

Succeeding in tourism

A series of practical articles by Chris Elphick, Breadfruit Consulting, aimed at tourism SMEs.

Article two – understanding our visitors

Over the next few weeks I will focus on the challenges and opportunities facing small businesses working in the tourism industry.

Across the Pacific tourism has been identified as a major industry for economic development and resources are provided by a wide range of organisations. This focus on tourism obviously provides enormous opportunities to rural and urban communities alike but will it be possible for everyone to access those opportunities? Will there be an equal playing field? Will tourism reap the rewards for small rural businesses in remote parts of the Pacific? How will small tourism businesses be able to compete with their larger and probably better resourced neighbours? How will locally run tourism businesses be able to compete with expat run and resourced operations?

Understanding who tourists are, what they want from us and making sure they get what they want, and more, is vital to any successful tourism business. The challenge for many small operators in the Pacific is the lack of tourism experience where we may not have travelled outside of our own area let alone our own country.

If possible going on a short break to another country to experience being a tourist for a few days is ideal. This way you will get to experience first hand what some of the tourists who visit you do.

First time visitors to the Pacific who have only information from friends or the web to go on may well have unrealistic expectations. They may try to do too much in too short a time and get disappointed; they may not think that it rains here; they may not be used to power going off at night or water shortages. When people get disappointed they get upset and often angry and lose any sense of proportion.

Number one essential is to make sure that when you meet your visitors for the first time blow them away with your interest in them. Ask them questions; give them a fresh coconut and some nice fresh local fruit; if they are hungry feed them even if the kitchen is closed! If you know what nationality they are try and learn a couple of simple greetings in their language; manage peoples' expectations from the beginning by giving them good information; think ahead and anticipate anything that could go wrong and, above all, focus on the friendliness and beauty of the Pacific.

We must train our staff to be problem solvers, not problem avoiders! No-one wants to hear 'The boss is not here today'! if someone has a problem, no matter how small, then it has to be solved to the benefit of the visitor immediately. It doesn't matter if it is not a problem for the business or individual member of staff.

Anyone in the tourism business takes on a duty of care for visitors – look after them; treat them as special guests; think ahead and anticipate any concerns they might have; thank them for coming and for spending their money with you. Try and put yourself in their shoes – imagine you are visiting a city in India for the first time. How might you feel? You are likely to be nervous, apprehensive, maybe a little frightened, curious – you will need a friend.

If you are running a small tourism business, or even a larger one, go out of your way to make friends with the visitors – stop what you are doing and focus on them – after all they pay your bills!

Finally, it is likely that most people who have travelled all the way to the Pacific to stay on a secluded island in a small resort are looking for an experience of a lifetime – make sure you give it to them!! Your accommodation may not be as comfortable or as large as some in other parts of the world – but make it authentic and genuine. Serve local food with pride. Meet needs of visitors before they become a problem. Fill their days with surprises.

If you have any tourism issues you would like me to cover during this series, please contact me.

Coming next, creating a reputation in the Pacific for exceptional and consistently high service.

Chris Elphick is Partner in Breadfruit Consulting, supporting the development of a range of businesses and organisations in Melanesia and other parts of the Pacific. He is an experienced trainer, coach and business mentor and has years of experience of working with Small & Medium Enterprises. He and his partner Hazel Kirkham live in Vanuatu and are involved with tourism operators and their businesses in several Pacific countries.

Breadfruit Consulting have partnered with Fiji Entrepreneur to develop mentoring services for new and young entrepreneurs.

If you have an issue or query related to this article, please contact Chris at chris@breadfruitconsulting.com or text to +6785500556