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Managing Service Encounters

'At Your Service' Spotlight: Marcos Van Aken, Ten Travel in Tenerife



Marcos and cheerleaders: Photo courtesy of Ten Travel

Running a business and incentive travel agency in Tenerife – a Spanish-owned island off the northwest coast of Africa – involves daily customer service dilemmas for Marcos Van Aken. As conference manager for Ten Travel, part of Red Carpet Destination Management Service, he is in charge of both wooing businesses and keeping delegates happy during their visits. Owned by John Lucas, the company began 35 years ago with a package holiday focus but quickly diversified into the business group and incentive travel market. 'Business and incentive travel require a very high level of specialization. We segmented into that and, slowly but surely, we were approached by various cruise companies, too. We aim for the top end of the market,' explains Van Aken, who, although born in Tenerife, studied for his Masters degree in Hotel Management at the University of Surrey, England.

Van Aken spends a considerable amount of his time solving problems for customers. A dilemma presented itself when a German company wanted red carpet treatment for their clients at the airport. 'They insisted on them leaving the plane and getting on to the coach without touching a suitcase,' Van Aken remembers. Although he appreciated the desire to offer this kind of top end service, he marveled at the amount of paperwork, lobbying and money it required to make it happen. 'I can understand why the client wanted that: he wanted to offer the top end of service, to get unloaded at the cocktail area straight away with drinks ready, and while they were having a cocktail, the luggage would be delivered to their rooms.' Van Aken thinks that this type of service is what quality is all about, making something difficult happen smoothly.

Although Ten Travel employs multiple staff members and regular tour guides, the key accounts are Van Aken's personal responsibility. As middle man between tourism and business industries, he is in a prime position to elevate service standards in Tenerife. Part of his job is to make sure that the service levels seen on inspection visits are translated literally to the galas and conferences when guests eventually arrive. He has the perfect multi-cultural background for this, with a Dutch mother and Spanish father, British and German schooling, a year traveling in South America and experience in the hotel industry. 'That's my edge,' he says. 'I speak five languages which gives me the means to reach the Dutch market as well as UK, German and Spanish businesses and, what's more, I've been around, I've had experience of the world.'

Before joining Ten Travel in 2003, Van Aken worked in hotel management where he was exposed regularly to the minutiae of conferences and business events. He believes in providing a wow factor for his clients who often have a limited conception of what Tenerife is all about. 'Most of the time they think it is 99 % sun and beach,' he says. Surprising his clients mainly consists of taking them away from the coast to inland destinations with mountain biking and hiking in diverse landscapes and national parks. He tries to go beyond the usual tourist trip to Tenerife's volcanic park at Mt Teide. 'We go up in the cable car and then on to a lodge where you stay overnight. Then there's a two-hour walk at four o'clock in the morning to make it to the top for sunrise. That's the kind of thing that will take people over the edge and say wow that was different,' he explains.

As well as organizing anything from dolphin and whale-watching, to kayaking and quad biking, Ten Travel arranges inter-island itineraries. He also has a stable of dedicated local guides and experts to draw from both for tours and for presentations. 'Employing the right people who have both knowledge and experience and who really care about the island is key. They emanate a warmth, having been in tourism all their lives.' However, Van Aken has noticed a trend in not overloading the schedules of delegates too much: 'People need time to breathe. They are often so burnt out when they come away that they don't want to be running around the whole time. I find they are incorporating free time strategically – which is not necessarily good for my business – but it certainly is better for them to come away rested.'

Loyalty to the company has been achieved by looking after staff and suppliers despite the economic recession. 'In the crisis, we decided to carry on paying exactly what we paid before, unlike many other businesses on the islands,' says Van Aken. 'Sometimes it has meant not cashing in on the last payments from the group ourselves but everyone else has been paid. Admittedly you need cash flow to do that and not everyone has access to that. But strategically we decided that and it has paid off as suppliers will bend over backwards for us.' This pays off particularly when Ten Travel faces an emergency. Recently two clients sustained severe leg injuries during a sporty tournament on a remote beach. The area was not usually accessed by ambulance but when the emergency services got the call from Van Aken, they pulled out all the stops, negotiating four-wheel drive ambulances on to the dunes.

Service is not all about what the client actually experiences on his visit. It is sometimes entirely behind the scenes. 'After winning over the client, from then on it is all in the planning and it is the nitty gritty details that really count. The client enjoying the trip is oblivious of the behind-the-scenes battles that have been going on,' Van Aken explains. Sticking to budget is another important area for service quality. Ten Travel has to quote accurately for business travel events around 18 months in advance. If Van Aken later finds the client wants some more expensive services than originally expected, he is unable to increase his estimate. 'I have to try and find a margin elsewhere,' he says. Service recovery is also crucial to Ten Travel's sustained reputation. With six full-time staff in Tenerife plus one in Lanzarote and another in Gran Canaria, Ten Travel can afford the personal touch. 'Everything is just a telephone call away and I think that is our edge,' says Van Aken. He also knows the limits to the volumes they can handle, adding on extra days before and after each event for preparing and later dismantling all the special facilities. 'We need people who can handle that sort of pressure,' he says.

Source: Interview with Marcos Van Aken, 12 July 2011.

The employee role in delivering service

The opening spotlight highlights the critical importance of 'service encounters', defined as 'the dyadic interaction between a customer and a service provider' (Surprenant and Solomon, 1987, pg. 87). Marcos Van Aken of Ten Travel specializes in personalized and customized service for his clients, and has developed strong business relationships because of this attention to detail. The majority of research examining social interactions in commercial service settings has focused on such exchanges between consumers and frontline employees (e.g. Gremler and Gwinner, 2000; Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988). This is particularly the case within tourism and hospitality settings, including hotels (Hartline and Jones, 1996), restaurants (Lin and Mattila, 2010), and tour groups (Conze, Bieger, Laesser and Riklin, 2010). As 'service encounters are first and foremost social encounters'