

Title: Know your Area – Product and Training

Ref: 1.d/productandtraining

Date: 20/5/10

KNOW YOUR AREA – PRODUCT AND AREA TRAINING

This article looks at how knowing more about your area, and the other tourism businesses in it, can boost business and bring benefits to you and the customer.



Why undertake product or area training for you and your staff?

Research shows that, once visitors are here, if they are given friendly, knowledgeable recommendations about where to see, stay and eat, they are much more likely to:

- spend more
- stay longer
- return for repeat visits
- recommend the region to their family and friends.

If all businesses that have contact with visitors take the time to make a few recommendations – either directly through conversation, or indirectly through their websites and brochures – think of the massive increase in marketing the region, and the businesses within it, would benefit from!

The power of a personal recommendation

Unless customers are very familiar with an area they all face the same basic challenges:

- what businesses or places are out there that meet their needs and interests?
- which ones offer the best quality and value?
- how can these fit together to create an 'itinerary' that makes the most of their time and budget?

Working through guides and websites only partially solves these problems, and raises other concerns: are all the options being presented? Can all the marketing be believed? How do they choose the best ones? How do they know they aren't missing out on something really good?

A personal recommendation, if made sincerely and knowledgeably, cuts through all these doubts. In face-to-face conversations in particular, the customer feels reassured that they are being advised by someone who really knows the area, takes pride in it and wants them to get the most out of their time here.

From a business perspective, there is no better marketing than the power of a personal recommendation. It is highly compelling, and sticks in customers' minds far longer than any other form of advertising.

What is product and area training?

Product training is all about understanding what businesses and services – tourism products – there are in the region for customers to enjoy. It focusses on building knowledge of the accommodation, attractions, activity providers, shops, restaurants, events and guides that are in the region, so that suitable recommendations can be made to customers to help them enjoy their stay and get a sense of how much more the region has to offer.

Area training is more about the layout and geography of the region and which products are based where. It also looks at how visitors come into

and go out of an area, and how they move around it.

Which businesses and staff should undertake product and area training?

All tourism businesses and, in particular, all staff that have direct contact with customers will benefit from excellent product and area knowledge. It helps you deliver really good customer service and one of the top factors visitors like about our region is the pride and passion the people have for their area.

Well trained staff, who engage with customers, don't just bolster the visitor's impression of the region, they also deliver a very favourable impression of the high levels of quality, professionalism and conduct of *your* business.

How do you go about it?

It's easy, enjoyable and there are a myriad of ways to learn about the region and what it has to offer. However: you can't do everything all at once! Start by thinking about the kinds of customers you get. Are they young families, older couples, smart singles etc? Do they enjoy active pursuits, culture and heritage, shopping, family fun etc. Do they fit into any particular niche or theme: spiritual tourism, eco-tourism, genealogy, nature and outdoors etc.

Focus on building up your product knowledge of the types of things that would interest them, the kinds of places they might like to stay and the sorts of events and eating out that would appeal.

You can also build up your knowledge around particular routes, or specialise in a particular area or terrain eg urban, moor, countryside, coast etc.

Ways to increase your product knowledge

Try these for easy ways to build your knowledge about the businesses, products and services in our region.

- **Attend the distribution days** – March is Distribution Day month, your chance to collect and exchange leaflets, talk to other operators and see what's new and improved in the area. They usually only last for a morning, are all free and they are the perfect way to access lots of information in one place. Don't restrict yourself to just the events in your area... it's a comparatively small region and visitors move around!
- **Use www.visitnortheastengland.co.uk to familiarise yourself** with what the region has to offer. You can search for all sorts of accommodation, attractions, events, places to eat and drink etc and can also use the dynamic maps to zoom in and out to get a really clear picture of what's in each area. There are videos, podcasts, itineraries, drives, beauty spots, cycle routes, walks... endless ways to discover what the region has to offer (and give your own leisure time a boost as well...).
- **Use the ATP sites** to do the same thing in more area detail. They are: www.visitnorthumberland.com , www.visitteesvalley.co.uk , www.visitnewcastlegateshead.com , www.visitcountydurham.com .
- **Keep up to date with special offers** at the above sites, so you can keep your visitors informed of great value deals.
- **Order copies of the regional and area guides** – available from the websites above.
- **Sign up for some of the fantastic training courses** offered such as Northumberland Coast & Country or Hadrian's Wall. Usually very low cost and highly hands on, these fun workshops, courses and events are a very easy way to increase your knowledge of an area and its culture, geography and history.
- **Keep an eye on local and national news** – to see what's new, talked about and recommended.
- **Visit your local Tourist Information Centre** – go and chat to them about the type of customer you get and what's on offer locally and further afield. [Click here for a list of TICs.](#)

- **Get out there and visit places** – the best recommendations come from personal experience. Visit the most suitable places in your area, especially the ones most likely to appeal to your customer types. It's worth ringing up and explaining you want to come for a familiarisation visit (fam visit) and consider taking key members of staff. Also offer to reciprocate, so their staff can come and visit you.
- **Don't forget food** – for all visitors, whether they are day, overnight, from the region or beyond, domestic or overseas, food is a big part of their leisure experience. Find out about the great and iconic restaurants and cafes in the region, but also look at specialist shops, farmers markets, food festivals, breweries, vineyards etc. Use the regional and area websites but also the [Journal Taste](#) publications and [Northumbria Larder](#), the regional food group.
- **Ask customers for feedback and recommendations** – by their very nature, your customers have a lot more liberty to explore the region. Encourage your staff to actively gather and record verbal feedback and use written customer feedback forms, to find out what is most popular and most rated. Make a 'Recommend it to Others' book available for guests to write in.

Ways to increase your area training

Many of the ideas above – especially using the websites and brochures, and joining in with specific training days – are great for building area knowledge too. Also look at:

- **The main routes in and out of the region** – by air, road, train and ferry, and the main public transport routes (including metro). It is worth building your area and product knowledge around the routes to and from your business. Being able to give visitors suggestions that will knit together into a sensible itinerary and won't have them zig-zagging all over the region is obviously helpful. Look also at scenic travel options: steam or scenic railways, cruises and boat-trips, small plane and helicopter rides, off-roading options and so on.
- **Maps and guide books** – it might seem strange to be reading guide books about

your own region, but very few people are deeply familiar with what's on their own doorstep. Maps and travel guides are a really good way to get a taste of what our counties and areas have to offer, and to narrow down which areas you may want to build more knowledge about. Plus they are often full of historical, cultural or traditional anecdotes you can pass on to your customers.

- **The different types of terrain and area in the region** – in North East England we are blessed with coast, countryside, dramatic landscapes, gentle terrain, moor, cosmopolitan and urban areas, market towns, villages – in short a whole diverse host of possibilities. Familiarise yourself with our main areas and centres including, of course, the national park and the two areas of outstanding beauty: [Northumberland Coast](#) and [North Pennines](#). These are hugely important to our tourism economy. Look also at areas that offer the best options for outdoor pursuits: walking, cycling, mountain biking, rafting, sailing, canoeing, para-gliding, swimming, nature watching and so on.
- **The history, culture and traditions** – of different areas. Our region is rich in history and has distinct cultural and traditional practices. One thing very important to visitors is a 'sense of place' – it's what people travel for. If you can build up even a small store of information about the history, unusual traditions, music, local crafts and the colourful characters (past and present) of your locality, you will help, through your conversations with customers, to build this sense of place and attachment ... it's what people come back for.
- **Getting out there** – as with product training, you can't beat a recommendation from experience. Explore the region yourself, but, as with product training, you can't do it all at once. Focus on building the knowledge **you** need to better serve **your** customers.