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**Preventing Product Disintegration**

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In much of the world, the winter season has become a period of extensive travel mixed with poor weather conditions, high expectations, and high levels of frustration and disappointment. Often it seems that if something goes wrong, the mishap will occur in the winter. These are the months when the tourism industry needs to not only worry about product development (offering new products and services) but also "product disintegration". Product disintegration is when a good travel/tourism product fails to meet expectations of travelers/tourists or lowers the quality of service that it provides. Currently the number one travel/tourism product to suffer from product disintegration is the airline industry. Not only has the airline industry cut back on the number of flights offered and the services rendered, but often employees take out their frustrations on the paying customers. All too many airline customers have come to dread the air travel experience: the rude personnel, the defensive posture of customer service representatives, and the irregular schedules. Once product disintegration begins it is often extremely hard to reverse the process. Thus, the best way to avoid product disintegration is to offer good service and to maintain high standards. Good service, however, does not require great amounts of money spent. Instead an extra smile or the willingness to put oneself in the travelers' shoes may be all that is required. Found below are several ideas on how to help nurture a more service-oriented culture in the travel and tourism business and to prevent product disintegration from beginning.

Often the formula to prevent product disintegration can be reduced to three basic concepts. The first concept to consider is to hire the best people possible. While this principle may seem self-evident it is much harder that one might imagine. Within the next few years many travel and tourism business will begin to experience substantial personnel loss due to retirements, frustrations, and unstable political situations. In order to find good employees begin now to think through various innovative ideas. For example:

- hold job fairs in which the public can learn about the advantages of working for a travel/tourism organization,
- work with the various universities which are developing tourism degrees. These people are not just seeking a job. They are seeking a travel and tourism job.
- offer a reward to each employee who finds a new employee for your business,
- make sure that you are known within your community. The better known you are, the more people want to work for you,

- always be on the lookout for a good employee. Even if you do not need a new employee now, having a list of potential candidates can serve you later on.
- Never forget that good customer-service begins with managerial respect for one's employees. This is best translated into the psychological principle that is always stated in the negative: "Do not treat another person in the manner in which you would not want to be treated."
- If you interview people for a job, make sure that you mainly listen and speak as little as possible.

Secondly, give your employees the best possible training. Upon finding the right people, give them the proper training. Too often service industry managers tend to forget that people in tourism not only need good training, but lots of refresher courses. Training not only makes people better employees, but it serves as a "booster" shot for sagging morale. Good training makes good employees. While even the best employee cannot wipe away the frustrations of winter travel, well-trained employees can turn frowns into smiles and save a situation from becoming worse. In training a good rule-of thumb to follow is that training should never be a one-time deal, but a continual educational experience. To check on the quality of your training use some of these guidelines:

- make sure that the goals of training are clear to both management and the employees. What are you expecting employees to receive from the training? Is the training simply propaganda or is it based on dialogue and mutual respect?
- Always explain to employees what the purpose of the training is and attend the sessions. There is nothing more demoralizing than having management mandate training to which it does not attend.
- Teach by example, don't speak about it, do it!
- All too often the purpose of training in travel and tourism is merely attendance. Being there without having learned anything is a waste of time. Ask for meaningful feedback. You are not looking for gossip but to learn if the goals have been met and if the lessons have been learned. Often a follow-up session, which asks employees to demonstrate what they have learned, is a more accurate gauge than merely filling out a sheet of paper ranking the course's usefulness.

The third major rule to prevent product disintegration is to make sure your employees know that you appreciate them and care about them. It is hard to expect customer service from our employees if we do not treat the people serving the public with respect. In a strange sense, employees are management's customers. Here are a few other items that will inspire employees to want to give good service.

- Compliment! Compliment! It is easy to catch people doing things wrong, try to catch them doing something right. Make sure that you follow this up with a letter.

- Hold an open informal breakfast or lunch with the employee of the week. Then invite that person to evaluate his/her tasks, indicating that you would like to learn how to improve employee morale.
  
- Take a few minutes each day to call a sick employee or someone who is going through a hard period. Let your workers know that you are all a team and that you care about them. In a like manner, birthday cards sent to people's home can mean a lot, and they may result in the added extra touch that travel and tourism employees need to get them through the holiday season.
  
- Let people know that they are doing a good job and that you want to retain them, but never hold on to employees who have negative personalities. One can teach efficiency to an inefficient employee with a positive attitude, but an employee with a chip on his/her shoulders can cause a decline in morale throughout the organization.

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