

## Business

### The right attitude

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#### Clinic encourages standing in customers' shoes

By AARON BRAND  
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The Texarkana Chamber of Commerce's Hospitality University kicked off this past week as locals look to strengthen their sense of hospitality and promote all that is good in Texarkana.

The chamber program trains local businesses and organizations on ways to develop strong hospitality toward both visitors and other Texarkanians. On Friday, the event featured motivational speaker Paul Vitale, who led an interactive session on serving customers.

Local tourism- and hospitality-related businesses attended the "Texarkana Hospitality Clinic" with representatives from such entities as the Four Points Hotel by Sheraton, Four States Fair, Texarkana Independent School District, CiCi's Pizza, Ramage Farms, Comfort Suites Hotel and both Texas- and Arkansas-side tourist information centers.

"I got nothing but positive feedback," said Debbie Stewart, the chamber's vice president of tourism and communications. She said TISD already wants to take the knowledge back to students and implement it in the curriculum.

Stewart said the aim is to get participants to bring awareness and a hospitable attitude back to the workplace.

"They're going back to their places of business and

implementing this ... that is what we wanted to accomplish," said Stewart.

Vitale focused much of the discussion on getting people to think their way into the customer's shoes as he stressed the many ways in which customers are the most important people at a workplace.

As Vitale puts it, "customers are the bosses behind our bosses."

At one point, he asked participants to list what makes them upset when they themselves are customers. Texarkana's contingent of hospitality workers listed off a few common ones, such as being rushed, ignored or passed around.

"Feeling as though you're an interruption," offered Vitale.

Ultimately, he focused on how to show respect and sincerity to customers, noting that not only is it the right thing to do, it also makes good business sense.

"We get one crack at people," he said. "That's the truth."

According to the training packet given, 68 percent of customers don't return because of an indifferent or rude attitude.

He encouraged people to take a closer look at what's possible when on the hospitality front-lines in Texarkana, both in terms of serving the customer and representing the Twin Cities.



Motivational speaker Paul Vitale speaks Friday, April 23, 2004, to Texarkanians about the importance of strong hospitality and customer service in their businesses. Participants in the Hospitality University, hosted by Vitale, will take their knowledge back to their Texarkana workplaces as part of a Texarkana Chamber of Commerce program.

"When people come to Texarkana, what an opportunity to not only educate but to change people's lives for the better if you want to take that approach," Vitale said.

He offered the example of a recent bass fishing tournament in Russellville, Ark., that was covered by a major sports television network. In speaking with a representative of the network, said Vitale, he discovered that the city and, most importantly, its people made an outstanding impression.

That, he believes, will bring the city positive play that pays off.

"We are only as good as each other," said Vitale.

He offered a bevy of ways to improve customer relations and promote hospitality:

- Compliment customers ("that means be nice");
- send "Thank You" notes (a rarity these days);

- don't over-promise;
- ask if you don't know the answer;
- keep tourist information on hand;
- "over-communicate" with customers;
- and keep them informed in busy situations.

Even getting down to the little details can help, he said.

"If you make the children happy, you make the parents happy," Vitale said.

Joyce Campbell, the chamber's vice chairman of tourism and communications, said the important point emphasized during the session was "paying attention and being sharp."

Jeff Reddell, the chamber's vice president of membership services, said the next class is planned for June. He said all participants, who received a certificate and "Hospitality Specialist" pin, are considered trainers. ■