

RESTAURANTE DÁRSENA, ALICANTE, SPAIN

The Use of Training to Improve Customer Service

Introduction

The Dársena restaurant was opened by Antonio Pérez Molina, nicknamed "Perete," in May 1961. Originally called "Náutico," until the end of the 60's, the restaurant hosted music events during the summer months with performances from both Spanish and international artists such as The Platters, Elder Barber, Luís Mariano and the Dúo Dinámico. However, the passing of time and a strong desire for change drove "Perete" to focus on the culinary side of the business and scrap the shows, thus developing the business by designing menus around traditional Alicante cuisine that are still offered today. At the end of the 1960's Perete's son joined the management team and in 1983, he was to revamp the establishment by adding the category of "arrocería" (traditional rice dishes) to the restaurant menu. By 1997 the restaurant abandoned the original premises and relocated to the Port's Marina where it still remains, with service in accordance with the highest international standards. Restaurante Dársena serves as a model example of the best of Spanish hospitality and cuisine.

Human Resource Management in Dársena

Restaurante Dársena's prestige and acclaim is due to the professionalism and love of the hospitality sector expressed by its founder, Perete and which in turn has been instilled in his son. The quality of the produce on offer and the attention to customer service are key elements in its success and are core underlying principals of the business.

In line with these principals, the business strategy has been and continues to be, the on-going training of its staff. Today, the restaurant boasts a total staff of forty eight employees (ten women and thirty eight men) with a mean average of between ten and fifteen years experience working in the restaurant. This rather surprising mean average for the hospitality sector is largely due to positive management-staff relations, high levels of employee commitment, long-term employee loyalty and regular staff involvement in organisational decision-making. Restaurante Dársena staff are also highly qualified and constant efforts are made by management and staff to improve the quality of life and working conditions. Experience has shown management that training is the tool that produces the greatest benefits. On the one hand, having a team of highly qualified staff is always an assurance of constant quality and excellent customer service and, on the other, trained personnel are motivated and want to show their professionalism to the client as much as to their co-workers and restaurant management.

To achieve high training standards, Restaurante Dársena regularly organises a series of different activities focusing on staff training. A training needs analysis is conducted to examine skill shortages within the business with a view to further improving the professional qualifications of existing staff members. Employees are then offered the chance of taking up suitable training courses. These are usually designed to fit around normal working hours to ensure up-take is high. The employees are also offered

training courses organized by the Generalitat Valenciana's CDT network on a bi-annual basis so that they can voluntarily choose those they consider will benefit them most professionally. In this way, Restaurante Dársena considers commitment to training as a two-way responsibility benefitting individual employees and the business. In addition to these training options, every Tuesday the company's employees are given English classes by native English speakers. The costs of attending these classes for dining hall, kitchen and administrative staff are covered by the management.

The commitment to providing regular training programmes is not centred solely on the training of their staff but is also used to benefit the community as a whole in various ways, for example:

- Collaborative agreements are established every year with the UA's School of Nursing whereby the Restaurante Dársena hosts a number of Nutrition Studies students;
- Wine-tasting and wine selection courses are offered by the restaurant's three sommeliers to companies and individual clients;
- Kitchen staff can elect to attend refresher courses organised by top national chefs, which are also available to personnel of other establishments who request to attend them.

Financial incentives are also provided to staff with respect to qualifications acquired in languages and advanced studies. This takes the form of an increase in monthly salary received. This gives an additional reason for employees to attend training courses organised by management. Employees attending such courses also become more eligible for promotional fast-tracking.

Some drawbacks have also been identified in the implementation of the training plan, namely:

- Employees have sometimes experienced difficulties in taking courses which run outside normal working hours. As a general rule, courses are usually taken within working hours;
- Employee specialisations can, on occasion, mean that they become somewhat defensive of what they consider to be their "territory", which can lead to a decline in team spirit. To address this, management have introduced departmental meetings to help resolve these problems and avoid conflict within the working environment.

Conclusion

The example of Restaurante Dársena shows how an effectively applied training policy can produce excellent results which reflect positively, not only on management itself but also on the customer and the service offered. The training policy is without doubt a reflection of the high level of staff loyalty and retention within the organisation. In addition the staff are granted a total of forty-five days holiday a year and the possibility of two consecutive free days a week which are also key to staff retention. Restaurante Dársena is a socially responsible company which proposes to continue improving management-staff relations. They are currently striving to increase the percentage of women working in the business. Lastly, the restaurant has shown considerable respect for other establishments in the Alicante hospitality sector by pledging to never engage personnel who are already under contract with another hospitality organisation. With its wide range of excellent staff management practices and its service to the community, Restaurante Dársena clearly demonstrates that investment made in personnel guarantees both quality and business prosperity.