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The Importance of Market Research

'At Your Service' Spotlight: Simply the Best



Charlie Locke (left) and Sandy Best (right). Photo courtesy of Lake Louise

Sandy Best has been in the hospitality business since the 1970s. Starting out running chalets in French ski resorts, he is now Director of Public Relations for Lake Louise and Director of the newly renovated Great Divide Lodge.

Best is passionate about every little detail in his work whether it is staff training, daily operations, customer contact or service recovery. 'You know why I am good at it, it's because I love what I do,' he says. 'If you don't believe you have the best product on the planet, the guests won't believe it.'

One of the areas to which he devotes significant research – and great attention – is media. He encourages and conducts numerous media visits as well as travel industry fam trips every year at Lake Louise, Alberta – arguably Canada’s most famous ski resort. ‘It’s the most cost-effective form of marketing you can do,’ he explains. ‘If you look at dollar per column length, if I had to buy that, it would be ten times what it costs to look after the media.’

One of his party tricks for visiting journalists is to greet them in their own language. ‘I speak reasonable Mandarin so the Chinese are always amazed when I say hello and welcome. I can welcome almost every nationality in their language,’ he says.

Lake Louise hosts the Winterstart World Cup every year, attracting skiing VIPs and media from all over the world. Best’s job is to provide them with a seamless experience to take back to their readers, listeners and fans. ‘We had an executive producer and VP from Channel 9 here recently and they said they would only call *me* when they come back to the Rockies because I totally understand what they are about.’ He does his research before a press visit so that he can be ready with interesting and unique sound bites rather than just rolling out the usual press kit full of turgid statistics.

Best has noticed that many other ski resorts do not employ seasoned marketers and ski lovers as their press coordinators: ‘Many resorts employ 25 to 30 year olds who don’t even ski for media contact,’ he says. ‘I get very angry when journalists don’t get treated as if they are valued.’ One of the big differences in Best’s red carpet treatment for journalists is to introduce them to Charlie Locke, Lake Louise’s owner. ‘Journalists are always impressed by this, they comment “so the owner will come and talk to me”. They are surprised as this is not the case with other resorts,’ says Best. Most ski hill owners delegate media duties to their fam trip organizers and various specialists around the resort.

Best’s work does not stop at media and industry, though. He is also responsible for customer service for fee-paying visitors and for staff training and motivation. He considers customer service the lynchpin of operations for both the ski hill and for his hotel: ‘Customer service makes pay days possible, the rest is bullshit,’ he jokes.

One of the difficulties faced by ski hills world over is line-ups. There are various peak periods during a ski season when waiting in line is inevitable. Best has a contingency plan for this. ‘People don’t mind standing in a line as long as they are recognized. In the old days when we had lines Charlie would go out and give out chocolate. If people see you do something about a problem 99.9 % of people are fine with it.’

He carries this theory over to his daily work where he thrives on face-to-face communication in and around the ski lodge and at his hotel. He works in a challenging industry where the operational staff are often young, fresh out of college and mainly there for the skiing and nightlife rather than a career. And he has noted changes in the way they tend to communicate. ‘The culture has changed,’ he says. ‘I see people under 30 in tourism,

supposedly the leaders of tomorrow, sitting at a table and texting each other. They just can't communicate face to face,' he laments.

Despite this, he inspires his employees with enthusiasm for people contact, leading by example. 'Good generals lead from the front not from behind. They see me being nice to people, caring about things, wiping tables, and picking up litter.' He has also helped implement a new 'service with no boundaries' system for employees to deal with service issues. Staff are empowered to solve problems and also compensate for them: 'For example, if a washroom has no toilet paper, the staff solve the issue but if, as the customer, you are still really pissed off, the staff member offers you lunch in return. We train them to do that.'

Best has found that employees feel good about their work when they are empowered in this way. The extra money spent is well worth the good PR that service recovery engenders. In the era of instant communication through all the far-reaching tentacles of social media, Best deems it cheaper to solve a problem instantly than to let it escalate into something more serious by leaving it until a guest gets home.

Despite initial concerns from 'the money people,' Best says that the new 'service with no boundaries' system is working well. It is monitored weekly, he adds, as a learning tool for management: 'If the bottom of the totem pole rots out, the management hit the ground hard and fast because they fall from higher up,' he explains.

Another way that service quality is monitored at Lake Louise is via an 'excellence card'. Customers can nominate a particular member of staff and management can do the same within their own staff pool. Employees are recognized at parties each month with prizes. At the end of the season, an overall winner is honoured with a trip to Charlie Locke's house in Hawaii and \$1000 spending money. Loyalty is also valued and every staff member who comes back for a second season is given a pay rise. As a former ski bum himself, Best recognizes the major motivation for his staff: skiing or snowboarding. So, accordingly, he gives everyone a 'ride break' during the day so they can remember exactly why they are at Lake Louise.

His market research also extends to product, trying to provide a better all-round service than the competition. 'It's not just other ski hills, my competition is the all-inclusive holiday,' he says. In answer to the deals tourists are used to enjoying at resorts and on cruises, he offers a reasonably-priced meal plan at the 1926 Great Divide Lodge – something which is unusual in ski lodges. For \$129 in the 2011/12 season, guests got a cooked breakfast, accommodation, ski ticket and dinner. After extensive renovations, the lodge features sauna, fitness facility, quiet reading room, bar, upmarket dining room, outdoor firepits, wireless internet and shuttles to and from the ski hill, which is also a hiking and wildlife reserve in the summer. 'It's the only place in the National Park where tourists can get a room under \$100 during summer high season,' says Best.