

11

TOURISM CUSTOMER SERVICE TRAINING PROGRAM UPDATE

The Planning and Economic Development Committee recommends adoption of the recommendations contained in the following report dated November 27, 2008, from the Commissioner of Planning and Development Services.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. Regional Council authorize the Economic Strategy and Tourism Branch to submit a funding application to the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to implement the next phase of the Customer Service Training Program.
2. The Regional Chair and Regional Clerk be authorized to execute the contract, and any renewal, subject to the approval of Legal Services as to form and content.
3. This report be circulated by the Clerk's Department to the local municipalities, York Region public and private school boards, Chambers of Commerce and Board of Trade for information and engagement.

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to provide an update on implementation of Phase Two, a pilot launch of the Tourism Customer Service Program and the proposed next steps.

3. BACKGROUND

In February 2008, the Tourism Customer Service Program report was received by Regional Council. This report provided an update of the development of the York Region Tourism Customer Service Training Program and proposed Phase Two, which was to engage tourism businesses in a pilot launch.

This report provides an update on Phase Two milestones, program enhancements, proposed next stage to establish the program as an ongoing training initiative for the tourism business community.

The Tourism Customer Service Program was designed specifically for small to medium sized tourism businesses that currently may not have the resources to provide customer service training to their employees but is equally beneficial for larger corporations.

The Tourism Customer Service Program consists of a Leadership Manual and three training modules built upon the Character Community philosophy and principles that includes a variety of resources to assist tourism operators to train employees on how to deliver a superior level of customer service. By using the Character approach, the intent is that service behaviours, attitudes and actions change to ensure that every customer Be Welcomed, Is Heard, Feels Valued, Departs Delighted and Will Return.

It was designed to provide the employer all the necessary resources, summaries and customer service examples/best practices to deliver the program in-house. This in-house and inclusive approach encourages a year round business philosophy and culture change, flexible staff training and sustainable performance metrics versus individual training and external consulting fees.

The need for the development of a Region wide Customer Service Program was a tourism industry recommendation from the Premier Ranked Tourism Destination Research completed in 2006.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

The pilot launch included engaging tourism businesses in structured training workshops to ensure that the Customer Service Program met their needs, could easily be adapted into business cultures and provide the tools for successful implementation prior to an official launch to refine the training program.

The pilot launch initially consisted of two one day “Train the Trainer” sessions held in March and May, engaging a maximum of 12 tourism operators, local municipal and Chamber of Commerce staff on the delivery of the program within their organizations. A submission to the Ontario Ministry of Tourism resulted in additional funding in the amount of \$19,000 to increase business participation and expand the training over the period, April-June 2008. The incremental funding resulted in York Region holding 14 workshops, training 513 participants. From this training, additional in-house training was delivered by tourism operators to 800 employees.

Feedback received to date from employees and tourism employers validates that the Customer Service Program provided excellent resources and learning aids for the business to successfully implement a service orientated culture within organizations and facilitate training of employees on the delivery of superior customer service. Students who participated in the training responded that it was a very good learning experience, the teaching aids were excellent, the program was easy to understand and it was helpful training to bring to a perspective employer.

ELEMENTS OF THE PILOT LAUNCH

Two Train the Trainer Workshops

Fifty-four (54) management representatives from 40 tourism businesses participated in one of two full days Train the Trainer workshops held on April 15 and April 18. These sessions were attended by owners and operators of tourism businesses, local municipal staff and chambers of commerce representatives who have a vested interest in improving the level of customer service within York Region. Feedback from the participant evaluation forms was very positive ranking the training session 4 or 5 out of a 5 ranking validating that the customer service program is comprehensive and provides the resources to engage the employee and the employer in building a service excellence culture within their organizations. From these sessions, 23 businesses committed to incorporating the resources provided to train their employees on customer service training and to provide feedback to further evaluate the performance of the program.

Two Academic Engagements

A total of 28 students from Keswick High School participated in two, three hour after school sessions to assist in the evaluation from a youth perspective, the program's alignment to Character Matters and for potential inclusion as a component to the school's curriculum.

Workshop Training

A total of 431 staff and management from organizations including Markham Museum, Varley Gallery, Markham Theatre, Monte Carlo Hotel Markham. Monte Carlo Hotel Vaughan, Hilliary House, Whitchurch Stouffville Museum. Georgina Pioneer Village and Glenway Golf and Country Club were trained in 11 workshops. On October 23rd, The Georgina Chamber of Commerce had a training session and the Newmarket Chamber of Commerce is proposing a session later in 2008.

In-House Training

Businesses including the Cardinal Golf and Country Club, Toronto Region Conservation Authority, Hilton Suites and Conference Centre, Sheraton Parkway Hotel and Conference Centre, Briars Resort, Spa and Conference Centre and Upper Canada Mall have participated in the training and are committed to incorporating the Customer Service Program in ongoing in-house employee training initiatives.

Outside Organization Engagement

Representatives from the Employment Programs and Services of the York Region District School Board participated in a Train the Trainer workshop and are planning to

incorporate the Customer Service Program into their skills development training initiatives.

On September 11, Regional staff was invited by Tourism Brantford to present the Customer Service Program to their Board of Directors and Chamber of Commerce. This has resulted in a working group being struck to develop a course of action to take the York Region program out to their business community. Tourism Brantford is a division of the Corporation of the City of Brantford.

The Ontario Ministry of Tourism is encouraged about the possibility that the Tourism Customer Service Program developed by York Region may be embraced by other communities across Ontario.

Program Enhancement

Tourism businesses involved with the initial development of the Tourism Customer Service Program and those who participated in the pilot launch identified the need to better understand cultural nuances and recommended the development of a supplementary training module that addresses diversity, inclusiveness and culture sensitivity training as it relates to customer service delivery. The Ontario Ministry of Tourism has provided an additional \$10,000 in funding to retain the services of the Ontario Tourism Education Corporation to develop this module in consultation with the York Region Tourism Advisory Group and the tourism industry.

Building upon the framework of the Customer Service Program and the Character philosophy, three cultural sensitivity training modules will be developed focussing on – Be Welcomed, Is Heard, Feels Valued, Departs Delighted and Will Return from front line employees and the fourth module will provide tools to assist business owners and operators create a culture of inclusiveness within their organization. The cultural module is proposed for completion by the end of 2008 and will be vetted through various cultural organizations in early 2009 prior to launching to the tourism industry.

Program Recognition

The York Region Customer Service Program received *Honourable Mention* at the Ontario Tourism Marketing Summit on October 7, 2008 in Toronto as one of two finalists for the Ontario Ministry of Tourism Employee Attraction and Retention Award. This provincial award recognizes initiatives developed that demonstrate an innovative approach to recruiting new employees, minimizing staff turnover and business loyalty.

Going Forward

York Region Tourism intends to submit a funding application to the Ontario Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities to assist in establishing the program as an ongoing

training initiative for the tourism business community. The proposed program implementation frame is April – December 2009. Local municipalities, York Region public and private school boards, the Character Foundation, other academic institutes, chambers of commerce and the board of trade will be encouraged to partner to accomplish the following:

- A greater outreach to increase tourism business participation in the York Region Customer Service Program training.
- Develop a Customer Service Award and Recognition Program for employers and employees.
- Engage academic and not-for-profit skills development organizations in delivery of the Customer Service Program through curriculum and Character Matters initiatives.
- Enhance media relations and marketing activities to build awareness and profile of York Region, a destination dedicated to service excellence.

Relationship to Vision 2026

The Tourism Customer Service Program supports the Vibrant Economy, Engaged Communities and a Responsive Region and Responding to the Needs of Our Resident goals identified in Vision 2026.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Funding for the development of the Tourism Customer Service Program initiatives to date were included in the 2008 York Region Economic Development operating budget and have been supported by the Ontario Ministry of Tourism in the amount of \$39,000. Development of an ongoing program is contingent on securing funding from the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

The Tourism Customer Service Program is fundamental to the overall appeal and image of York Region as a viable tourist destination. It provides the business community with the tools to enhance the customer experience resulting in customer loyalty, increases in visitation and generates economic benefits throughout the local municipalities.

7. CONCLUSION

Being recognized for the delivery of superior customer service provides tourism businesses a competitive advantage and supports business sustainability and growth. Understanding the customers' needs and having the skills to deliver superior customer

service builds recognition as valued employee and enhances the opportunity for employment opportunities.

The Tourism Customer Service Program was developed based on a need identified by tourism businesses. It has been recognized by external organizations as an innovative model to support business competitiveness and sustainability. Based on industry feedback, due diligence has been done to enhance and refine the training modules. Local municipalities, York Region public and private school boards, the Character Foundation, other academic institutes, chambers of commerce and the board of trade are encouraged to get involved to facilitate an official launch to the business community.

For more information on this report, please contact Brenda McGowan, Program Manager, Tourism Development at (905) 830 4444 Ex 1553 or Patrick Draper, Director Economic Strategy and Tourism at Ext 1503.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.