

HOSPITALITY SEMINAR



Paul Vitale speaks to area hospitality workers during a hospitality seminar held at the Northwest Arkansas Community College's Shewmaker Center on Monday in Bentonville. Vitale talked with the workers about what they expect as a customer and how they can relay that in their jobs.

Owner: Customer Care Vital

SPEAKER: WORKERS NEED TRAINING

By Anita French

BENTONVILLE -- Sixty-eight percent of customers don't return to a place of business where they receive indifferent or rude service, according to a recent state survey.

Other reasons why customers don't return include dissatisfaction with a product (14 percent); competition (9 percent); developing other friendships (5 percent); and moving away (3 percent).

Those figures were released at a hospitality seminar held Monday at the Shewmaker Center in Bentonville and hosted by the Rogers-Lowell Area Chamber of Commerce. The seminar was part of several statewide hospitality clinics funded by a \$170,000 State Workforce Development grant to the Arkansas Hospitality Association.

Paul Vitale, motivational speaker and owner of Vital

Communications in Little Rock, led Monday's seminar. He said just 9 percent of customers will complain when given rude service, but the other, silent 91 percent "just won't come back."

"In customer service today people have choices. You either win together or you lose together," Vitale said.

Vitale addressed his remarks to those he called "in the trenches every day" -- people who deal with customers in any industry. Vitale said a customer should be considered "the most important person in the world," not someone dependent on a business but vice versa, not to be seen as a work interruption and certainly not someone to argue with.

While the familiar saying "the customer is always right" may not always be true in reality, it's important to a business that the customer thinks it's true, Vitale said.

"When they walk out that

door, they need to feel as if they won the war," he said. "In the world of customer service, we all know we get one shot."

A 2001 study carried out by D.K. Shifflet and Associates, a travel and tourism market research consulting firm in Falls Church, Va., showed that Arkansas businesses needed improvement in the area of customer service.

The \$170,000 grant to fund hospitality clinics around the state grew out of the Shifflet study. The goal of the program is to reach 4,000 workers in Arkansas, Vitale said.

Monday's meeting -- another session is being held today -- was sparsely attended, and both Vitale and Beth Stephens of the Rogers-Lowell Area Chamber of Commerce agreed that customer service can't be improved if businesses and companies don't take it seriously.

Stephens said part of the problem is that the word

doesn't get out about the seminars, there is a time or scheduling problem, or some companies think their own employee training is sufficient.

But reinforcement is needed, Vitale said.

"It is important to keep educating people," he said.

Arkansas spends \$14 million a year on advertising The Natural State, Vitale said. If people leave the state with a poor opinion, it won't matter if Arkansas spends triple that on advertising, he said.

Vitale graduated from the University of Central Arkansas in 1995 with a degree in mass communications and journalism. He spent five years working for Cranford Johnson Robinson Woods Advertising Agency in Little Rock before starting his own business.