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BUSINESS

CUSTOMER APPRECIATION



Paul Vitale addresses an audience of hoteliers and other people in tourism-related occupations during Fort Smith/Van Buren hospitality class held Monday at the Donald W. Reynolds Cancer Support House.

Seminar Highlights Hospitality

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STATE'S RATING BELOW U.S. LEVEL

Is the customer always right? It doesn't matter, attendees at the first Hospitality University seminar held in Fort Smith decided Monday. Satisfying customers is essential because their businesses depend on them, many agreed.

"I'm here for training. ... I want to try to learn more about the hospitality business, to give better customer service," said P.J. Patel, a front desk employee for Ramada Inn on Rogers Avenue.

Almost 60 hospitality employees attended the free "It's Your Business — It's Your Name" seminar, including representatives from area hotels, Hardscrabble Country Club, Sparks Health System Foodservice, Arkansas & Missouri Railway, museums and art centers.

The Arkansas Hospitality Association designed the program to address a satisfaction shortcoming noted in a 2002 survey by travel industry tracker, Falls Church, Va.-based D.K. Shifflet and Associates. A \$175,000 grant from the Arkansas Workforce Investment Board funds the AHA's statewide seminars.

Surveyed visitors gave Arkansas a 61 percent average satisfaction rating, compared to 66 percent nationwide and 65 percent

among the state's competitive set, which includes Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas and Missouri.

There is \$5.6 million lost for every one-point difference in satisfaction rating, Ed McWilliams of D.K. Shifflet said in March. According to Parks & Tourism data, in 2002, in western Arkansas garnered \$297,990,600 in travel expenditures, generating 3,532 jobs and a \$58,075,277 payroll.

The seminar, the first of at least three, was sponsored by the Fort Smith and Van Buren Advertising & Promotion Commissions, AHA, Parks & Tourism and the Workforce Investment Board.

"We're real happy about this because as we're working toward economic development in the mix with workforce development, we can show visitors that Arkansans are nice, polite, hardworking people," said Amanda Isbell of the Investment Board.

Tourism is Arkansas' third-largest industry. It generates about \$220 million a year in state taxes and almost \$81 million in local taxes, State Parks & Tourism Director Joe David Rice has said. Of customers who don't return, 3 percent move away, 5 percent develop other

friendships, 9 percent leave for competitive reasons, 14 percent are dissatisfied with the product and 68 percent don't return because of an attitude of indifference or rudeness by the business or attraction owner, manager or employee, said seminar speaker Paul Vitale.

Vitale, founder of Little Rock-based Vital Communications, urged attendees to put themselves in their customers' places.

Pampered, fairly, with kindness, appreciated, as a priority and with respect were among customer treatments attendees said they desired. Bad manners, disinterest, bad attitudes and being ignored were among behaviors attendees said created customer dissatisfaction.

Sandy Lowe, a Fort Smith Museum of History receptionist, said she attended "to see if there is any way I can develop more people skills to deal with the public."

In the three-hour seminar, Vitale touched on communication skills, including diffusing anger with empathy to deal better with a customer's problem, giving clear directions, knowing area attractions and resources, handling multiple customers, entertaining children, telephone etiquette, appearance and demeanor. ■