

Customer service enhances tourism

Trinidad and Tobago is in the midst of a diversification thrust and this includes making a more concerted effort to development of the local tourism sector. This will make the adoption of a customer service excellence philosophy in Trinidad and Tobago an absolute necessity, for the two are inextricably bound. In the area of customer service excellence, this country does not have as good a reputation or track record as some of its regional counterparts, e.g. Jamaica, Barbados, Bahamas, Dominican Republic, Aruba and Curacao, to name a few. Accordingly, The existing level of customer service delivery needs to be radically overhauled if this country expects to be considered as a tourist hub and match strides with its Caribbean neighbours who are more seasoned and professional in the area of customer service, especially with regard to the tourism sector.

T&T needs to put measures in place if it desires to improve in the short to medium term. Underpinning any such measures taken, is the adoption by all the major stakeholders in the country of a culture that is committed to customer service excellence. T&T must strive to offer an equivalent or better level of customer service than presently exists.

A number of factors have been identified which affect the potential of the tourism industry to play a more meaningful role in the development of the economy of Trinidad and Tobago. These include *inter alia*: collaboration and communication among stakeholders; environmental degradation; tourism education, training and awareness; local community involvement; infrastructure; air and sea access; marketing and promotion; adequate funding; socio-cultural impacts and customer service. Therefore, if this country has aspirations of becoming a more prominent tourism destination, all of these constraints must be adequately addressed in the quickest possible time.

Of the aforementioned challenges, customer service can be one of the primary disincentives to business and leisure travelers in T&T. It is not uncommon for visitors, upon landing at the airport to be met by long lines and generally stern and sometimes unfriendly officials at immigration and customs. However, in order for T&T to establish a profile and reputation as a premier tourism destination in the Caribbean, there must be excellent customer service at every point of contact that visitors have with the country. From the minute the traveler lands at the airport, to the time he/she checks into the hotel or guest house, to the various restaurants, malls, groceries and stores that he/she visits, the level of customer service offered must be of a consistently high standard. When an individual stays at a hotel, or dines in a restaurant, he/she must receive excellent customer service in order to make his/her trip an enjoyable experience. Indeed, the most effective way to build customer loyalty in the tourism industry and, indeed all other industries is to provide excellent customer service.

A commitment to high customer service needs to become systemic and the normal way of operating in T&T. Furthermore, for any significant societal transformation to be realised, customer service sensitisation needs to be done at an early stage. One of the main methods of achieving this is by introducing the philosophy of customer service in the education system. Teaching a young child good manners, ethics and consideration lays the foundation for good customer service.

As the education level progresses, a more practical/hands-on approach to customer service can be implemented. By the time students have entered the tertiary educational level, customer service would be part of their psyche rather than a foreign concept to them. By then, they would have received a sound grounding and understanding about what does and does not constitute proper customer service. At the tertiary level, it is now a question of honing this knowledge with more practical and interactive programmes/exercises focused on the theme of customer service excellence. All of the above measures (instituted from primary to tertiary level) will ensure that when students enter the workforce, they will be fully geared toward the daily practice of the customer service approach.