

Customer service key to 2010 experience

Former Disney executive shares how 'the happiest place on earth' does it

By Alison Taylor

Ask yourself: do you know where the unusual names of the 2010 mascots - Quatchi, Sumi and Miga - come from?

Do you know where the Olympic and Paralympic athletes will stay when they come to Whistler in 2010?

Customer service guru Doug Lipp asked these questions when he was walking around town last week, here as the featured speaker for the Spirit Breakfast on the 100 day countdown to the 2010 Games.

But he couldn't always find the answers.

"Most (people) were very, very accommodating," said Lipp after his captivating presentation. "I was just surprised at a negative level, as I mentioned in my presentation, that some didn't know some basics about the Olympics, which are going to be commonly asked questions and that they and their team should get those pretty well nailed before the onslaught in February."

Lipp knows more than anyone else the importance of "nailing those questions." He is the former Head of Training for Disney at its corporate headquarters in Los Angeles. Now he is an international consultant and speaker on customer service and leadership - perhaps the perfect guest speaker for the manager's spirit breakfast, held at the start of every winter season.

The difference this winter season, however, is that there's a lot riding on it. Whistler is expected to be at capacity, around 55,000 people each night, during the Olympic Games. The world's media will be here telling stories about the resort. Whistler has a lot to gain, and everything to lose if it doesn't do it right.

Lipp urged the managers and business owners in the room to think about stepping out of their comfort zone, forget their old ways, and embrace new ideas to make the guest experience better.

Lipp knows first hand the frustration of working with the public and being asked stupid questions day in and day out.

"What time does the 3 o'clock parade start?" was a classic one at Disney, he said.

What the people are really asking, explained Lipp, is what time that parade will pass by their area. The key is to help them with that information.

"Be proactive and recognize that the guests that are coming from around the world don't know their way around your backyard and what you consider to be common sense and everybody should know this, they won't know," explained Lipp.



"Look for the people who are lost, confused. Step out of your comfort zone into theirs and offer assistance even before they ask."

For example: can I help you find something? Are you lost? Would you like me to take that picture for you?

"That produces those magic moments where people will really remember, more than the mountain, which is fabulous, is that one-to-one interaction."

He talked of another Disney motivator called "popcorn empowerment" where employees were given carte blanche to offer guests free popcorn if they had spilled theirs.

Just think of how that can change an experience around, said Lipp. A crying child has spilled his popcorn, his parents are getting frustrated, and a Disney employee stops by and fixes the situation with something as simple as a free bag of popcorn.

It's not a big expense for Disney and the flip side is they create lifelong loyal customers.

"It's doing the ordinary in an extraordinary fashion every day," he said.

That will get tiring and difficult as the glow of the Olympics begins to fade after the first few days and fatigue, stress and crankiness settle in.

"It's incumbent upon the business owners here and the managers and leaders to set the tone," said Lipp.

Spend time talking to your staff, keep them motivated and encouraged.

"You have a world-class facility here so don't underestimate that," said Lipp. "I looked at this with a very critical eye, and the physical plant, the mountain, everything looks spectacular. It's having pride in your staff, having pride in your team, and trusting your team

that they will step out of their normal customer service mindset that you would have for a domestic audience and think what is the international audience going to need."

Snow White at Disney, he cautioned, can never have a bad day. She can smoke like a chimney, and gripe with the rest of the employees behind the scenes but when she's on show, she must transform again into Snow White.

It's the difference between what Lipp called "good show" and "bad show."

When the athletes come to Whistler for the Olympic and Paralympic Games they will be staying in the \$161 million athletes' village, built opposite Function Junction at the south entrance to town.

The development will be transformed into a predominantly employee housing neighbourhood called Cheakamus Crossing after the Games.