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A survey of customer service training for motor coach drivers in United States and Canada

This exploratory study investigates customer service training programs of motor coach companies in the U.S. and Canada. Results indicate training programs are inconsistent and lack standards. It is the responsibility of motor coach associations to establish customer service training standards. Owners and management of motor coach companies must invest in customer service training to compete in the marketplace.

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Introduction

Customer service is vital to the sustainable success of motor coach companies. This exploratory investigation focuses on customer service driver training programs of motor coach companies in the United States and Canada.

This research was a class assignment in spring, 2003. First, students selected the sample of the investigation from the membership list of the American Bus Association's web site. Second, they brainstormed and developed a research questionnaire. Thirdly, they investigated the membership by using telephone, fax and e-mail. Finally, they organized, categorized and analyzed the survey data.

270 randomly selected motor coach companies in the US and Canada were contacted. 70 companies responded to the interviews. The respondent rate was 26%. The questionnaire included two parts: a brief profile (company location, number of coaches and employees) and 15 questions regarding department responsible, time and length, contents and evaluation of customer service training programs.

Summary of findings

Respondents were from 14 US states and one Canadian province. Fleet sizes range from three – 70 coaches, yet one Canadian company operates 2500 coaches. Most companies employ from six to 100 drivers, while the Canadian company has 6200 drivers.

42 of the 70 companies indicated that a customer service training program would be/or has been beneficial to the company's image and customer satisfaction. 16% did not believe that such a program would improve the company's image or customer satisfaction. Though the majority of companies surveyed understand the importance of training, few are willing to spend money for customer service training.

45 out of the 70 companies, or approximately 64% offered customer service training to their drivers while 25 companies or 36% did not. About 62% of the respondents indicated they conducted customer service training during orientation and 15.5% provided on-the-job training.

16% of companies conducted customer service driver training for four to eight hours, 16% provided the training to drivers for one to three days. 20% offered on-going customer service training. Please see Table 1.

Length of customer service training	Percentage
4-8 hrs	15.56%
1-3 days	15.56%
1-2 weeks	17.78%
On-going	20.00%
Depends on experience	6.67%
Don't know	6.67%
No Answer	17.78%

The departments responsible for the customer service training of drivers varied from company to company. 23% of such training was completed in the operations department, and 20% in the safety department. Some companies were so small that managers trained drivers, and in some cases company owners provided the training.

The frequency of updating customer service training programs varied from company to company. 20% of companies updated their program annually, 13% updated monthly, 11% updated as needed, while seven percent of the companies did not know whether their program was updated. Please see Table 2.

Table 2 Customer service training updated	Percentage
Monthly	13.33%
once a year	20.00%
every 2 years or more	4.44%
as needed	11.11%
Never	11.11%
don't know	6.67%
No answer	22.22%
more than once a year	11.11%

38% of companies tested their drivers on customer service, while 42% did not. 20% did not know if there was a test at the end of the program. Of companies that offered such training, 18% certified their drivers after they completed the program, however, 56% did not certify drivers in customer service.

42 companies responded to the question of how to handle customer's complaints or compliments on service. Numerous methods were employed. For complaints, they investigated, took immediate action, disciplined, compensated the customer and filed results; for the compliments, they rewarded the employees.

With regard to how the companies monitor the employees' customer service performance, 47% conducted some type of customer evaluation, such as comment cards. 29% of respondents indicated managers monitored employee performance, two companies used a mix of management and customer evaluation, one hired an outside company for evaluations, and two others conducted evaluations by phone.

Thirty six percent of the respondents without customer service training programs for drivers, 21 were not interested in implementing such a program. Two indicated interest and two did not respond. Reasons for not wanting to implement a program were that many companies were very small and they could not afford training, or felt that training was unnecessary.

Conclusion

64% of companies interviewed offered some type of customer service training for their drivers and they believe that the program is beneficial to the company's image and customer satisfaction. The research, however, found that customer service training was inconsistent and lacked standards. For example, the length of training varied, the department responsible for training differed and there was no standard of evaluation of employee performance in customer service.

Moreover, 36% of respondents did not offer customer service training nor were most of them interested in implementing such a program. This shows that some companies underestimate the importance of good customer service.

As competition for passengers increases and the demand for customer satisfaction intensifies, standardized customer service training for drivers should be a priority. It is the responsibility of the motor coach companies to establish customer service standards in terms of length, content, department responsible, evaluation and certification. The associations should provide inexpensive and easily accessible training programs for their membership.

The authors believe that motor coach company owners and management must understand who their customers are and that consistency of product delivery is of vital importance. If they wish to improve the image of the companies, enhance customer satisfaction and achieve competitive success in the marketplace, they need to invest in customer service training for drivers.