

Case Study: The Whistler Experience

Let's look at the town of Whistler, BC. In 2014, the whole town and all the organizations within it were looking to rally around world-class service, and they came knocking on my door for help. The Whistler Experience shows that with a simple framework based on science, a visionary Chamber of Commerce, and some incredibly eager business participants, you can achieve almost anything.

History

In 1986, the Whistler Chamber of Commerce reached out to Whistler Mountain to initiate a customer service program for the community. From the beginning, the vision was to turn customer service into a competitive advantage for the Whistler resort. From 1987 to 2014, the Sprint Program grew into a community offering with annual service training and a better understanding of the resort for new employees.

Even though enrollment was high, the program lacked ongoing inspiration and events were perceived as one-off. While the local leadership enjoyed learning from high-calibre guest speakers, post-event guidance was missing and business owners were unmotivated to make changes to achieve better or maintain consistent service levels. Additionally, the majority of longer-term employees perceived the training as repetitive and without depth.

That's why, in 2013–14, the chamber underwent a comprehensive review process with resort partners and the business community. The community asked for three things to rejuvenate Whistler's service program: inspiring speakers, world-class content, and implementable tools.

Pilot workshop

In January 2014, the chamber's CEO, Val Litwin, reached out to Saul Klein, the dean of the University of Victoria's Peter B. Gustavson School of Business. Together, they explored the opportunity of bringing executive-style education on service excellence to the resort of Whistler.

To test the waters, I delivered the first workshop in Whistler in March 2014. I spoke on the 3Rs and how to execute them every day. As Litwin says, "Our attendance goal was forty. In the end, we had 136 people. Their feedback was outstanding and confirmed that we had found an expert community partner with Gustavson School of Business."



Start and takeoff



Building on the success of the pilot workshop, the Whistler Chamber rebranded its service excellence program as The Whistler Experience®. Today The Whistler Experience embraces all chamber initiatives that elevate service in Whistler.

The Whistler Experience is a service solution that teaches teams how to plan for and deliver powerful experiences that customers won't stop talking about. From the beginning, the Whistler Chamber of Commerce recognized that training outcomes will only last if backed up with implementation programs like the secret shopper program, which offers service feedback to employers and employees.



The initial success was essential to boost the confidence and funding levels of the municipality, the resort partners (Whistler Blackcomb, Tourism Whistler), and sponsors.

Why did the community buy into The Whistler Experience?

The community united behind the 3Rs for three reasons:

1. Thanks to the innovative partnership with the Gustavson School of Business, the Whistler Experience offers leading-edge content based on science, presented by a highly engaging team of experts. The core framework is based on social psychology and explains what people value in their service experiences.
2. The program included relevant implementation tools for all employees, including handouts, the secret shopper program, and an implementation guide. For example, the secret shopper program is probably the single most effective tool a business can apply after training is completed, as it takes the temperature of current service levels and provides material for coaching sessions.

3. The Whistler community acknowledges that a rising tide lifts all boats. They endorse the program's vision to become the number one resort town in the world for service—a commitment to consistently provide high service levels.

After the first series of training courses, highly engaged businesses from the town of Whistler met with me every month to discuss execution. They wanted a simple framework to teach their employees. That's when the group decided that the 3Rs—the three things customers are looking for in any service interaction—should become Whistler's service values. This focus generated a new wave of interest in The Whistler Experience, as the 3Rs are easy to explain and to remember. The 3Rs are now the starting point of any service conversation in team meetings, one-on-one coaching sessions, or recognition initiatives.

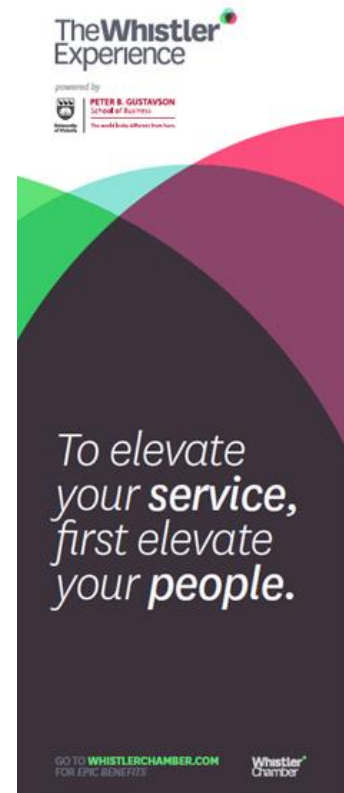
Success breeds success

In its first three months in 2014, the program saw more than 5,000 participants— a diverse group of front-liners, supervisors, managers, and partners from Whistler and beyond. Within two and a half years, more than 16,000 had learned about the 3Rs. This is very impressive for a community with a permanent population of approximately 10,000 people.

Key Whistler businesses—large and small—adopted the framework, including Whistler Blackcomb, The Mexican Corner, Canadian Wilderness Adventures, and Gibbons Hospitality.

In its third year, word-of-mouth spread beyond the resort in the hospitality sector. In 2017, more than 200 company representatives made the trip to Whistler to learn about the 3Rs, Moments of Power (see Part Three of my book) and how to implement a service culture to cultivate their own brand.

Barrett Fisher, president and CEO of Tourism Whistler, says, "Throughout winter 2015–16 and 2016–2017 and summer 2016 and 2017, Whistler served more guests than ever. Still, thousands of guests rated Whistler's service *higher* than in the past. Our community has every reason to be proud of the 3Rs."



Where is The Whistler Experience going from here?

The 3Rs and Moments of Power are the foundations of The Whistler Experience. Introductory courses help to build common understanding and language. Leadership courses are offered to help leaders implement a true service culture.

Mechthild Facundo, the GM of The Whistler Experience, says, "We take pride in offering leading-edge training *plus* implementation tools. Everybody loves inspiring training, but that's the first step. The second step is to help organizations build their service brand. We break it down to a few simple steps to create a true service culture. Our message is clear: nothing will improve unless management declares service a competitive advantage, sets service goals, and coaches each employee accordingly."

The Whistler Experience fosters a dedication to make Whistler renowned as the best place to ski and ride in North America, and it's become the best resort for employees to learn about service. Why would you work anywhere else if you can learn crucial business skills and earn a certificate all while having fun?

Facundo adds, "The Whistler Experience has grown into a community movement. In less than three years, the vast majority of organizations sing off the same song sheet."

The 3Rs and The Whistler Experience have been a great mix of science and engaging content, with the Whistler Chamber of Commerce acting as the facilitator for local businesses. This facilitation role helps businesses execute great service with their customers. The vision of the Chamber to train a whole town is a bold one, but with the right approach, partnerships, and a focus on execution, they've shown it can be done!

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