

Training Needs in the Tourism Industry

Niche Profile

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Information Clearinghouse**

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Introduction

This report takes a broad look at training needs and demands throughout the tourism industry in northern Alberta, asking tourism operators and promoters about what they see as the main training needs in their industry. It also looks at ways for the Clearinghouse partner colleges to respond to the industry's needs.

Previous Clearinghouse reports on Ecotourism (September 1995) and Customer Service Training (February, 1996) have examined aspects of training for the tourism industry in northern Alberta. The Ecotourism report suggested that tourism operators needed training in marketing and small business management and that employees in the industry needed customer service training. The latter need was confirmed in the Customer Service Training report. Research for that report showed a strong consensus on the need for customer service training but the actual demand for the training turned out to be very low.

Almost everyone contacted for this study pointed to customer service and marketing as the main skills needed. Once again however, the training demand in both of these areas remains comparatively low. In order both to encourage and to serve the tourism training market, colleges would do well to become involved in local and regional tourism partnerships.

Methods

The information in this report comes from a combination of interviews, a survey, previous reports and statistical data. The interviews were conducted with people involved in the tourism industry as operators and as marketers. The survey was a short questionnaire included in the delegate package for the "Travel North '98" tourism conference in December, 1998, hosted by the Northern Alberta Development Council. The response to this survey was disappointing, with only eight surveys returned out of the 70 or so distributed. Those returned came from a mixture of operators, promoters and municipal officials. Additional views on training needs in the industry were found in the proceedings from the Travel North '98 conference.

Previous Clearinghouse reports on Ecotourism, customer service training and training for new entrepreneurs all provide some useful information. Data on employment comes from Statistics Canada Census 96 data.

Industry Overview

The tourism industry is difficult to define. Any commercial, cultural, recreational or institutional operation that deals with and or depends on the general public can be said to be part of tourism. Most commonly however, the industry is broken down into eight divisions:

Accommodation	Tourism Services
Adventure Tourism and Recreation	Events and Conferences
Food and Beverages	Transportation
Attractions	Travel Trade

Not surprisingly, the size of the tourism industry in northern Alberta is also difficult to gauge. According to the 1996 Census:

- some 12,600 northern Albertans worked in Accommodation, Food and Beverage industries.
- Counting by occupations, some 1,020 people in our region were employed in Occupations in Travel and Accommodation, including attendants in recreation and sport.
- A further 5,830 were listed as managers in retail trade, food and accommodation services.

The number of tourism operators in the region varies depending on the definition one uses. It is safe to say that there are several hundred tourism-related businesses in northern Alberta.

Partnerships of various sorts are very important parts of the tourism industry in northern Alberta. Marketing partnerships operate locally in the form of Tourism Marketing Organizations (such as Big Lake Country Tourism or the Heart of the Lakeland Marketing Association) and regionally in bodies such as the Alberta North Tourism Destination Region.

Training Issues

The survey of Travel North '98 delegates asked respondents to answer several questions regarding their training interests. The results of the survey alone cannot be taken as truly representative of all operators due to the small number of survey respondents. Combined with interviews, notes from the Travel North '98 conference and previous research however, they do give some indication of the concerns and priorities of people in the industry.

Training Provided

Six out of the eight survey respondents claim to provide training for their employees. The most commonly provided types of training are customer service/hospitality, first aid and safety. Also on the list are “boats”, “horses”, “whatever comes up that’s relevant”, “recreation-supervisory skills” and “maintaining sports fields, facilities”.

In contrast to the survey response, interviews and previous research suggest that most tourism operators do not recognize the value of training. They tend to look at training as a cost, not an investment. Employee turnover is quite high in this industry; as a result, many employers feel that it is not worth their money to train short-term workers. Conversely, the market for training for supervisors, i.e. Train-the-Trainer or personnel management courses, may be stronger. Employers are more likely to invest in longer-term employees.

Training Priorities

Customer service training is the most important training for the survey respondents. Seven out of eight gave this the highest possible rating. This is backed up by interviews with tourism promoters. Right now, northern Alberta has a reputation for friendliness, but also for mediocre customer service. This must change, say respondents, if we are to attract international tourists.

Marketing was the second most important area for training according to the conference delegates. Once again, this is reinforced by comments from interviews. Operators and promoters need to learn how to market their products effectively to an international audience.

Outdoor pursuits/guiding and media relations tied for third in the respondents' list of training priorities. These are followed by first aid and business/office administration.

It is noteworthy that first-aid training is relatively low on the list of training priorities, given the fact that it is one of the most frequently provided forms of training.

Factors in Decision-Making

The survey asked people to rate several factors affecting their choices of training courses.

- The highest rated factor was location, followed closely by cost and the specificity of the training to their organization.
- The time of year of training, was next in line, with the trainer's reputation and the duration of the training rounding out the list.
- The difference in importance between the top and bottom of the list was not great.
- Most operators provide training on a yearly or semi-yearly basis, generally in their off-seasons.
- Colleges do not have a high profile in the field of customer service training. One group at the Travel North '98 conference was asked who should be involved in training for, and maintaining, quality service. Their responses included operators, marketing organizations, the Alberta Tourism Education Council and others, but did not include colleges.

Training available

A number of institutions in Alberta have certificate, diploma or degree programs specifically related to tourism. The only one of these in the North is Lakeland College with their Adventure Tourism & Outdoor Recreation diploma program. There are numerous other business programs

that can be applied to work in the tourism industry.

The Alberta Tourism Education Council (ATEC) is a major source of training for the tourism industry in Alberta. ATEC's best-known program is their Alberta Best customer service program, which is soon to be renamed "Service Best". This program is a recognized standard throughout Alberta. While it is widely respected in the tourism industry, not all of the delegates at the Travel North '98 conference support it. Some operators claim that it is too costly for their needs.

ATEC offers several other courses as well, including:

- Workplace Train-the-Trainer
- Senior Friendly (how to serve the aging population)
- Team Excellence
- certification for service occupations
- Tourism Careers for Youth Project.

ATEC has also developed series of Marketing Workshops for Tourism Operators. This is made up of three modules, lasting two days each:

- Tourism Product: Take your idea to Market
- Tourism Packaging: The Total Experience
- Promotions for the Tourism Industry.

So far, ATEC is offering this program through NAIT, but they may be open to other service providers, depending on the number of interested students. For more information on any of the ATEC programs, please contact Jane Albers at (780) 422-0781.

As need arises, Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development makes ATEC's Tourism Careers for Youth program available to those eligible for funding under the Labour Market Development Agreement. The training component is delivered by individuals and/or institutions on a contract basis.

Private trainers also offer customer service training. For example, Fred Pryor Seminars offers a one-day course titled, "How to Deliver Exceptional Customer Service" for \$89.00 plus GST.

Comments on Training in Tourism from Survey and Interviews

- "Hospitality and customer service training must be embraced as an investment by employers and employees." (TN '98) It is important to educate tourism operators about the value of having well-trained staff.
- Traditional institutional sales models (i.e. listing a course in a calendar and waiting for people to sign up) are not effective in this case.
- Innovative cost structures and payment options will help to sell customer service and related training. Having employers and employees split the cost or having employees pay through payroll deductions which can be remitted as a reward for long service are just

two such options. This can make the training more affordable for the employer and encourage the workers to make a commitment to their jobs.

- As much of the training as possible should be delivered on-site, not in a classroom.
- The biggest training market is for those already working in the tourism industry.
- Employers and employees need to be trained together. A new worker with good customer-relations skills will be of no benefit if the corporate culture does not reward good service.
- Personnel Management was also identified as a training need. This would be a logical partner to Train-the Trainer courses.

Summary/Recommendations

Innovative marketing and course delivery will be needed in order to serve the training needs of the northern Alberta tourism industry. As in the past, the potential market for customer service training is quite large, although a major marketing effort must be made in order to create real demand. The demand for marketing training is not as large but may be easier to access. The main market for training in this industry is for people already working in the field.

In both cases courses will have to be delivered on-site (as opposed to in the classroom) as much as possible and at times that work for the employers and employees (i.e. off-season, evenings). In addition, colleges will have to find ways to help employers keep their costs down and improve employee retention. Looking at other training priorities, there may be a market for combined training programs such as outdoor pursuits and customer service or marketing and media relations.

Given the importance of tourism partnerships in northern Alberta and the current low profile of colleges among operators, colleges that want to provide tourism marketing courses should become involved in local tourism organizations. This would give them visibility in the industry as well as the ability to gauge, and respond to, the training needs of the operators more effectively.

In order to provide marketing training, colleges can either adapt their own existing marketing and business courses to this industry or partner with others such as ATEC to offer programs that have been specifically designed for tourism operators. Since most operators look to their partnerships and marketing organizations to sell their product, training in this area should be aimed at those organizations.

Sources

A Traveller's Guide to Alberta North.

Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse reports:

“Ecotourism in Northern Alberta”, September, 1995

“Customer Service Training”, February, 1996

“Training for New Entrepreneurs”, November, 1996.

Statistics Canada, data from the 1996 Census of Canada.

“Northern Tourism Priorities and Action Steps: Small Group Sessions - Travel North 98”

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