

Succeeding in tourism

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

Article three – providing the best service all the time

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?

A few years ago, I was asked by a tourism official in a South Pacific country what my first impressions were. My immediate response was of very friendly people delivering very bad service. He was a bit taken aback!! However that is still my experience. On the whole I find people extremely friendly in all the Pacific countries I visit but unfortunately service does not live up to the friendliness of the people.

Customer service is not about smiling or saying 'have a nice day' – obviously these are included but it is much more. It is about the whole customer experience from the first time they contact you (maybe by email before they leave their own country) to the time they return home.

'Drop everything for the customer' is not just a few meaningless words – it should be at the heart of all businesses and especially tourism businesses who are in the business of giving people the time of their life. Delivering exceptional service is one way of creating a fantastic reputation in a highly competitive market.

I was recently waiting for a domestic flight which was delayed by an hour due to a late international connection. No-one from the airline saw fit to come and explain, ask if everyone was OK, provide water or just be helpful. Not a word was spoken yet the delay was known about well before we were all ushered into the stuffy departure lounge for a long wait.

Delivering outstanding service is not hard but it does demand thought and it needs to be at the top of our list of actions every day all day – it needs to be in our hearts and minds. There are plenty of custom service courses available that teach the basics so I am not going to repeat those. However, unless we really understand that customers are the reason we are in business, knowing the basics is going to make no difference.

Our visitors do not want to be told 'no', 'sorry the boss is not here', 'no fish today', 'yes, we know it doesn't work', 'I don't know' and so on. Let's take 'no fish today' – the other day in a small hotel I was looking forward to the fresh fish they serve only to be told there wasn't any because the fishermen hadn't been out. Of course this happens. My point about service is that I should have been told, 'sorry Chris, we have no fresh fish today – we should have some tomorrow – however we do have lovely fish pies made last week or we can do a really fresh vegetable curry or'. The sooner we develop a reputation for always thinking about our customers' needs, before they become a problem, the better. We know that plans can get disrupted by bad weather or mechanical problems or power failures or other issues but these are not the fault of the customer. We must think ahead and anticipate issues and create solutions. In last week's article I said we must be problem solvers not problem avoiders.

Delivering exceptional customer service means making the customer number one in everything we do and making sure, as far as possible, that nothing gets in the way of that promise so that tourism in the South Pacific becomes known not just for its wonderful places and friendly people and interesting cultures but also for its fantastic service.

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

Coming next, developing vibrant tourism experiences and protecting our local culture and way of life.

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