

Improving a Destination Image Through a Countywide Training for Frontline Employees: The Welcome to Memphis project

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Introduction

A destination image is an impression formed by cognitive and affective evaluations toward a destination and plays an important role for visitors in their travel-related decision making (Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011). Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) are responsible for assisting in the development of communities for a specific destination and putting in their best efforts to establish a positive destination image of their cities and to diminish a negative image of their cities. Media coverage, advertisements, and managing an official website for the destination are just a few examples of a DMO's marketing activities. In addition to these traditional marketing strategies, the Memphis Convention and Visitors Bureau (MCVB) has created a countywide customer service training project called "Welcome to Memphis" to create a positive destination image of Shelby County, mainly focused on Memphis, Tennessee, with an ultimate goal of increasing visitation to the area.

This case study demonstrates workforce challenges for the hospitality and tourism industry as well as the impact of hospitality and tourism employees on a destination image using the Welcome to Memphis project as an example. The main learning outcomes of this case study are as follows:

- to enhance undergraduate and graduate students' understanding of a destination image formation and
- to demonstrate the impacts of improved customer service skills and destination knowledge of hospitality and tourism employees on a destination image.

Background of Memphis

The city of Memphis is located in the southwestern corner of the state of Tennessee in the United States. With an estimated population of 655,770 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016), it was ranked as the largest city in the state of Tennessee and as the 23rd largest city in the United States in 2015 (Charlier, 2015).

The hospitality and tourism industry has a major impact on the economy in Shelby County. As one of the top three industries in terms of the number of employees in Shelby County, the industry provides jobs to nearly 35,000 people. In addition, more than 10.5 million

leisure and business travelers visit Memphis, spending \$3.2 billion annually (MCVB, 2016a). Specifically, Memphis enjoys a rich heritage and a great history as a major city on the Mississippi River with more than 60 tourist attractions (MCVB, 2016a). Some of the attractions are well known nationally and internationally, which bring visitors to Memphis from all around the world. Graceland, Elvis Presley's mansion in Memphis, Sun Studio, the recording studio that discovered Elvis Presley, and the Beale Street Historic District attract music lovers. In addition, Memphis is intertwined with the history of the civil rights movement in the United States with the recently renovated National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel. The city also has a rich culinary heritage, with foodies visiting the city to enjoy Memphis' thriving culinary scene, including famous slow-cooked pork barbeque and local beers.

Memphis has served as a transportation and distribution hub with the Mississippi River, an international airport, railways, and three major highways (I-40, I-55, and hub with the Mississippi River, US-78). Furthermore, several Fortune 500 companies including FedEx, AutoZone, and International Paper Company are headquartered in Memphis. The infrastructure for meetings, events, conventions, and reunions includes a 350,000-square-foot convention center and 2,800 first-class hotel rooms connected or within easy walking distance to the convention center (MCVB, 2016b).

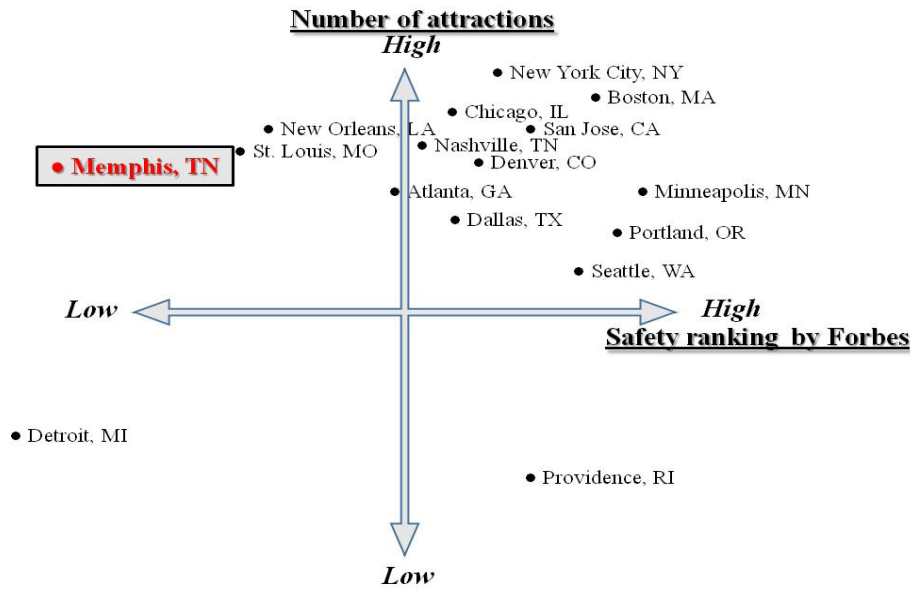
Despite the various attractions and competitive advantages that Memphis offers, the city has received mixed reputations from the media. Memphis was named as one of the top three domestic destinations to visit in 2016 by Money Magazine (7 best domestic destinations, 2016) and was ranked in the top 10 most affordable cities for music lovers by Redfin.com (Whitely, 2016). On the other hand, Memphis has struggled with a poor image with its high number of violent crimes and other socio-economic issues. Memphis also has been in the top five of Forbes' annual most dangerous cities list for the last several years (Charlier, 2016).

As shown in Figure 1, a perceptual map clearly identifies the image issue that Memphis carries compared to competing destination cities. Despite the recent decline in serious crimes reported to law enforcement, the city is still suffering image problems, not only in the minds of tourists, but also among local residents. One of the barriers to creating a positive destination image is an unfavorable impression of Memphis formed in the minds of frontline employees, which they

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Figure 1

A Perceptual Map Based on the Number of Attractions^a and Perception of Safety^b



^aThe number of attractions was counted by listings on each city's official convention and visitors bureau website. ^bThe perception of safety was identified by the Forbes' most dangerous city list in 2015 (The 10 most dangerous U.S. Cities, 2015).

communicate to Memphis visitors.

On June 17, 2015, the MCVB announced Tourism 20/20, an initiative to develop communities promoting tourism in Shelby County, including Memphis and six adjacent cities: Arlington, Bartlett, Collierville, Germantown, Lakeland, and Millington. The main goals of Tourism 20/20 are to develop programs that increase industry coordination, upgrade infrastructure, improve visitor experience, and educate residents in Shelby County on the local economic impact of the tourism industry. The ultimate goal of this strategic planning is to endorse Shelby County, especially Memphis, as an appealing tourism destination regardless of visitors' purpose for visiting. During its planning, several opinion makers including hotel managers, restaurant managers, small business owners, and political leaders addressed workforce-related issues in the hospitality and tourism industry in Shelby County. The issues consist of the lack of customer service skills and knowledge about the city by hospitality and tourism employees, and the absence of resources for managers and employers to train their employees. The following scenarios demonstrate these challenges:

#1. Lack of Customer Service Skills

Memphis One is a legendary family-owned barbeque restaurant located in downtown Memphis. The restaurant enjoys its excellent reputation as a premier destination for rib lovers with several awards for barbeque from different sources. It's also rated four out of five bubbles on TripAdvisor and as one of the

top 20 of more than 1300 restaurants in Memphis. Its location in downtown Memphis is within walking distance of less than one mile to the major attractions such as Beale Street and the Civil Rights Museum.

Caroline started working for the Memphis One restaurant as a server three months ago. Caroline has had several years of previous experience as a server, so she was placed in front of customers after learning some basic functions of the point of sale system. On a busy Friday night, two female visitors came to the Memphis One restaurant from out of town to try barbeque ribs. They informed Caroline, their server, that it was their first time dining at the restaurant and asked for recommendations for popular menu items. Based on Caroline's recommendation, they decided to try the world-famous barbeque nachos and Memphis-style wet barbeque ribs. They enjoyed the food very much and loved the atmosphere of the restaurant. After dinner, they asked Caroline whether it was safe to take a walk downtown and go to Beale Street at night. Caroline did not know how to respond to the question because she felt that walking downtown at night was not a good idea in urban cities like Memphis, so she reluctantly responded, "I don't think it's safe to walk around downtown at night. I don't recommend walking downtown and to Beale Street at night." The visitors were disappointed to hear Caroline's response because they heard great

things about Beale Street, but they didn't want to take any risks. Therefore, they decided to go directly to their hotel room and watch TV to be safe instead of going to Beale Street.

#2. Lack of Knowledge

Michael moved to Memphis eight years ago for family reasons right after he graduated from his high school in a small town in Louisiana. Michael did not possess any technical skills, but he was fortunate to find a job as a server at the Memphis One restaurant. Visitors who dined in at the Memphis One often asked Michael about local attractions in Memphis and directions to an attraction from the restaurant. However, he could not provide the information because his knowledge about local attractions was very limited, so he advised the visitors to search for the information online. Michael felt sorry for not being able to help the visitors, but with his busy schedule, he did not have any time to explore attractions in town. In addition, Michael believed that it was not a mandatory requirement for him to learn about local attractions for his server job because it was not part of his job description. Several of Michael's coworkers had not been to most of the local attractions either, because they thought the attractions were for tourists and the admission tickets were expensive.

#3. Lack of Training Resources from Manager's Perspectives

Matthew is a manager of the Memphis One restaurant who is responsible for not only meeting the restaurant's financial objec-

tives, but also for managing human resources by training staff and enforcing policies and procedures. Matthew believes that managing the restaurant by walking around is a great practice to become engaged with his employees, and he tries to spend as much time as possible out on the restaurant floor talking to patrons and listening to how his staff interacts with them.

When Matthew overheard the conversation between the two female visitors and Caroline, he could not believe what he had just heard. Matthew did not want to interrupt their conversation, but he knew that it was not a proper answer. Matthew realized that he needed to train his employees about how to answer questions regarding safety around the area and educate his employees about local attractions. However, Matthew had been busy with day-to-day operations and had no spare time to spend on training. He also recalled that Caroline once mentioned a long commute, indicating that she lived in one of the Memphis suburbs and she didn't have extra time to receive non-job-related trainings, either. Furthermore, Matthew felt that he did not have the necessary resources to train his employees about attractions, because he had not been to most of the local attractions in Memphis, even though he had lived in the city for the majority of his life.

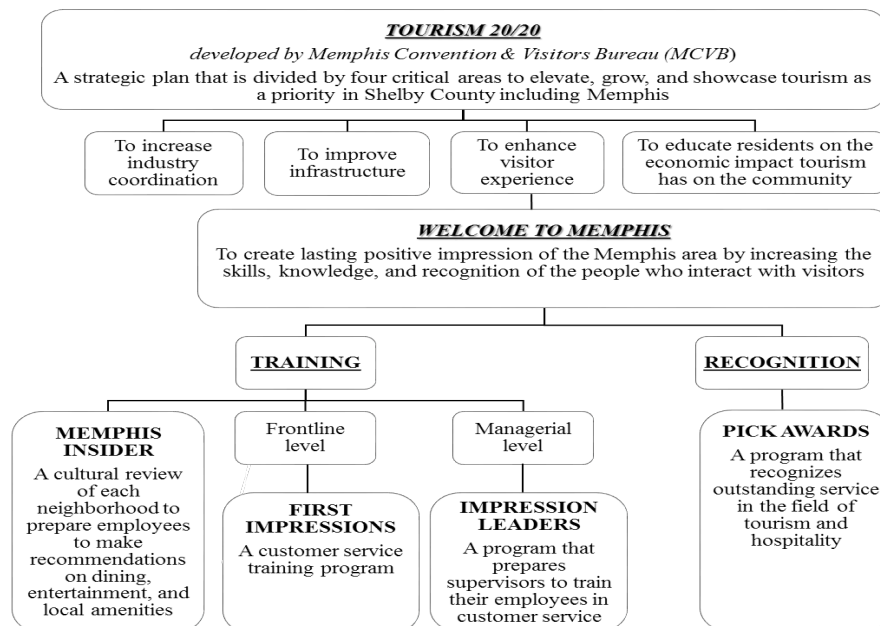
Welcome to Memphis Project

The mission of the Welcome to Memphis project is "To create a lasting positive impression of the Memphis area by increasing the

Figure 2

A Structure Chart for the Welcome to Memphis project.

Adapted from "2015 Annual Report," by MCVB, 2016a



skills, knowledge, and recognition of people who interact with visitors" (About, n.d.). The Welcome to Memphis project provides trainings and certifications in customer service skills to hospitality and tourism employees and recognizes employees who provide excellent customer service to ultimately increase the number of visitations to the city. When a manager or business owner schedules a class regarding customer service for their employees with the Welcome to Memphis project, a trainer will conduct a class either at their organization or with other employees from different organizations.

Currently, two distinctive customer service training classes are offered: one for supervisors and managers called "Impression Leaders" and another for frontline employees named "First Impressions". Specifically, the "Impression Leaders" class educates supervisors on how to train their employees in terms of customer service, and the "First Impressions" class covers foundations of customer service skills as well as how to answer tough questions from visitors properly, such as the safety question in downtown Memphis that Caroline received. In addition to these two classes, the Welcome to Memphis project has developed a training program titled "Memphis Insider" to educate the frontline employees on the specific neighborhoods where they work. All of the classes offered by Welcome to Memphis are free of charge to members of MCVB. Figure 2 illustrates the structure chart of the Welcome to Memphis project.

Due to the short history of the Welcome to Memphis project, there is no evidence to evaluate the success of the project yet. However, in order to measure the effectiveness of the project, the Welcome to Memphis organization has developed the following plans to:

1. perform pre- and post-tests with hospitality employees at every training session to investigate significant increases in employees' destination knowledge,
2. conduct a survey with visitors regarding their perceptions of Memphis every year to determine significant increases in city image,
3. monitor the number of visitations to Shelby County, including Memphis and surrounding areas, to test significant increases in the number of visitors, and
4. compare annual visitor expenditures over time to measure significant increases in visitors' spending

Matthew, the manager at the Memphis One restaurant, decided to require his employees to take "First Impressions", the customer service training class, as well as the "Memphis Insider" class during the restaurant's slow time. At the trainings, the trainers taught all of his employees, including Caroline and Michael, about customer service basics and demonstrated how to answer frequently asked questions. For example, when visitors ask about the safety of downtown Memphis, they should inform them that downtown Memphis is as safe as other downtowns of big cities because police patrol the area regularly and there is plenty of foot traffic even at night; however, they should

apply the normal big-city precautions. Caroline and Michael now feel confident that they can bring more revenue to the restaurant by providing better service to their customers. The training has also increased their knowledge of Memphis significantly, and they feel that they are ambassadors for Memphis.

Matthew has also completed the "Impression Leaders" class with other managers from hotels, restaurants, attractions, and retail stores and he feels that he finally has the tools and resources needed to reinforce customer service skills to his team and to motivate them to provide better customer service and to handle tough questions properly.

Discussion

Visitors often ask frontline employees of the hospitality and tourism industry questions about local attractions. If the employees are not well trained, not only does the company lose potential sales, but also the visitors might not enjoy their time in the city because of the poor service that they received from the company. Cities that heavily depend on the hospitality and tourism industry, such as Memphis, need to position themselves strategically as a tourism city and try to provide a certain level of customer service to visitors, so that they can come back to the city and recommend it to their friends and family. All of the employees of the hospitality and tourism industry, especially the frontline employees, should be aware that they are ambassadors for the area and their performance is one of the most important factors affecting visitors' satisfaction with their trip and destination image.

Discussion Questions

Undergraduate level

- Who are the frontline employees of the hospitality and tourism industry and what are their unique characteristics?
- Why do the frontline employees of the hospitality and tourism industry play an important role in customer satisfaction?
- What are the challenges and benefits for hospitality and tourism companies in terms of training their frontline employees?
- What are the benefits that training brings to frontline employees?
- What are the benefits of the customer service training from the city's perspective?
- What are the factors affecting a destination image?
- Can employees and owners be held liable if someone becomes the victim of a crime at the site recommended by the hospitality operation?

Graduate level

- What are the criteria that determine first-, second-, and third-tier destination cities? What tier do Memphis and your city fit into?

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