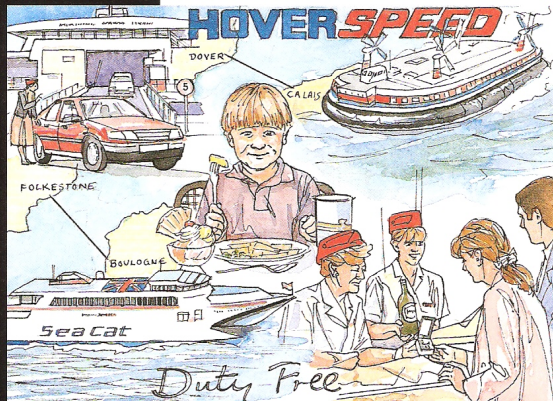


OPEN LEARNING

Hoverspeed – A Blue Riband for Bilingual Staff

CROSS-CHANNEL COMMUNICATION



The Business Need

The creation of the Single European Market and the construction of the Channel Tunnel present cross-Channel ferry operators like Hoverspeed with a changing and challenging business environment.

Hoverspeed's managing director, Bill Moses, was determined to meet the challenge of the Tunnel

head-on, and to establish his company ahead of the rest of the field. His approach was simple; to provide an airline style service for customers on Hoverspeed's Blue Riband Sea Cats and Hovercraft.

As one of the UK's leading cross-Channel operators, Hoverspeed shuttles between Dover, Folkestone and Boulogne several times a day, handling some 2.5 million customers a year, of which around 20 per cent are French speakers.

A key part of Bill Moses' plan to improve customer service required that all cabin staff and captains become proficient in French. This meant ensuring that all announcements and customer contact exchanges were made in English and French.

The Training Challenge

A busy cross-Channel operation demands a very specific training solution, because crews working shifts find it difficult to attend a formal course. Hoverspeed's personnel manager explains:

"The only practical way to achieve our objective was through Open Learning. We were happy to fully fund the development and production of a flexible learning package because, for us, it seemed the only realistic way of approaching the challenge."



Learning Methods Branch
Employment Department
Moorfoot
Sheffield S1 4PQ

Requests for publications
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LEARNING METHODS CASE STUDY

O P E N L E A R N I N G

It was decided that all 20 captains would be trained, together with two-thirds of the cabin staff, a total of 120 trainees.

The Project Brief

Hoverspeed contacted the European Business and Language Centre (EBLC) which was given the task of producing a package of Open Learning materials at a cost of £10,000. Part of South Kent College based in Dover, the EBLC has been operating for nine years, offering short courses to adults in a variety of subjects. There is considerable demand for language training (90 per cent of it French), particularly from the local police and Eurotunnel personnel.

The project brief was to produce two separate Open Learning packs, one for captains and another for cabin staff, enabling both to understand and speak French within the context of their on-board cross-Channel duties.

Development of a Tailored Solution

The Open Learning materials produced had to be totally relevant to the work of Hoverspeed staff. To achieve this, a representative from EBLC made two crossings to France. The first was in order to conduct an assessment of captains' duties and of their training needs.

The second crossing was in the role of a passenger. An assessment was made looking at the operation from the customer's viewpoint and taking in shops, bars, duty-free facilities, enquiry points and emergency procedures. Visits were also made to the

harbourmaster at Boulogne (an English speaking Frenchman).

The assessment phase highlighted important elements which had to be incorporated in the learning programme. The aim was to provide for every eventuality, from advising French speaking passengers on routes out of Dover, to general tourist information and the issuing of safety or emergency instructions. Three months later, the study packs were produced and ready for use.

The packs were broken into separate sections reflecting likely areas of interaction. These were:

- arrival and departure
- what to see in Dover
- menu items
- bar and Duty Free prices
- emergency procedures and difficulties, entering or leaving harbour.

Each pack had built-in revision sessions, question and answer sections and complementary audio tapes. Trainees were supported by a telephone Helpline to EBLC together with intensive tutorials. No prior language skills were required.

Open Learning in Action

Three months later, over 75 trainees had reached Unit Six of the programme. Hoverspeed was delighted with progress, anticipating that the majority would complete all 15 units within the next four months.



The intention was then to back up the learning with a series of intensive tutorials. These were to be highly interactive and explore skills gaps as well as learning opportunities.

Such was the enthusiasm of staff that one captain has begun an intensive language course at a more advanced level. This will contribute to the success of the scheme as the company will have an in-house mentor, able to provide colleagues with guidance and support.

A Successful Outcome

Hoverspeed has encountered positive responses to the programme in every quarter. All those involved with the Project agreed that the Open Learning approach, combined with the job-specific nature of the material, was ideally suited to the requirements of the busy cross-Channel environment.

The addition of an in-company mentor proved to be a great bonus to the programme. Problems could be quickly overcome and, with backing from the Helpline, trainees soon grew in confidence so that overall job performance improved significantly. Already, staff retention levels are increasing as work becomes more enjoyable and rewarding. Hoverspeed's personnel manager points to the support for the programme amongst captains and cabin staff as a significant factor in the success of the scheme:

"The training will enhance their skills and provide much job satisfaction. Improved customer satisfaction will follow as the language fluency of staff improves. There is a real prospect that 1993 will see a five per cent increase in the number of French speakers travelling with us as a direct result of this investment. This is at a time when building

O P E N L E A R N I N G

repeat business is critical to our future success.”

Preliminary research into customer reactions indicates that Hoverspeed is already establishing a competitive edge; its staff are compared favourably with competitors in terms of linguistic ability. The company is now sufficiently confident of the success of the programme to publicise the language skills of its staff.

Hoverspeed recognises that to compete with the Channel Tunnel, it must establish an operation built on speed and customer service. Language training is clearly having a positive and direct impact on both these business objectives. From a safety point of view alone, the fact that staff are now able to speak in French to their French passengers means instructions and directions can be quickly and accurately communicated at both the point of embarkation and disembarkation. Turnaround times are already being cut by ten per cent as a direct result of improved communications.

Future Developments

When the initial exercise is complete, Hoverspeed will assess the feasibility of extending the Open Learning package to

shore-based staff who handle the arrival and departure of customers. This will require some adjustments and additions to the basic programmes but the company remains fully committed to using the Open Learning route. Staff will wear badges to inform customers of their language skills, an initiative which will help Hoverspeed communicate the importance it attaches to quality, customer care and safety at sea.

Other ferry operators have expressed some interest in the approach, and EBLC is planning to extend its on-site based programmes to a wide variety of clients.

“1993 is a tremendous challenge,” explained EBLC manager David Hadfield. “Increased understanding of foreign languages is vital to full European integration and future prosperity. Britain’s ferry companies operating our gateway have much to gain from increasing the language fluency of their staff.”

Open Learning has provided Hoverspeed with a cost-effective and flexible training initiative which is equipping the company to face the challenges of 1993 and beyond.

This Case Study is one of a series of eight covering Open Learning and foreign languages in the hospitality and leisure sector.