

North East England Tourism Awards 2009 Business Tourism Award

Gold award winner: Sunderland Football Club

'We hosted the first year of the North East England Tourism Awards, so we knew of them,' says Gary Hutchinson of Sunderland Football Club, 'and we also knew how prestigious they are. We're therefore singing about winning Gold in the Business Tourism Award. We have the award itself on display, the suitcase logo is up on our website, it's on all emails that go out and we're adding it to our 2010 marketing material. A competitive edge is important in today's economic climate.'

As group general manager for catering and events, Gary is responsible for 560 staff and for all catering and events at the club's Stadium of Light: from the executive and public catering divisions, to the 36 kiosks and all football departments at the stadium, including the hospitality academy.

Gary says, 'The football team and associated events are the core part of the business, but non-match days are equally important. Given the economic climate this year, we felt 2009 was a record year for us away from football events. We held three headline music events for the first time – the biggest live events in the North East. From 1 June to 31 July we catered for a quarter of a million people. The diversity of the events and the fact it was not just core business were the greatest achievement for us. We feel we're a well-rounded business and this encouraged us to enter the tourism awards.'



Gary involved various colleagues in completing the entry form and eight senior staff attended the assessment visit. Gary says, 'I thought it was important for them to be involved in and have experience of such an assessment.'

He adds, 'It was a good exercise to put down on paper what we actually do – you feel you're doing well when you see it all together. Also, we must have used the entry file forty times since. For

example, the football club's owner asked to see me at short notice recently and I referred to it when preparing for the meeting. Colleagues also use it as a platform for other things.'

Gary thought the mystery shopper experience was also great. He says, 'It's helped us look towards further improvements. The mystery shopper also picked up one relative weakness – a lack of photographic evidence. Therefore, when preparing for the national awards, I put together a CD of photos. We're happy to take any suggestions on board and act on them.'

Asked to pick a couple of examples which he feels best demonstrate their commitment to running an award-winning business, Gary highlights several aspects. 'We're not just about being a conventional venue – it's the diversity of events we put on, from major music concerts to a fairground for the local community,' he says. 'I feel we get the message across well that we're not just a football stadium – we are a 365-days-a-year business.'

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'Having marketing strategy plans in place leaves us free to be both proactive and reactive to changing market conditions. We can also tailor our offering – whether it's a pie and pea supper for a charity event or a £150-per-head corporate event, we can flex the menu, etc to suit. Our constant evaluation and tailoring to fit is, we believe, one of our strong selling points. We also look for ways to add unique value. For example, we're using one of our professional footballers to present at an event this evening.'

He continues, 'We are particularly proud of our hospitality academy. This was formed two years ago with our national training provider STL/ESG for the training and development of all our staff. All have a tailored development plan – from kitchen apprentices to senior managers. We deliver more funded and tailored staff training than many other venues. It's important that all our staff feel informed and involved in what we're doing as a business.'

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