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## KOA BRINGS CUSTOMER FOCUS OUTDOORS

By Chelsea Pritchard, Contributing Writer

No matter how beautiful the natural surroundings of its sites, [Kampgrounds of America](#) (KOA) has one competitive advantage that brings campers back: customer service.

Two years ago KOA surveyed the customers of its 438 campgrounds to get a feel for what they really wanted from a camping trip. KOA's goal was to improve the total customer experience. "Given that the camping industry lacks disciplines that we tend to be familiar with in other hospitality sectors, we had to understand that people's needs, perceptions, and traveling requirements change," says Jim Rogers, CEO. "And we had to define those sectors into what we learned that specifically could apply to us."

KOA applied techniques used in the casino and hotel businesses, such as relevant marketing communications and CRM technology. Combining cutting-edge service to fit client expectations and the ideals of natural surroundings, KOA wants to create an outstanding customer experience.

### The People Perspective

KOA started with a focus on how its employees and franchisees deliver that customer experience. "On a campground people tend to check in and then only see a worker cleaning or walking past. We've tried to change that image," Rogers says.

KOA worked with LRA Worldwide to launch a training program to develop a customer-focused culture. The program, called Making it GREAT (greet, relate, explore, act, and thank), creates a consistent customer experience across all KOA locations.

The program includes two channels of customer experience improvements. First, campground employees participate in a 10-day training course at KOA University in Billings, MT. They learn how to use the CRM system to track new and repeat customers, as well as how to market and handle KOA merchandise, such as apparel and camping items. There is also training to understand the different needs of customers around the country. For example, sites in Florida tend to get more beachgoers and tourists, while in Oregon many rugged family campers visit.

### Understanding Needs

As a result of the customer service training, all staff members now greet campers immediately, wear telltale yellow KOA shirts and nametags, check in with customers out in the campgrounds, ask questions of campers about their experiences, and give away KOA gifts like t-shirts and key chains at the front desk.

The second improvement involves field service representatives, who travel to the sites to share best practices, such as what customer approaches work or don't, and what patterns they're seeing among customers' expectations. They also facilitate ongoing employee training, and offer hospitality demonstrations to the on-site trainers.

So far, customer insight has taught KOA that more customers are purchasing and using recreational vehicles (RVs), which opens a huge opportunity, says Rogers. Also, Baby Boomers, its largest customer group, have said they have high expectations for a compelling camping experience. On the technology front, customer demand fueled the launch of an online reservation system for 200 of its properties in September, with full roll-out expected by early 2007.

### **Next Steps**

While Rogers makes it clear that the program is in its infancy, he also says that the knowledge gained from the work done so far is "laser-like now, in terms of where we're going with it, what behavior we want to focus on, what we really know about our guests. We have no hesitation in saying that it will continue to allow us to satisfy our guests and to exceed their expectations; and this is all at the ground level, the very beginning of this project."

As for next steps, KOA is developing a points-based loyalty program that would allow the organization to gather such information as which KOA sites campers travel to and when. "We need to bring that kind of loyalty to camping," Rogers says, referring to their version of a frequent flier program. "The loyalty and recognition incorporated into this level of service is going to indeed make KOA the first choice, no matter where campers are going."