

teaching note

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

Summary

The city of Memphis enjoys a rich heritage and a great history as a major city on the Mississippi River. However, the city has been struggling for decades with violent crimes and other socioeconomic issues that are negatively impacting its destination image. Furthermore, Memphis' hospitality and tourism employers have reported the following workforce challenges: lack of basic customer service skills and destination knowledge, difficulty in retaining frontline employees, and low levels of staff motivation.

This case study presents three scenarios that illustrate the factors that affect the quality of hospitality workforce in the Memphis area. Caroline, a server at Memphis One, a family-owned barbecue restaurant in downtown Memphis, didn't have the proper training to be able to answer visitors' questions regarding safety in the area. Michael, her colleague, recently moved to Memphis and struggled to answer patrons' questions about things to do in the city. Matthew, their manager, realized that his employees were not properly trained, but he felt he didn't have the necessary resources needed to teach them basic customer service skills.

Welcome to Memphis, a nonprofit subsidiary of the Memphis Convention and Visitors Bureau, provides a countywide training program to develop customer service skills and destination knowledge, as well as develops tools and resources to support hospitality and tourism industry managers in their mentoring efforts. Still in the growth phase, it's too early to tell whether this project will reach its ambitious long-term goals. However, it serves as an illustrative example of a countywide effort to revamp a destination image through implementation of a training program in customer service and destination knowledge.

Theoretical Background

A destination image is a subjective interpretation formed by cognitive and affective evaluations of a place (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Kim & Richardson, 2003). While the cognitive aspect includes physical attributes that a destination offers, such as attractions and tourist infrastructures, the affective component covers the individual's emotions toward the destination site (San Martín & Del Bosque, 2008). Factors affecting a destination image formation include gathered information from previous experience, media, and personal factors, such as socio-demographic characteristics and psychological factors (Beerli & Martin, 2004). Among these factors, only previous experience and media can possibly be managed by a Destination Marketing Organization (DMO). In order for a DMO to ensure visitors receive great hospitality during their visit, many organizations offer training pro-

grams to hospitality and tourism employees in their areas.

Employees in the hospitality and tourism industry have been identified as one of the most important assets of a company because they directly interact with customers (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). Concerning the nature of the service delivery process, the concept is especially important in the hospitality and tourism industry, and it is critical for employees to possess the right training and attitudes. However, many of them have never received any formal training related to customer service skills at work.

Trainings contribute to a company in many ways. Training is considered to be one of the management strategies that businesses utilize to communicate with their employees about new organizational strategies, new products, system changes, and customer-related skills (Kassieh & Yourstone, 1998). Trainings help employees not only to acquire new job-related skills or information, but also to develop interpersonal skills. In addition, training is positively related to job satisfaction as well as commitment to the organization (Joung, Goh, Huffman, Yuan, & Surlis, 2015). Despite these benefits, small hospitality and tourism companies often do not possess the necessary skills and resources to train their employees. Therefore, well-structured trainings such as the Welcome to Memphis project offered from outside of the company can be a solution for hospitality and tourism companies to improve the basic customer service skills of their employees. Creating a positive destination image driven by well-trained employees in the hospitality and tourism industry increases the attractiveness of the city. It will ultimately increase visitations to the destination because visitors are willing to choose a destination with a positive image over destinations with a poor image.

Target Audience

This case study is appropriate to many courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels, including Hospitality Marketing, Tourism Management, and Human Resources classes. To adapt the case study to the graduate level course, it is recommended to assign two articles from the additional reading as required ones, as well as assigning a research paper instead of the reflection paper required at the undergraduate level.

Teaching Objectives

By the completion of the case study analysis and its related assignments, both the undergraduate and graduate level students should be able to:

- define destination image
- explain the process of perceptual mapping

- describe the benefits and challenges of implementing a city-, county-, or statewide customer service training
- identify a similar customer service training program in the area where they live
- discuss property owners' liability regarding information that employees provide to customers

Additionally, the graduate level students should be able to:

- determine the differences between first-, second-, and third-tier destination cities
- assess Return on Investment (ROI) of creating a positive destination image for a city or state
- evaluate and critique a city-, county-, or statewide customer service training program based on the suggested criteria (please refer to the analysis of the teaching objectives)

Instruction Plan

The lesson will require two hours to complete the full exploration of the presented topics and ideas. Prior to the lesson, the instructor will assign students to read the case study and additional readings.

Part 1 - Video: What to do in Memphis

- In the beginning of the class, the instructor will show a video about Memphis produced by "36 hours," a video series from The New York Times to visualize the situation that students need to analyze. The video can be found on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgnQdIM4UV4>

Part 2 - Analysis of Memphis perceptual mapping

Perceptual mapping is one of the ways for students to analyze the issues facing Memphis. Students will work in pairs to interpret the Memphis perception map and to answer the following questions:

- What are the two dimensions used to create a perceptual map?
- What cities are most likely to be perceived as worth visiting based on the perceptual map?
- What are the potential opportunities for Memphis to reposition itself?

Part 3 - Classroom Discussion

Students will be asked to reflect on the thoughts and attitudes of the people involved in the scenarios by answering the following questions:

Undergraduate level:

- Why did Caroline advise the women against walking to Beale Street?
- If you were the female traveler, would you return to the city?
- Why does Michael have difficulties answering his patron's questions about local attractions?

- As a visitor, do you expect local staff to be knowledgeable about the city?
- What resources does Matthew need to help his staff provide exceptional customer service?
- Do you think that recommending local attractions to visitors is a part of a server's job responsibilities?

Graduate level:

- Should employers take responsibility for employees' professional development? What are the obstacles to achieving it?
- What are the legal and ethical responsibilities of a business towards its customers when it comes to recommending local attractions?

Part 4 - Assessment of the Welcome to Memphis project

The instructor will ask students to read the Welcome to Memphis mission, vision, and description of the classes available at the Welcome to Memphis website at <http://welcometomemphis.org/>. The instructor will then ask students to answer the following questions:

Undergraduate level:

- Do you think this training program is beneficial for entry-level hospitality employees and their managers?
- How does the city of Memphis benefit from the classes offered by the Welcome to Memphis?

Graduate level:

- Compare the "First Impressions" class for frontline employees and "Impression Leader" class for supervisors. What are the different components of each training program? Are there any similarities?

Part 5 - Analysis of a similar customer service training model

The instructor will ask students to identify a city-, county-, or statewide customer service training program in the area where they live and discuss it by answering the following questions:

- What are the program's goals and objectives?
- What are the benefits and challenges of organizing such a training program?

At the graduate level, the instructor can also ask students to create a list of the possible research topics related to destination image and discuss them in class.

Assessment

Undergraduate Level

Undergraduate hospitality students will be assigned a two- to three-page reflection paper. Working students will be asked to discuss the challenges of acquiring destination knowledge during full-time employment. Non-working students will be asked to discuss their

expectation of local employees' level of destination knowledge when travelling and how it affects their experience as a visitor.

Graduate Level

Graduate hospitality students will be assigned a three- to five-page research paper on Return on Investment (ROI) of building a positive destination image.

Analysis of Discussion Topics and Questions

Below is the analysis of the discussion questions included in the case study:

Undergraduate Level

1. Who are the frontline employees of the hospitality and tourism industry and what are their unique characteristics?

Frontline employees are the people who handle the initial contact with the visitors; thus, they can contribute to creating a positive destination image. They are typically low-wage workers with limited formal education, lack of basic customer service skills and destination knowledge, and lower levels of motivation.

2. Why do the frontline employees of the hospitality and tourism industry play an important role in customer satisfaction?

Frontline employees play a key role acting as ambassadors between a city and its visitors. A properly trained and motivated frontline employee provides a higher level of customer service that positively impacts a visitor's experience and his/her perception of the area.

3. What are the challenges and benefits for hospitality and tourism companies in terms of training their frontline employees?

Training improves the company's morale and increases employee satisfaction, which contributes to higher levels of customer service and employee retention. One of the major challenges in providing employees with quality training is the lack of training resources.

4. What are the benefits that customer service training brings to frontline employees?

It increases frontline employees' confidence and helps them meet visitors' needs and personalize their experience, which might lead to higher tips and, in some cases, opportunities for promotion.

5. What are the benefits of the customer service training from the city's perspective?

A customer service training program can improve visitors' experiences, increase customer satisfaction and loyalty, and bring more revenue to the city's budget, as well as endorse the city's image as an appealing tourism destination.

6. What are the factors affecting a destination image?

They include factors such as gathered information from previous experience, media, and personal factors, such as socio-demographic characteristics and psychological factors.

7. Can employees and owners be held liable if someone becomes the victim of a crime at the site recommended by the hospitality operation?

Table 1

Attributions for First-Tier, Second-Tier, and Third-Tier Cities

FIRST-TIER CITY	SECOND-TIER CITY	THIRD-TIER CITY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Airport with ample nonstop national and international access • Hotel inventory that includes major hotel brands • Abundant dining, entertainment, and attraction options for attendees • 10,000 minimum committable sleeping rooms • Convention center with a minimum of 500,000 gross square feet of exhibit space • Considered one of the top 25 destinations for group business • Distinctive leisure-travel appeal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordable, better value • Attracts a regional drive market • Convention facilities with fewer than 500,000 gross square feet • Regional airport with less nonstop or direct airlift • Largest convention venue generally a single hotel or conference center • Productive local industries and business climate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional airport with less nonstop or direct airlift • Largest convention venue generally a single hotel or conference center • Convention facilities fewer than 500,000 gross square feet • Attracts a regional drive market • Distinctive leisure-travel appeal

Note. Adapted from "First-, Second- and Third-Tier Cities," by C. Shimasaki, 2015.

A hospitality entity usually cannot be held liable for crimes committed near its area unless it should have anticipated the crime and could have prevented it by giving a sufficient warning (a negligence case). Despite taking a recommendation from the hospitality company, it is expected that a visitor has the duty to use reasonable care to keep himself or herself safe.

Graduate Level

8. What are the criteria that determine first-, second-, and third-tier destination cities? What tier do Memphis and your city fit into? Since there are no existing specific tier qualifications at this point, the meetings and events industry uses the unofficial criteria as presented in Table 1.

Analysis of the Teaching Objectives

Both Undergraduate and Graduate Levels

- *Define destination image:* Students will be able to explain the concept of a destination image.
- *Explain the process of perceptual mapping:* Students will be able to describe the steps needed to construct a perceptual map.
- *Describe the benefits and challenges of implementing a citywide customer service training program:* Using Welcome to Memphis as an example, students will be able to identify the benefits of the project such as improved customer service skills and destination knowledge. The students will also be able to identify the challenges of implementing such a program related to the training at a city level.
- *Identify a similar customer service training program in the area where they live:* Students will be able to determine whether their city or state makes any efforts to create and promote a positive destination image by training their frontline employees.
- *Discuss property owners' liability:* Students will be introduced to the concept of premises liability.

Graduate Level

- *Determine the differences between first-, second-, and third-tier destination cities:* Students will research a set of criteria to determine whether a city is a first-, second-, or third-tier destination.
- *Assess Return on Investment (ROI) of creating a positive destination image for a city or state:* Students will estimate the benefits obtained by a city or state over a specific period of time in return for the investment in developing and implementing a customer service training program.
- *Evaluate and critique a city-, county-, or statewide customer service training program based on the following criteria:* different kinds of training for frontline employees versus managers, cost of program for participants, post- and pre-assessment, clear lesson plans, developed goals and objectives.

Students will identify a similar customer service program in the area where they live and critique it based on the suggested criteria.

Additional Readings

- Baloglu, S., & McCleary, K. W. (1999). A model of destination image formation. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 26(4), 868-897.
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- San Martín, H., & Del Bosque, I. A. R. (2008). Exploring the cognitive-affective nature of destination image and the role of psychological factors in its formation. *Tourism Management*, 29(2), 263-277.
- Shimasaki, C. (2015). First, second- and third-tier cities: What do the designations really mean? *The Meeting Magazines*. Retrieved from <http://www.themeetingmagazines.com/cit/first-second-third-tier-cities/>.