

OPEN LEARNING

Enhanced business performance and employee motivation with open and flexible learning

PROFESSIONAL WINE SERVICE

The Background

By the end of the 1980s, Forte (UK) Hotels had become increasingly aware that specific skill training for their staff was the way to ensure higher standards of customer service, improved guest satisfaction and increased profitability. They also recognised the opportunity to link that training to nationally recognised standards and to help employees gain membership of a professional academy. As the major employer in the food service industry, Forte Hotels were keen to take the lead in



devising a suitable scheme. As a result, the Academy of Wine Service was asked to initiate the development of a training programme. Employers associated with the project prepared a detailed list of objectives; employees were consulted on their needs. Chief among them were training in wine service and selling skills, coupled with increased potential for career promotion

opportunities. Employers identified the need to increase sales and profitability.

The Training Solution

The training programme needed to result in increased business performance and better motivated, more qualified staff (with membership of the Academy) for hotel restaurants. The Academy's initial assessment of existing training options led them to conclude that employees serving wine as only part of their duties lacked ready access to practical skill training in wine service, even at a basic level. Equally



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important was the need to help employers improve profitability and business growth through training in this area. Open and flexible learning was selected as the best training solution, a bold and innovative response to a sector which had not traditionally used such methods at craft level. With matched funding from the Employment Department and Forte Hotels, and considerable help from the Academy of Wine Service, a commitment of over £200,000 was made to research and training, of which £95,000 covered one-off development costs for an open learning package, tailor made to fit diverse and demanding criteria.

Within six months, the total investment was recovered.

Once initial field tests within Forte Hotels had been completed, support was sought from the Restaurateurs Association of Great Britain, to broaden the scope of the pilot project to include smaller, independently owned restaurants and hotels. The success of the project showed that the approach was equally applicable to a small unit.



The Format

The Professional Wine Service Programme was developed as a single open and flexible learning package, devised specifically to improve trainees' competence, increase their background knowledge and lead to a National Vocational Qualification. The package comprises an integrated video, a learning guide, workbook and standards manual, through which trainees work at their own pace, at a time to suit themselves or their employer. The great advantage of the package over conventional training methods is that trainees need take no time off from their work, so under-staffing is never a problem. An important part of the system is close support and performance feedback from mentors with food and wine knowledge. Given that, the open learning package was shown to produce excellent results.

The Benefits

Twenty hotels took part in the initial open learning programme, 65% of them independent establishments. Field trials covering a twelve-month period gauged reactions to training, the practical application of new skills, general changes in trainees' motivation, and overall business performance. These assessments were made of a control group which undertook no training, a group undergoing traditional tutor-led training, and a group working through the open learning package.

Improved Sales

At a time when the recession was biting into the year-on-year monthly liquor sales across the

country, results from those participating hotels showed that wine sales were out-performing the control group - and that the open learning group out-performed the tutor-led groups. By the final six months, average spend per head on liquor was up by an average of 17%, compared with only 8% in the control group. On average, additional sales revenue generated over six months by each open learning trainee was 59% greater than that produced by tutor-led trainees - and yet the cost of training was around 40% less per open learning student.

Given the average amount of additional gross profit produced by each trainee over a six-month period, the investment in training was being recovered in an average of 15 weeks.

Improved Guest Satisfaction

A post-training survey of service quality indicated that:

- 65% of guests saw no scope for improvement
- 94% of guests concluded that staff were confident in serving wine
- 61% perceived a professional use of selling skills.

Benefits to Staff

72% of trainees completed the programme, 86% of them gaining Associate Membership of the Academy of Wine Service. Substantial improvement was noticed in the trainees' professional attitude and their confident approach to serving wine. As knowledge and skills improved, so did self-esteem and self-assurance. Staff no longer needed to consult the wine waiter on routine matters and they

could more accurately predict customers' needs. The knock-on effects for job satisfaction, improved performance and customer satisfaction are self-evident. Staff have since enquired about undertaking more advanced level training, and an all-round improvement in appearance, presentation and work attitude has been noted.



The Future

Forte plc will be extending the use of the Professional Wine Service Training Programme to other divisions within the company and is considering the development of a similar approach, based on this successful formula, in other areas such as bar and food service.

"Well-trained and motivated staff are the lynchpin to commercial success in the hospitality and leisure industry ... the results of this programme quite frankly prove that premise."

Lord Forte