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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

Analysts and industry insiders say that Russia's approach to customer service has drastically changed in the last 10 years, and one shining example in the tourism and hospitality sector is Russian tour Ulkotours, Russia & Scandinavia. The company, based in St Petersburg, runs private shore tours for cruise passengers in the Baltics and also sets up tailor-made tours for air and train passengers, specializing in city itineraries such as Moscow, Tallin, St Petersburg, Stockholm, Helsinki and Berlin. How it differs from other – bigger – operators is in its personalized service message and delivery both to customers and B2B.

The website (<http://ulkotours.com/>) reads like an invitation to come on a family vacation with founder and CEO, Elena Ulko, whose smiling photographs dominate the site and advertising messages. 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.'

Ulkotours is also a founding member of the Baltic Cruise Association, working closely with other operators and sectors of the tourism industry. Since 2012 the company has grown substantially, offering tours in increasingly more destinations around the Baltics. 'It all has been done with only one purpose – to make Ulkotours a one-stop shop and minimize search time for our clients,' says Ulko. 'Selling Baltic destinations is not something that brings a lot of profit for us (I'd rather say it only creates more work) but it's something that brings clients who buy these tours together with other St Petersburg private tours.'

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 attends a variety of travel shows, specifically for travel agents and relationship-building. She has thereby expanded her network of agents, providing them with free brochure and catalogue delivery and conducting face-to-face presentations in their offices. At the same time, she has branched out to encompass online intermediaries, too. 'Travel agents are the easiest to work with, because they also offer a very similar personalized travel approach and most of them have been on our tours, so they feel confident in referring their clients to us, or reselling our tours directly to their clients,' she explains. 'Each agent knows his/her client needs and it's very easy for us to set up a tour for them. They don't ask too many questions because most of them have already experienced a tour with us, so they are able to handle most questions themselves. They also recommend specific guides to their clients, usually those that they had been on tour with previously, so guides are always very excited to work with such referral customers.' Online intermediaries, however, pose different challenges but Ulko has solved this more impersonal relationship by traveling to meet the agents involved. 'There is a very large travel agency in California, where we had been working with a single agent, at first, who had found us online and sent in a request on behalf of her clients,' she explains. 'After I had flown into Los Angeles to meet everyone in their office in person and tell them about Ulkotours and about the services that we provide, our sales with the agency increased considerably and now we regularly arrange tours for their private clients and groups as well.'

Since 2014, Ulkotours has been working with major online tour platforms such as Viator.com and, in order to cope with the flow of bookings and to ensure tour quality, had to launch a new department responsible for automated bookings. But this brings its own array of problems: 'One of the main inconveniences of working with such online

intermediaries is that there is no customer communication involved and most of them offer closed loop communication through supplier extranet. Often, tour platforms are not fully developed in the way we would want them to be, so there's a lot of information missing from bookings and a lot of essential details need to be somehow obtained or communicated to the client after the booking has been placed,' says Ulko. Booking blips – such as customers failing to realize that they need to submit further information to complete a reservation – often occur, which ultimately gives Ulkotours more work rather than streamlining the process.

The impact of the sharing economy has not yet had a negative impact on bookings. 'We have not really noticed any substantial decrease in sales or requests for accommodations and transport services because people who go with us prefer that we arrange everything together as a package for them,' Ulko explains. 'We have had several cases of clients cancelling private transfers and choosing to go with a taxi or Uber, but such cases are extremely rare.'

In a savvy cross-marketing project, Ulkotours has another office based in the US St Petersburg in Florida. 'When I was taking client calls while in the US, all of the clients asked if they were talking to the US office or Russian office,' says Ulko. When she told them she was in the US with her family but was usually based in Russia, the conversation would invariably lead to the clever connection between the Florida St Petersburg and the Russian one. 'We would then talk about the weather and kids going to school...and voila, next day comes their tour booking,' says Ulko.

It is all very well connecting emotionally with customers when trying to close the initial booking sale, but there is still the task of continuing that connection both during their visit and afterwards. Ulko works hard to perpetuate this personal connection by meeting with clients during their tours, giving them welcome gifts and posing for photos with them. After their holiday, communication continues with picture sharing, feedback and client referrals. Business is booming, confirming Ulko in her 'personal attention' strategy.

Sources: Interviews with Elena Ulko (2012 and 2016); Matthews (2011); Obrazkova (2015)

Developing an integrated communications strategy for customer service

The 'gaps model' of service quality, introduced in Chapter 6, showed the importance of external communications in setting customer expectations given that a major cause of poorly perceived service is the difference between what a firm promises about a service, and what it actually delivers. The opening spotlight is a good example of a tour operator going out of its way to close that gap. To avoid broken promises, companies must manage all communications to customers, just as Elena Ulko does with UlkoTours, so that inflated promises do not lead to overly