

# OPEN LEARNING

*Waterton Park, Wakefield: A survival pack for Receptionists*

## **“MAY I HELP YOU?” The Business Challenge**



The growth of tourism and the advent of the Single European Market are leading to a significant increase in the number of overseas visitors coming to the UK. For the hotel and leisure industry, this means a new emphasis on foreign languages at work; enabling staff to offer the best possible customer service by communicating with guests in their own language.

A survey of hotels across the UK revealed that, while most London hotels offered a good level of competence in a cross-section of foreign languages, staff at many provincial establishments could not communicate effectively with foreign guests.

Waterton Park Hotel near Wakefield piloted an Open Learning initiative which aimed to equip staff to deal with everyday requests and queries in a range of foreign languages.

### **Waterton Park Hotel**

Waterton Park is a typical example of a medium-sized provincial hotel providing top-class accommodation to business people visiting industrial centres in the UK. The hotel has 32 rooms, conference and dining facilities and a leisure complex. It employs 41 full-time staff and a pool of 20 part-time staff.

A snapshot of guest registration cards illustrates the growth in numbers of overseas visitors; in a two week period the hotel accommodated six Americans, six Spanish, four French, one Egyptian and two Indians. Germans and Japanese are also regular visitors.



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LEARNING METHODS CASE STUDY

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

The catalyst for the training initiative was a work experience student who was able to converse with overseas guests while working on the reception desk. This prompted the hotel to contact Wakefield College for advice on language training with the idea of developing a programme specifically for hotel receptionists.

Waterton's owner and manager, Deirdre Kaye, was strongly committed to the idea of a training initiative:

"We want to offer a personal service and excellent customer care. That should include at least some words to visitors in their native tongue".

In 1992 Waterton Park won the Wakefield Business Enterprise Award for business growth through employee development. The new training programme would continue and consolidate this achievement.

### **The Training Solution**

A traditional language training course would require college-based tuition and would necessitate hotel staff being absent at peak times during the working day. A flexible Open Learning programme was therefore an ideal solution.

Wakefield College has operated a Business Language Centre for six years and employs both a language training co-ordinator and a European officer. The college has built a reputation for developing Open Learning materials and for serving the needs of its local community. This expertise enabled the

College to meet the challenge set by Waterton Park.

Discussions between the college and the hotel led to the creation of a single objective:

- to produce a kit for hotel receptionists covering the basic foreign language skills essential to meet most guest/staff communication needs.

It was decided that the training programme should assume no prior foreign language experience. Where a foreign language speaker was already employed at the hotel, help and encouragement could be given to trainees.

### **Development of the Solution**

A survey established that French, German, Spanish and Japanese should be the target languages for the pilot scheme.

The first task was to isolate, from the vast range of contact conversation between guests and receptionists, a manageable 'core' of essential phrases which would form the basis for the training programme. Two forms of research were undertaken:

- a telephone survey of 32 hotels across the country to ascertain receptionists' language learning requirements
- observation visits to four hotels in the Yorkshire area. At each, receptionists were observed and the phrases used most in dealings with guests recorded, together with the kinds of non-verbal directions given.





This field research produced over 60 main phrases split into the four areas of check in, check out, complaints and miscellaneous requests.

#### **'May I Help You?'**

Each of the four areas identified formed the basis of one section in a fully comprehensive workbook. Four language cassettes were produced using a native speaker to ask questions, make a statement or raise a complaint. An English speaker then replied in the appropriate language.

The Open Learning package incorporated:

- a fully comprehensive workbook
- two audio cassettes covering the four languages

- a 'pictogram' chart to aid explanation
- a simulated clock
- a simple 'stand-on-desk' card in the four languages.

The cassettes covered a variety of everyday situations and aimed to enable the trainee to respond to a wide range of circumstances as easily as possible. The bilingual 'sign on the desk' was a crucial element in the success of the scheme as it denoted which staff were able to converse in which language. The purpose of these aids was to encourage the learner to feel confident in making conversation and to elicit the co-operation of the guest.

Once developed, the pack, entitled 'May I Help You?' was field-tested in Waterton Park Hotel and the Leeds Hilton.

**Project Feedback and Assessment**

Between July and September 1991 six staff from the two pilot hotels worked through the French section of the programme.

Most trainees required three months to feel comfortable in each language, an average of ten hours each of French, German and Spanish and around 20 hours for Japanese. However, many felt that an on-site mentor or external assistant would be helpful, to provide guidance in areas such as pronunciation or to help students with learning difficulties. It was also felt that to move beyond 'survival level language fluency' some additional tutorial support would be essential. However, the fact that more than one member of staff was working on the pack at the same time was an important benefit as it enabled trainees to bounce ideas off each other.

The college sent a native speaker, acting as a guest, to assess all staff participating in the programme. This generated positive feedback and confirmed the value of the Open Learning package.

**Results**

Deirdre Kaye is delighted by what has been developed and achieved:

"There has been tremendous enthusiasm and a lot of hard work from all the participating receptionists. We are already seeing real benefits in terms of increasing numbers of overseas guests. Many now know that they will be welcomed in their own language, something that we aim to turn into a real selling point in the future."

From the point of view of the trainees, training on a self-learning basis has helped staff to relate their learning to their everyday jobs. In spite of some initial reluctance, staff confidence in striking up conversations with guests has increased dramatically. Staff retention has also improved and receptionists have become far more skilled in turning enquiries into bookings, and first visits into repeat business.

Deirdre Kaye concludes:

"Prior to the Open Learning programme, we had anticipated that our market for overseas visitors would grow by around ten per cent over three years. With a much more competent workforce I am now confident we could increase by a further five per cent."

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