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Golf BUSINESS[®]

National Golf Owners Association

STANDING TALL

LIMITED ACCESS TO CAPITAL IS COMPELLING MANY OPERATORS
TO RETHINK KEY STRATEGIES AND DO MORE WITH LESS.



Operators like Greg Slag are trying to cut costs and spend wisely while facing a tight credit market.

A new approach to staffing and management has helped Mark Farrell produce substantial revenue increases.



HOW WOULD YOU REACT IF SOMEONE SUGGESTED YOUR GOLF OPERATION COULD REDUCE FULL-TIME STAFF LEVELS by nearly a third and still grow sales by 40 percent over the next five years? That's not all. What if you could also

LEAN AND MEAN

BY OVERHAULING ITS CUSTOMER SERVICE CULTURE, WESTFIELD HOSPITALITY HAS GROWN SALES WHILE TRIMMING PAYROLL EXPENSES

By Trent Bouts

provide pay increases yet keep labor costs static over the same period while enjoying customer satisfaction increases in every measurable category?

You'd probably think such an offer would come with a free set of steak knives and a 30-day money-back guarantee. Well, sorry, you'll have to get your own steak knives, but Westfield Hospitality, a unit of Westfield Insurance Group that operates a conference center, hotel and 36 holes of golf in Westfield, Ohio, can vouch for the rest of it.

"It took some time, but the numbers definitely confirm our improved effectiveness," says Mark Farrell, Westfield's executive for corporate hospitality operations. "We operate more efficiently and provide better service than we did five years ago, and we expect to be even better five years from now."

Farrell admits that when Westfield contracted with LRA Worldwide, a research and consulting firm that specializes in customer experience management, to overhaul Westfield's customer service culture, both the task and the fee seemed daunting. Management eventually got past its uneasiness and today, Farrell praises the resultant program like the consummate television pitch man. "We

were looking at a five-year return on investment, but by the second year we really felt like we'd gotten our ROI," he says.

Some background. Westfield's hospitality base hosts clients and agents from across North America. Many of those clients have been courted at world-class resorts that boast glistening beaches and ocean views, two things that are hard to find in northern Ohio. Without that special sense of place, per se, Westfield turned to its people as a potential source for differentiation and distinction.

But with hundreds of seasonal employees recruited each year, standardizing service levels—let alone elevating them to exceptional—was a major challenge. The first steps involved some intense navel gazing, where company executives "hung out all the washing" to identify "who we are" and "how we deliver," Farrell says.

Of numerous outcomes, one of the most significant led to changes in managerial hiring and training. On the hiring side, "a natural desire to please others" became the primary focus ahead of past experience and other customary résumé criteria. In terms of training, managers were encouraged to "let go and empower employees to do more, even when it was easier and less risky to do the work themselves," Farrell says.

Enabling managers to trust staff could only work if employees knew their roles and responsibilities intimately. To do that, Westfield wrote a code of universal standards to honor a

promise that every guest would "feel special." These standards are taught to seasonal employees during a mandatory two-day orientation before they begin work. Returning seasonal employees receive a one-day refresher course in those standards, which includes role-playing activities to emphasize lessons and customer service techniques. Full-time employees participate in a half-day session that features roundtable discussions on improving service levels. Westfield also uses skits to reenact real-life incidents from the previous year.

To reinforce the universal standards, all employees participate in "daily line-up" sessions of about 15 minutes during the main season from early June through September. In these line-ups, managers review activities, incoming guest information and how well staff is living up to a specified customer service promise, which changes weekly. Farrell says the line-ups were designed to inform employees but have inadvertently become a means for employees to voice ideas or concerns, a kind of managing up.

As a means of keeping tabs on staff performance, assistant managers from the various Westfield departments take turns performing weekly audits of the other departments. These audits serve like a routine blood test for the entire operation, revealing such particulars as whether the front desk answered phone calls within three rings, if employees addressed guests by name and whether or not every light bulb in the chandelier was working.

By investing so much in training and monitoring seasonal employees, Westfield has been able to reduce its number of full-time staff, which originally amounted to one-third of the workforce, by 28 percent. Seasonal staff numbers are now around 300. Farrell says expenses as a percentage have been "significantly reduced," which has allowed the company to pass on "incremental wage increases" to employees, further increasing the incentive for seasonal staff to return.

"Our ultimate goal is to perform with full-time employees only in skilled positions," Farrell says. "This allows us the greatest flexibility and lowest overhead during non-prime seasons, and that goes a long way in reducing overall labor and associated benefit costs each year."

With results like those, who needs steak knives? **RB**

Trent Bouts is a South Carolina-based freelance writer and editor of Palmetto Golfer magazine.

The Power of Empowerment

RATHER THAN ADHERE TO THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM OF LUMPING SEASONAL EMPLOYEES WITH THE MOST MENIAL TASKS, Westfield Hospitality takes the opposite approach. "Empowering seasonal workers has allowed us to get more done with fewer full-time bodies," says Mark Farrell, the company's executive for corporate hospitality operations. What's more, the lure of more meaningful work has increased the rate at which seasonal employees come back the following year. That retention rate is now better than 50 percent.

Westfield's reputation as an incubator for real-life work experience means some of the best potential and at least partially pre-qualified employees, including many from Ohio State University, are lining up. "As we put more teeth into their responsibilities, it's not just a job, it becomes a position," Farrell says. "By offering a more enriching work experience, they become more invested in the place and its culture."

Critically, Westfield uses attitude as much as aptitude when deciding between applicants for seasonal work, much like it does for its managerial roles. That essential quality is valued at the bag drop as much as it is further up the organizational chart. "Our research has shown you really want that attitude in your people even in the seemingly unimportant positions," Farrell says. "Every customer touch point matters."

In addition to sales and revenue numbers, Westfield's own customer surveys support Farrell's contention. Satisfaction rates among hosts of large-scale events have climbed from 84 percent to 96 percent. The facility's 600-plus private club members now average a "very satisfied" rating of their experience for the first time in club history. And in-house dining rates among the 1,400-plus employees at Westfield's corporate headquarters climbed from 30 percent to 70 percent in 2008. —T.B.