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Promoting Customer Service Internally and Externally

At Your Service' Spotlight: From Russia with love



Elena Ulko, CEO, UlkoTours. Photo Courtesy of Elena Ulko

Russia is not renowned for its exemplary customer service, but one Russian tour company is going against the grain and specializing in personalized customer attention. UlkoTours is a verified member of the American Society for Travel Agents (ASTA), running private shore tours for cruise passengers in the Baltics. The company, based in St Petersburg, also sets up tailor-made tours for air and train passengers, concentrating on city itineraries in Moscow, Tallin, St Petersburg, Stockholm, Helsinki and Berlin.

How it differs from other – bigger – operators is in its personalized service message and delivery. The website reads like an invitation to come on a family vacation with founder and CEO, Elena Ulko, whose smiling photograph dominates the center of the home page. She is also pictured with her family at the top of a column advocating family travel to Russia. The text reads: ‘Being a Happy Mom of two kids I know what it feels like to travel with these little noisy bundles and I’m happy to assure you that no matter how old your children are, we will create a unique program concentrating on making everyone happy and excited about Saint-Petersburg.’ Ulko says her intention is to create a strong personal connection with customers: ‘I have included personal information for the clients to know that I am a real person standing behind UlkoTours and from personal experience I know that it creates an emotional attachment when you visualize the person you’re communicating with and when you are able to obtain some personal information about the person you are dealing with.’

On the website, Ulko goes on to outline all the free extras she offers to families, such as an upgrade to mini-van, water bottles and baby equipment – all available on request at no charge. She adroitly uses the emotional appeal of a picture of her happy family, perfectly posed in summer attire much like a US family portrait. She emphasizes the value of exploring the Baltics on a private tour with an educated local and introduces her web audience to everyone involved: her office team, her guides and her drivers. Her tagline is ‘Superior Customer Service & Real People behind the website.’ Again her objective is to connect with website readers and create a real-life story about the company for them. ‘Other companies include information on their staff and even write descriptions about those people,’ she says. ‘But having a vague description just makes you feel one of the many, whereas having a personal story, something that comes directly from your heart, connects instantly to your potential clients.’

And this emotional connection pays off in bookings for the boutique tour operator. ‘I can say with 100% confidence that every “possible” client who actually has read that section about my family has booked tours with us,’ says Ulko. She believes her methods inspire trust among potential clients. ‘Every client who has read the description does want to meet with me,’ she says. ‘They always ask if I would like them to bring something for myself or for my family from the US and they get upset if we cannot meet.’ The same applies when her managers take charge of tour arrangements, with clients hoping to meet and get to know them.

Another unique aspect of the company is the dinner party option. Visitors can meet with Ulko and her family for a private dinner and tour of her home. Tapping into this kind of fly-on-the-wall, reality show trend, Ulko offers the intimate family dinners as the perfect ending to a tour day: a way to unwind with authentic local foods and beverages as well as learning about everyday life in Russia. ‘It’s not something that people book very often,’ she says. ‘But those who have done it have become my close friends and my family visits them now and then when we are in the US.’

Her mandate is to provide high quality service at every touch point for what she thinks of as a 'once-in-a-lifetime' trip for her customers. Phone lines are advertised as open from 1 am until 9 pm EST. Elsewhere on the website, Ulko offers free visa support for her customers if required. The motivation behind all these customer service extras is to encourage more US visitors to the region now it has opened up to tourism, dispelling all the 'cold war' myths and prejudices. She uses photos and testimonials from happy US clients to try and reinforce the message both on her website and on Tripadvisor.

The Russian government is keen to increase international visitation numbers but there still remain some barriers to easy travel in the region. Independent travelers have to register with government officials in each city visited and the transit system can be rudimentary. Along with a \$12 billion blueprint in place to improve facilities and encourage tourism to Russia, the government also recently launched its cruise ship terminal in St Petersburg. It is all part of a plan to attract around 40 million tourists per year by 2016. Ulko considers the communication of customer service improvements to be paramount for the area in reaching out to target markets. 'Because many US travelers visiting Russia and the Baltics have hardly any knowledge of the language and the countries, they feel better when there's somebody that can guide them through the process, answer their questions not with standard answers, but with a highly personalized approach,' she explains. Although many clients take the opportunity to call the company and discuss the finer details over the phone, she says 90% of her customers leave all the arrangements for the entire tour program to her and her staff.

As a member of ASTA, UlkoTours is able to reach out to a network of over 22,000 US travel agents, cruise line and tourist board personnel. Ulko also offers a price match with any competitors' tours. These include large bus tour companies which deal with thousands of customers per season. 'For them, clients come and go,' says Ulko. 'For us, smaller folks, it's not the volume that matters, but the quality. Yes, our tours are sometimes more expensive but people get more in terms of personal approach and overall experience.' Another advantage of using a more personalized company is the quick response time when something goes wrong. 'We have never had any out of order situations, to be honest,' says Ulko. 'The only "disaster" happened last season when by mistake we assigned an English-speaking guide to a French-speaking group from Canada.' All correspondence for the tour had been conducted in English but the group had requested a French-speaking guide. Realizing the mistake, Ulko managed to find a substitute guide just two hours into the tour.

Communicating with potential customers always reaps rewards. Having noticed the provision of bottled water and welcome gifts during tours, one jocular client sent a message, saying 'Did that say a free bottle of water or a free bottle of Russian vodka?' Ulko went along with the joke with the response, 'Mmm...I think I can persuade my manager to leave our last bottle of vodka for you: As a ransom for the guide. A driver is part of the welcome gift!' The tour was booked immediately, she says, after this personalized banter.