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THE ALCHEMY OF APPLIED LEISURE RESEARCH:
TURNING MARKETING DATA INTO GOLD

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ABSTRACT

Scientific management makes a difference in bottom line profits. The effective use of information is the key dimension to scientific management. It helps to isolate the most effective management strategies.

THE ALCHEMY OF APPLIED LEISURE RESEARCH:
TURNING MARKETING DATA INTO GOLD

As general manager of the Lassen Park Ski Area in 1985, I was well aware of the fact that the new ski resort opening just hours North of us on the slopes of Mt. Shasta represented serious competition. In fact, one of our important markets would now be located directly between the two ski areas. To further aggravate matters, our building and lift facilities could not hope to compete with the new area's facilities due to the constraints of doing business within a National Park. Inasmuch as we had little control over the grossly inadequate facilities and their inability to meet the needs of a growing skier public, we began to focus on other methods of achieving guest satisfaction. We felt like this approach could be the key to staying competitive. In looking at our strengths and weaknesses, we decided to concentrate our energy on service effectiveness. This was a component of our ski product that we could improve. In fact, our ultimate goal was to become the "friendliest ski area in the West". Following a number of meetings on the subject it was

decided that a consultant would be hired to help us better define our market niche and implement programs to aid us in the achievement of our marketing objectives.

In October of 1985, a contract was signed with researchers from the Recreation and Parks Management Department at the California State University, Chico. It was decided that in combination with a skier survey on demographics and psychographics that the researchers would also study guest's perception of facilities, services and personnel at the resort. An Importance-Performance Analysis was utilized in order to better understand the guest's perception of what items were important and how these services were being rendered. The initial report's findings were right in line with what we expected regarding the demographics and the facilities, but the results on service quality were a shocking surprise. The report cited several areas which guests felt needed drastic improvement. Some of the more significant items the guests were disgruntled about included: abrasive employee announcements over the public address system, poor slope grooming, poor signage, mediocre lift service, and very poor service quality in several of the departments.

We took immediate action by meeting with department managers and discussing with them the significance of the low ratings. The second report indicated marked improvement in all areas. However, the ratings were still not as high as we would have liked them to be. At this point, the researchers began to conduct an employee survey in order to identify areas of employee concern which could possibly be linked to job satisfaction, performance and ultimately, guest treatment. After taking a look at the employee data and consulting with the research team, we came to realize that job satisfaction and guest-satisfaction were clearly related. In fact, the department which had the most trouble with their provision of services in a professional manner was also the department with the largest number of dissatisfied employees.

Throughout the ski season the data we received were applied at the management and staff level, resulting in a number of significant improvements. However, other problems were more resistant to "quick fix" solutions. As the season came to an end, we identified a need for specific training for both our managers and staff in the area of service enhancement. Researchers and managers alike agreed that in many cases it was not employee motivation that was lacking as much as it was the absence of actual interpersonal skills. Attending to guest's needs, the establishment of a guest-orientation, verbal and nonverbal communication skills, conflict resolution, an interdepartmental cooperation were just five of the areas identified as needing attention. Plans were made to retain the research team under the terms that they would design and implement a comprehensive management/employee training program during the next fall as well as be responsible for conducting a second skier survey in order to better assess the effectiveness of the training program.

The fall training program met with instant success and was rated highly beneficial by both the management team and staff. The training included modules for managers, departments, employees, and a general session for the whole group and was accomplished in one weekend. Highlights of the sessions included: employee motivation, attending skills, the development of empathy and sensitivity, the importance of

seeing every employee as being on the marketing team, barriers to communication, and teambuilding, among others. What was unique about the program was its multi-dimensional approach and its dynamic and entertaining format. The fast-paced program included lots of opportunities for putting the newly acquired strategies and techniques to work in demonstrations, simulations and roleplays.

Comments from the employees themselves revealed the quality of the training program. One rental shop employee commented, "I really appreciate the training we received, the trainer was full of high energy which kept my interest." There were other comments describing how this training would be useful in dealing with people throughout the resort complex. Department managers also learned many vital lessons which they would be putting to use on a daily basis. At the researcher's request the area also provided monthly follow-up sessions at the employee meetings which inspired a "yes we can" atmosphere. In addition, the researchers were available to staff members and managers on an individual basis for consultations regarding specific problems. In spite of the general feeling by area personnel that the training was a tremendous success and had in fact had a significant positive impact on both employees and guests, we anxiously awaited the results from this second year of skier/employee surveys to see if our impressions would be empirically supported.

The results of the second year's survey were just as surprising as the first years results, but in a much different way. Statistically speaking, employees were rated significantly higher by guests on all measurements of employee friendliness, attentiveness and courteousness. In addition, the data revealed that employees were significantly more satisfied with their job as compared to the season before. The guest complaints were reduced significantly in every department. A great illustration of the magnitude of the change can be gleaned by looking specifically at the rental department. Due to a poorly planned facility which has been outgrown for over a decade now, the rental shop was known as the "stress chamber" by employees. It was evidently called something similar by guests as it had racked up a 10% complaint rate the previous year. Now we would test our theory about effective service and it's ability to overcome facility inadequacy. Statistics revealed that the complaint rate for that department had dropped to less than 1%. The gamble had paid off.

Any reluctance on our part to accept the research and follow-up training as anything but absolutely integral to the continued marketing of the ski area was finally, irrefutably, put to rest. The research and training afforded the ski area has been instrumental in helping us isolate areas at our resort requiring attention. Taken together, the research and subsequent training has been responsible for a large improvement in our service quality delivery of the ski product.

I have come to realize over the course of the last three years that the opportunity to become involved in cooperative research and training programs with the CSU, Chico has been one of the best investments Lassen Park Ski Area has ever made. Reflecting back, I now see the mistake of looking at the research as an expense instead of the investment that it really was. I have also learned the hard way that the hiring of quality,

high-motivated employees is only the first step in being sure your guests are treated in an exceptional manner. The second step is giving you employees the tools they will need in order to render services effectively at your operation and training them in how to appropriately use these tools just like you would an employee in any other business. Since we are in a people-dependent business we must provide them with tools for working with people. It is also critical that you measure your employee's performance and provide some system of quality control for your resort. Last but not least, as a manager you must also not assume you know your guest or customer and his needs and desires. You may find yourself unpleasantly surprised by how out of touch you actually are. There is no substitute for the collection of data collected directly from your guests. This alone will shed light on the guest's perception of what is important and how the service is being performed.

In October of 1988, we launched into our third year of training with the best results ever! We have actually drawn more skiers to Lassen despite our new competition. With continued efforts in the training area and an emphasis on sampling guest perceptions seasonally, we look forward to a future where we can confidently boast that we are, indeed, the "friendliest ski area in the West!"