

In an industry that is designed, for the most part to make people's dreams come true, we rely heavily on some of the lowest paid skilled and semi skilled people in the Country. The majority of the people in the Tourism Industry around the world are there because they have a passion for their industry, a passion that absorbs a lot of abuse and a lot of financial hardships. These are people that have pride in the work that they do and a genuine desire to share their knowledge and skills with the travelers of the world, no matter how menial the task is. Tourism is one of the top foreign income earners in South Africa and I have seen in the past five months how much effort and money the Government is putting into the establishment of a sustainable Tourism Industry in South Africa.

It is relatively easy to open a Tourism based business, but I don't think there are too many people in the world that would open a business to make a loss! One of the quintessential reasons for opening a business in the private sector is to make a profit. People often invest their life savings and their lives into their ventures, believing that they will make a success of it and provide

an income for themselves and for others. It is often with the best intentions and knowledge of their particular industry that people forge ahead. Many people have an intimate knowledge of what they are doing, but do not however know what they are doing in other aspects of their business. It is unreasonable to expect that people can be experts in all facets of business, but people still go ahead with their fledgling businesses without knowing the pitfalls that lie before them. Most often businesses cover the bases of having themselves as the Subject Matter Expert, they call in a Lawyer to help set up the business and they have an Accountant to make sure that the books are in order and SARS are kept at bay. They will then hang out their shingle and are ready to do business. They have great smiles and great hearts and the best of intentions. The unfortunate reality is that their businesses are only as good and as sound as the weakest link in their service delivery chain!

At any one point the possibility exists for their business to be driven into the ground by the very people that they employ to help them. It stands to reason that the old saying is true; "If you pay peanuts you will get monkeys".

The very same people who ploughed their life savings into their dream do not take the time to invest in their work force. The low end of the pay scale is often seen as a necessary evil or a cost of doing business. These are expendable resources, after all there is a vast pool of unemployed who will willingly step into the breach and take the role, isn't there? Yes there is a huge pool of minimum wage talent out there, but the cost of training these people and the cost of what that change will cost the business is not taken into account.

Minimum wage workers or workers at the lower end of the pay scale, realize that they do not have the education, potential or training to apply further up the food chain, because if they did, they would not be applying for the lower paid jobs. Very few are under the illusion that they not expendable and that is the biggest risk that any business owner can face. Good talent is hard to come by. Good talent is even harder to come by at the lower end of the pecking order. This in no way implies that these people are intentionally going to try to destroy a business or that they have no talent; they just don't see a reason to give all that they have when they

are getting less than a fair shake from the business owners. It is a matter of equal reward for equal effort. Reward does not necessarily imply that you have to pay more than the going rate for labour, but it does mean that you should invest in your people, after all these people are the front line of your business; the smiling face that is going to determine whether or not you will be a success or not.

Investing in workers can be as simple as ego and as complex as training and education. If workers can see that their effort is appreciated and rewarded, and rewards are not always monetary, they will respond and give more effort. Human nature is a funny thing; people enjoy being rewarded and will often respond beyond their means to maintain the reward. Likewise most Business owners, who realize the potential of their workers and reward them, will in turn receive a better return on investment than they could ever have dreamed of. It is two way traffic and it has to be both top down and bottom up to succeed. It is no use businesses throwing money and time and effort at the problem if they do not address the real issues and likewise it is

useless effort for a worker to throw him or herself at the work if there is no recognition that the job is being well done, or if reward is not being realized.

Big business is no different to small business; it is only that the investor is not necessarily the person running the enterprise. The essentials are the same, larger businesses have to report to their investors or Boards and they need to have a return on investment.

While it is not possible for tourism related companies to control the people who can affect the whole tourism experience, they can start with the people who can affect their perception of their own business first and very soon they will realize that service excellence is infectious and very often a competitive edge that their competitors will try to emulate. The chances of recovery from a potentially disastrous encounter with a person not within your control, is much greater if you have just left that customer with a smile and a genuine concern for their well being and experience.

One company that did get this right is an airline in Canada called WestJet. Now people might ask the relevance to the local market of a Canadian airline, but is

not the relevance of the company but rather the value lesson of Service Excellence learned by looking at how they achieved the number of awards they have been awarded in the last ten years, from the most Admired Corporate Culture Award in Canada to the top Three of Best-Managed Canadian Brands in Canada. They have a show case of trophies that bear witness to the fact that they live and breathe Service Excellence. WestJet started a little over twelve years ago on the 29th February of all days! They had two simple principles that have made them famous and they were “Making the WestJet staff owners” and to “Empower the staff to be able to make decisions on the spot”. Both these principles gave the staff in an industry not known for high wages a pride and a stake in the business. The staff members in turn are some of the most loyal staff I have ever met. They have pride in themselves and pride in the Company they work for because they have been given a stake in running the business. Whatever they do can and will have a repercussion not only on their pockets, but also on their pride, because they are essentially the company, so much so that they refer to themselves not as employees, but as WestJetters. They do not have a Human Resource

Department, it is called the People Department, their Customers are Guests and their Management Team are referred to as Big Shots not the Executive Management. While this may seem cute and folksy, it results in one thing and that is that the employees and the management together deliver Service Excellence second to none and they smile and have a genuine concern for their guests which in turn makes the Company profitable and the employees keep and grow their jobs.

I would like to show you a short clip that was shot for the purpose of recruiting and retaining one of the industry's traditionally lowest paid and most underappreciated jobs – the Ramp agent. If you saw an advert that read; Ramp Agent required, must work odd shifts in the bowels of the airport and outside at temperatures of up to MINUS 50 degrees centigrade, in the dirt and the grease and must be able to lift 32kilograms quickly and all day and oh by the way we are going to pay you slightly above minimum wage for your effort! I do not think that you would get many takers. WestJet created this video to address that very issue and to give the people that

worked in that role an element of pride. Today they do not have a recruiting problem.

There are two things I would like you to look at. The first is that the men and women who work there are for the most part smiling and this video was not acted, it is real and live. The second thing is the sense of team play and that they take what they do seriously and with pride and they pass on and teach in their work the same pride. It adds value to the chain and makes it stronger than ever and these are the same people that the travelling public look for, because they KNOW that when they look out the window of the aircraft, that these hard working people will smile and wave and wear the occasional clown's nose to make the travelling public realize that they are worth something and the money they paid for the seat, that is the same as any other airlines seat, is appreciated. Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you the TAC team of WestJet at Calgary Airport.

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