

Identifying Competencies for Leisure and Hospitality Curriculum in a Rural Region

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Received: January 18, 2022

Accepted: February 7, 2022

Online Published: February 20, 2022

doi:10.5430/jct.v11n2p90

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/jct.v11n2p90>

Abstract

This case study describes how competencies that are common across entities that operate in the leisure and hospitality industry in North Central Idaho were identified. The leisure and hospitality industry is crucial to the economy of many rural regions with scenic surroundings. Tourists' satisfaction, however, depends on their experiences with frontline staff in the industry and service encounters are among the significant factors for customer satisfaction. Developing curriculum that leads to the proper training of frontline customer service representatives is important. A groupware process using workers in the leisure and hospitality sector was used to identify duties, tasks, general knowledge, skills, and attitudes for a guest relations agent. Issues and future trends were also identified. Results show half of the duties referenced essential interaction with customers, such as communicating to support customers and team, providing customer service, providing product/service/organization information, and providing customer assistance for local and regional activities. Trends and issues also point to the need to be prepared for factors such as outbreak of disease that may affect the operations in the sector.

Keywords: curriculum content, leisure and hospitality, job analysis, guest relations agent, competency

1. Introduction

Gartner (2004) reviewed trends for rural tourism development and highlighted the growing interest in heritage, tradition, and the authenticity of rural life. Increased health awareness underscore values such as fresh air, outdoor activities, and stress-free contexts, so people look for solitude and relaxation in quiet natural places. Consistent with this interest, North Central Idaho has seen an increase in number of tourists arrivals in the region. According to the Clearwater Economic Development Association (CEDA, 2020), North Central Idaho has some of the deepest, largest, and widest selection of recreational opportunities springing from its unique environment encompassing portions of five national forests. This region offers plenty to see and do. Recreational interests are realized through crop harvest or recreational hunting (Willerbrand, 2009). Rural tourism is centered on monumental wilderness, majestic peaks, wild and scenic rivers with some of the best whitewater in the world, backcountry trails, diverse wildlife, and awe-inspiring landscapes and night skies. As leisure and hospitality grow, this results in increasing jobs at motels, restaurants, and recreational services. According to the Clearwater Economic Association (CEDA, 2020):

The "Nez Perce Tribe's casino hotel near Lewiston is the largest tourism employer. About 5,000 people work at inns, R.V. parks, restaurants, bars, ski areas, golf courses, outfitters and guides, museums, the Tribe's two casinos, and related operations, while a few hundred others have jobs hosting visitors at state parks, the Nez Perce National Historical Park, and national forests. Jobs in the tourism cluster including restaurants, bars, motels, inns, private campgrounds, casinos, outfitters and guides, ski areas, golf courses, tours, and marinas..." (p. 28-29)

The growth of the leisure of hospitality industry from 2018 to 2022 was 2.1%, making it the third leading industry in the region. Along with this growth comes the need for more frontline customer service representatives who are properly trained to address the needs of customers across the various companies that operate in leisure and hospitality cluster.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

In 2019, the North Central Idaho Hospitality Needs Assessment was initiated by the Clearwater Economic Development Association to assess hospitality training needs of the region in order to develop curriculums for front-line customer service representatives, which address the unique needs of industry in the region. Long-term, this initiative aims to increase visitor satisfaction by providing trained frontline customer service workers who will produce consistent levels of service that meet the expectations and needs of tourists who visits the region (D. Smith, personal communication, June 10, 2019). This study focuses on how competencies for frontline customer service representatives in the industry were identified. The questions addressed were:

1. What are the common duties and tasks across the jobs of frontline customer service representatives in the leisure and hospitality sector in North Central Idaho?
2. What are the enabling knowledge, skills, and attitudes for frontline customer service representatives in the leisure and hospitality sector?
3. What trends and issues will impact training and work in the leisure and hospitality sector?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Rural Tourism

Rural tourism is seen as an opportunity for sustainable development and economic growth, with minimum negative impact in local communities. Many rural communities face declining populations (Cordero et al., 2011; Johnson & Lichter, 2019), often through out-migration, which affects these communities' regional economies. The development of rural tourism can support different types of small businesses, those directly related to tourism (hotels/motels, casinos, attractions, museums, historic sites tours) and those indirectly related (gas stations, convenience stores, grocery stores, department stores, and various retail businesses). Siemens (2010) and Davis and Morais (2004), affirmed the importance of establishing strong relationships between small businesses and the community with the former ensuring products, services, employment, and investments, while the latter contributing to the romantic perception of the rural mystique. Distinct historical, cultural, ethnic, and geographic attractions such as museums, site-seeing tours, theme parks, visits to historic sites, or traditional festivals and events contribute to the sustainability of rural tourism and attract an increasing number of tourists in rural areas (Martins et al., 2014). In this sense, tourism plays an invaluable role as an essential link across businesses in the rural community for growth and sustainable development.

Leisure and hospitality growth in rural areas is known to produce several economic advantages. These include adding to business growth and profitability, increasing the benefits to landowners because of rising land values, creating jobs for those who are unemployed or underemployed, diversifying the local economy, and giving underemployed manufacturing workers and farmers a way to supplement their income and remain in the community (Willerbrand, 2009; Reeder & Brown, 2005). Studies (Cordero et al., 2011; Kachniewska, 2015; Martins et al., 2014; Siemens, 2010) affirmed that rural tourism and sustainable tourism are not synonymous, but are closely interrelated and dependent on environmental, social, cultural, and economic factors. Kachniewska (2015) and others (Wilson et al., 2001; Davis & Morais, 2004) indicated that although sustainable tourism development is directly dependent on natural resources, human capital is one of the determinant factors for tourism development. Likewise, Siemens (2007) argued that human capital development has been identified as one of the most critical elements in rural economic development, agreeing with Wilson and associates (2001) that the way tourism employees treat tourists contributes to tourists' (customer) satisfaction.

2.2 Domestic Travel and Customer Satisfaction

Travel dependent leisure and hospitality industry is the largest small business employer in the United States (U. S. Travel Association, 2020). Published data revealed that although the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in severe revenue loss in the USA travel economy, more than two-thirds of American adults feel comfortable returning to their traveling routine and taking vacations year-round. Sports and recreational activities promote domestic travel on different levels and families across the U.S. increasingly combine vacations with their children's sports activities (U.S. Travel Association, 2020).

Roberts and Tribe (2008) described the contemporary tourist as supposedly well educated, environmentally friendly, sophisticated in tastes and consumption patterns, and searching for authentic and specialized experiences. Sivadas and Baker-Prewitt (2000) explained that service quality positively impacts satisfaction and positively affects the

likelihood of recommending and developing loyalty with the brand or the service provider. Therefore, tourists' satisfaction depends on their experiences with frontline staff in the industry—consequently, service encounters are among the most significant factors for customer satisfaction (Ardani et al., 2019). Zablah et al. (2017) defined the phenomenon of shared "frontline experience" where emotional convergence develops between the frontline employee and customers, which is fundamental for successful service encounters. Gremler and Gwinner (2000) investigated rapport in customer-employee relationships and found that primary dimensions are enjoyable interaction and personal connection (verbal and non-verbal). Gwinner et al. (1998) encouraged taking the time to allow customer-employee relationships to develop over being fast and efficient in dealing with customers.

2.3 Customer Service Competency

Customer service representatives' behavior is important in the leisure and hospitality industry and can increase customer satisfaction and perceived service quality. Customer service behavior can be classified into two categories, role-prescribed service behaviors and extra-role service behaviors (Cheng et al., 2018; Chow et al., 2015). Role-prescribed service behaviors are expected behaviors or performance when customers are being served. These are often expected through organizational norms or stipulated through job descriptions and performance appraisal and include competencies such as "providing correct knowledge on company products or services, greeting customers by name, thanking customers, exhibiting common courtesy, and cross-selling company products." Extra-role service behaviors exceed formal performance requirement and job description and are discretionary in nature. Referred to as service-oriented organizational citizenship behaviors, they may include actions such as "offering free coupons, gifts, extra blankets, and concern for customer needs" (Teng, 2019, p. 36).

Wu et al. (2016) reported front line customer service employees' interpersonal competencies, including the ability to communicate effectively when dealing with consumer issues and the ability to understand consumers' needs, are positively associated with the service quality dimensions of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. On the other hand, professional competencies, including the ability to analyze customers' problems and the knowledge to help customers better understand the product or service, are positively associated with reliability and assurance of service quality. Qualities such as empathy, assertiveness, selflessness, social collaboration, contextual awareness, environmental esthetic as well as adaptability are recognized as important for front line customer service worker (Wilder et al., 2014; Tesone & Ricci, 2009). Previously, Baum (2002) alluding to the triangular nature of competencies needed in hospitality referred to three types—technical, generic, and aesthetics.

3. The Framework

3.1 Job Analysis

Job analyses are "procedures for producing the systematic information about jobs, including the nature of the work performed, position in the organization and relationships of the job holder with other people" (Arnold & Randall, 2016, p. 653). Of the two types of job analysis procedures, *job-oriented* and *worker-oriented*, the former focuses on the work itself, how it is performed, the tasks involved, information about the equipment used, and resources and materials required. The latter focuses on the psychological or behavioral requirements, such as communication, decision-making, and reasoning required for the job (see Brannick & Levine., 2002). Data for a job analysis can be placed in four categories: written material, job holders report, colleagues' report, and direct observation (Arnold & Randall, 2016).

An example of a job-oriented process is DACUM (Developing A Curriculum). In this process a panel of 5-12 workers who are considered experts is guided by a trained facilitator to identify the duties and tasks of a job or occupational area. During the process, they also identify the enabling general knowledge and skills, attitudes, tools required to perform the job proficiently, and issues and trends that will impact work in leisure and hospitality. The tasks related to each duty serve as the basis for competencies that are used to inform content for a curriculum associated with that job or occupational area. The philosophy underpinning this job analysis process is using expert employees from specific industries to analyze their job can result in a highly reliable competency profile of the job or occupation (Finch & Crunkilton, 1999; Norton, 1997).

4. Method

4.1 Design

A focus group consisting of experts in the leisure and hospitality industry who had years of experience and understanding of customer service requirements was used to analyze the common functions of a frontline customer service representative across several business entities that represent the leisure and hospitality industry in North Central Idaho. The focus group was conducted as a workshop, referred to as the DACUM workshop, over two days and was led by a facilitator assisted by a recorder.

4.2 Participants

Critical sampling was used. Critical sampling is a form of purposeful sampling approach which examines exceptional cases related to the phenomenon that is being studied. Letters were sent to several business entities that operate in the leisure and hospitality cluster in North Central Idaho, explaining the initiative to identify competencies for curriculums to train frontline customer service representatives. They were invited to identify representatives from their company who had exemplary customer service expertise to participate in a DACUM workshop. Eight participants were identified and subsequently agreed to be a part of the expert panel. Participants represented both genders and had varying years of work experience in the leisure and hospitality sector. They included a director of hospitality operations in a casino & lodge, an owner of a hotel, a manager of a hotel, a director of human resources of a hotel, one president/C.E.O. of a tour operator, a curator of a historical society, an executive director of a museum, and regional economic development planner with deep experience in the tourism industry. All participants, although presently in some form of management/administrative role, also have many years of experience working previously in customer service.

4.3 Procedure

Through a series of questions, brainstorming, and consensus-building, the facilitator guided the panel to identify the duties and tasks of a frontline customer service representative in leisure and hospitality. The workshop followed the format.

1. Orientation of the panel to the DACUM process
2. Explanation of terms used on the competency profile chart
3. Illustrating the reporting function of a frontline customer service representative using an organizational chart
4. Preliminary brainstorming of duties
5. Selection of the appropriate duties and composing the duty statement
6. Describing the tasks for each duty and composing the task statement
7. Brainstorming and discussion to ensure all duties and tasks were addressed
8. Sequencing of duties and tasks
9. Identifying general knowledge skills and attitude, tools required to perform the job proficiently and issues that will impact the company.

The developed competency profile chart was circulated to the participants several days later for them to member check and verify it accurately reflected what was decided in the workshop. It also allowed the participants to make corrections. The competency profile chart was then sent to two other experts in the leisure and hospitality cluster in North Central Idaho to verify if the chart accurately reflects a Guest Relations Agent (Norton, 1997).

5. Results

5.1 Common Duties and Tasks Across Jobs of Frontline Customer Service Representatives in the Leisure and Hospitality Sector in North Central Idaho

The panel of experts by consensus agreed that the job title, Guest Relations Agent, best describes the work of the frontline customer service representatives across entities in the leisure and hospitality sector. The expert panel identified seven (7) duties and forty-nine (49) tasks as common for a guest relations agent. Table 1 displays each duty and the related tasks.

Table 1. Duties and Tasks for Guest Relations Agent

Duties and Tasks	
<p>A. Communicate to support customer and team</p> <p>A-1. Communicate face to face with customers</p> <p>A-2. Use technology to communicate with customers</p> <p>A-3. Communicate with customers and colleagues from diverse backgrounds</p> <p>A-4. Ask appropriate questions</p> <p>A-5. Provide continuous feedback</p> <p>A-6. Participate in daily briefings</p>	<p>E. Provide Customer Assistance for Local and Regional Activities</p> <p>E-1. Gather information about regional and local activities</p> <p>E-2. Disseminate information or services to guests</p> <p>E-3. Attend training sessions for product and services</p> <p>E-4. Liaison with business partners regarding activities and schedule</p> <p>E-5. Report to superior about update and changes</p> <p>E-6. Coordinate with internal/ external departments and companies</p> <p>E-7. Participate in events and activities where necessary</p>
<p>B. Maintain a Professional Standard</p> <p>B-1. Maintain professional appearance</p> <p>B-2. Complete company required training. (e.g., corporate values, customer service, job specific, etc.)</p> <p>B-3. Maintain professional certifications. (e.g., first aid, C.P.R., food handling, etc.)</p> <p>B-4. Study current product/ service information</p> <p>B-5. Participate in the performance review process</p> <p>B-6. Train new employees</p>	<p>F. Enforce Health, Safety and A.D.A. Regulation</p> <p>F-1. Facilitate maintenance operations</p> <p>F-2. Learn health and safety regulations, standards and guidelines of the organization</p> <p>F-3. Apply basic safety procedures</p> <p>F-4. Apply basic emergency procedures</p> <p>F-5. Maintain professional certification/ training. e.g., C.P.R., first aid, food handling, fire safety</p> <p>F-6. Report safety issues to department heads</p> <p>F-7. Be cognizant of A.D.A. standards</p>
<p>C. Provide Customer Service</p> <p>C-1. Prepare for customers' needs. (e.g., arriving guests, adequate supplies)</p> <p>C-2. Greet customers</p> <p>C-3. Offer assistance to customers</p> <p>C-4. Provide customer assistance</p> <p>C-5. Resolve customer complaints</p> <p>C-6. Provide customer feedback opportunities</p> <p>C-7. Develop internal/external business relationships</p> <p>C-8. Express appreciation to customer</p>	<p>G. Perform Administrative/ Clerical tasks</p> <p>G-1. Maintain customer's database</p> <p>G-2. Handle monetary transactions</p> <p>G-3. Secure customers' identity and personal information</p> <p>G-4. Operate communication technologies. E.g., fax, computer, multimedia, copier, etc.</p> <p>G-5. Maintain information log</p> <p>G-6. Prepare daily reports</p> <p>G-7. Evaluate daily inventory</p> <p>G-8. Process customer requests when appropriate. E.g., product info, extra- linens, course catalogs, etc.</p>
<p>D. Provide Product/Service/Organization Information</p> <p>D-1. Provide organization's introduction to the customer</p> <p>D-2. Identify the features of product/ services and its range</p> <p>D-3. Provide information of products/services to customers</p> <p>D-4. Provide customized offer to customers</p> <p>D-5. Provide feedback to superiors about product/service</p> <p>D-6. Acquire product and data knowledge</p>	<p>J. Perform Administrative Function</p> <p>H-1. Generate As-builts</p> <p>H-2. Complete O&M manual</p> <p>H-3. Report project summary</p> <p>H-4. Track monthly goal</p> <p>H-5. Participate in weekly schedule meetings</p> <p>H-6. Assist in company/ departmental development</p> <p>H-7. Conform to A.W.S. requirements</p> <p>H-8. Participate in personal development</p>

5.2 Related General Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes for Customer Service Representatives to Function in the Entities That Operate in the Leisure and Hospitality in North Central Idaho.

The panel identified several knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will enable the proficient execution of tasks as a guest relations agent in the leisure and hospitality industry.

Table 2. General Knowledge, Skill, and Attitude for Guest Relations Agent

General Knowledge and Skills	Attitude
Computer skills	Flexible
Communication skills: verbal, written, listening	Honest
Phone skills	Pleasant
Interpersonal skills	Motivated
Conflict resolution skills	Patient
Knowledge of facility equipment	Positive
Cleaning skills	Hospitable
Safety knowledge	Compassionate
Basic math skills	Attentive
Product/Service knowledge	Sincere
Analytical skills	Empathetic
Food sanitation knowledge	Sense of humor
Reading comprehension skills	Good judgment
Knowledge of security procedures	Trustworthy
Knowledge of your competitors	Problem solver
Knowledge of partners	Decisive
Attention to detail	Open-minded
Creative thinking skills	Tactful
Ability to make fluid transitions	Personable

5.3 Trends and Issues That Will Affect Training and Work as a Guest Relations Agent in the Tourism Cluster in North Central Idaho

The DACUM panel identified several trends and issues that may impact the work of guest relation agents in North Central Idaho, and this will also have implication for content for the curriculum and training. These include a faltering economy, growing identity theft, disease outbreak, mobile-enabled self-service technologies, aging population, affordable health care, industry perception, and salary gap.

6. Discussion

Guest relations agents are of immense importance for the profitability of small leisure and hospitality enterprises because they ensure gratifying service encounters for customers, which in turn influences short-term and long-term customer satisfaction (Afsar et al., 2018; Sivadas & Baker-Prewitt, 2000). Half of the duties referenced this important interaction with customers, such as *communicating to support customers and team, providing customer service, providing product/service/organization information, and providing customer assistance for local and regional activities*. The remaining duties relate to administrative/clerical, safety, and professional standards. The range falls within the competency areas alluded to by other researchers (Teng, 2019; Cheng et al., 2018; Wu et al. 2016; Chow et al., 2015; Wilder et al., 2014; Tesone & Ricci, 2009; Baum, 2002).

Gremler and Gwinner (2000) found that maintaining eye contact, language, and nonverbal gestures made by guest relation agents influence a customer's satisfaction with their service. Similarly, Tesone and Ricci (2009) found that showing empathy, assertiveness, selflessness, and social collaboration improves the interface with the customer. Contextual awareness, environmental esthetics, and adaptability are also desirable personality traits for guest relations agents (Wilder et al., 2014). The tasks associated with duties *Communicate to support customer and team*

and *Provide Customer Service*, and related *General Knowledge Skills and Attitude*, such as good communication skills, interpersonal skills, conflict resolution skills, product/service knowledge, open-mindedness, and tactfulness, are also consistent with these studies.

The competency profile chart also lists issues and concerns that potentially can impact the performance of guest relation agents in North Central Idaho. Among those listed are disease outbreak, affordable health care, and industry perception. Although the job analysis was conducted several months before the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic, these specific results demonstrate an appreciation by the experts of the impacts these infrequent but significant events can have on the industry. The Covid 19 pandemic plunged the leisure and hospitality sector in North Central Idaho into unfamiliar territory of challenges never navigated before. The Idaho Department of labor (2021) reported that the pandemic caused the shutdown of all cruises to Clarkston, a nearby port, and this hurt many businesses that cater to high-end tourist and ship crews. In contrast many lodging operations, golf courses and businesses serving hikers, campers, whitewater enthusiasts, anglers, and hunters saw a surge as Americans escaped to greater outdoors. With unemployment down by 8.9% from 2019 to 2020, the sector will need to address the availability of more trained guest relations agents as the region returns to normalcy. In addition, a curriculum that addresses commutable skills will allow guest relations agents who loses employment in one type of entity because of decline in business, to gain employment and properly perform in another type of leisure and hospitably entity. A deeper study of the impact and how companies can prepare and deal with these setbacks should also inform subsequent curriculums that are developed from this competency profile.

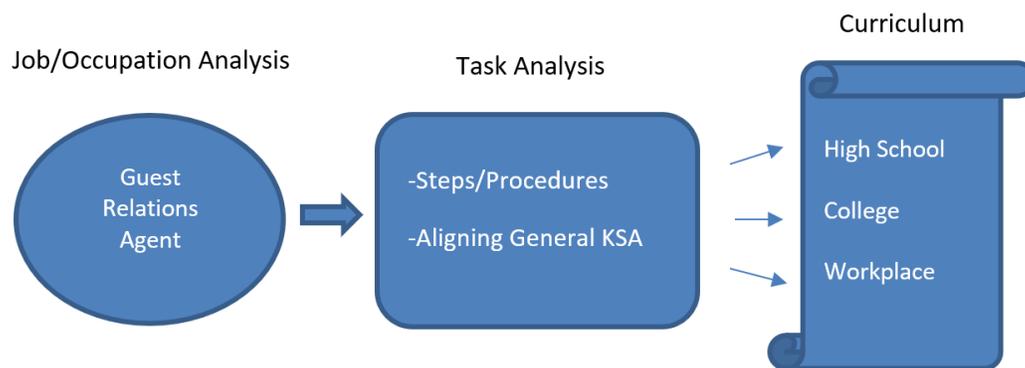


Figure 1. Systematic Curriculum and Instructional Development

7. Conclusion

The obtained competency profile generated by the expert panel is consistent and valid (Goffin, et al., 2011), and the consensus building process used reduces self-serving biases of participants (Cucina, Martin, Vasilopoulos, & Thibodeaux, 2012). The duties and tasks will provide content for the development of curriculum to train guest relations agents by the regional technical college and companies. Specific competencies can also be integrated with the Career and Technical Education (CTE) curriculum. Such integration will ensure that students acquire entry-level skills that are specific to the leisure and hospitality industry in the region. The competency profile from the DACUM process is the first step in the Systematic Curriculum and Instructional Development process (Norton, 1997). The identified tasks are later delineated into steps/procedures, and the enabling general knowledge, skills, and attitude that are required to complete each task proficiently are aligned with each task. Relevant competencies are then integrated in the high school, and technical college curriculum. Companies can also use relevant aspects of the competency profile to provide content for the professional development of their workers.

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