

## **Red Carpet Service: Helping Rural Communities Capture Tourism Dollars** (2007 Update)

### **Impact Summary - September 2007:**

Red Carpet Service's goal is to help front-line employees learn how to more easily promote regional tourism, practice skills to identify and respond to traveler needs, and sell their community in a positive way. Following the program, participants showed an average 36.5% increase in knowledge, understanding and ability to meet visitor needs. Once the program is offered, process and product outcomes are noticed.

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The cashier at the local gas station or grocery store could well be a key player in rural, small-town tourism development. They are the people who are the "face of the community" to travelers and tourists. They are often asked to give directions or restaurant and entertainment recommendations, information that could result in more dollars spent by travelers visiting a community.

Yet, front-line hourly employees are often overlooked as important contributors in generating tourism dollars. Employees and their supervisors often do not recognize their potential value to the economic development of their community.

In response, the University of Nebraska Rural Initiative created the Red Carpet Service in partnership with UNL Extension. The program provides hospitality training for front-line employees to help them create a positive first impression of their community to visitors and travelers. It also helps participants discover tools to promote tourism in their region, practice skills to identify and respond to traveler needs, and learn to sell their community in a positive way.

Since piloting the class in the fall of 2004, 289 people have completed Red Carpet Service classes in fourteen locations in Nebraska and three locations in neighboring South Dakota to become "Red Carpet certified."

### **Impact of the program**

Evaluations show that participants have increased their knowledge, understanding and ability to provide customers with tourism information in all 11 areas surveyed. On average, respondents showed a 36% increase with the greatest change indicated in the following areas:

- Ability to share information about several "hidden treasures" in the area (+54%)
- Knowledge of the main attractions and "hidden treasures" in your area (+52%)
- Knowledge of where additional local tourism resources are located (+44%) (See attached table)

It is critical that communities become more aware of the importance of customer service training for front-line employees who regularly meet travelers and tourists. The first step in developing this community awareness is communication. An evaluation asked participants how many people they shared program information with between the two class sessions. Results indicated that 24% had shared it with nine or more people, 29% had shared with 5 - 8

people, and 37% had shared with 1 - 4 people.

When asked what they liked most about the training, some typical responses were:

- “Really made you want to learn more about the things in our town and area.”
- “How much more I need to learn to market my business and community.”
- “Class participation kept it interesting; learning about some of the local ‘Hidden Treasures’.”
- “Helpful in defining many locations where I can retrieve information; learned many things about our community I didn’t know.”

Several respondents mentioned meeting new people or interacting with other business people in the community as being a benefit of participation.

A sampling of initial specific outcomes resulting from Red Carpet Service classes includes the following:

1. The Grocery Kart in Broken Bow decided to incorporate an electronic message crawler into a newly developed marquee to highlight events.
2. In Scottsbluff the curriculum was a key component of a Tourism Academy for front-line employees developed by a newly formed Platte Valley Attractions tourism marketing group.
3. Fairbury Chamber of Commerce developed a tear-off area map to improve service and increase referrals.
4. Jefferson and Thayer counties (and the 20 communities located within the two counties) used the program as a catalyst to re-energize regional tourism promotion.

Rosie Stockton, Director of the Harlan-Furnas Partnership, said, “[Red Carpet Service] brought a group of people together from six communities in our two counties . . . to foster a new understanding of tourism as a regional economic development tool.”

In 2007 the program was customized for another state’s use as a result of an invitation from Chamberlain, Watertown and Yankton, South Dakota. The universal principles, train-the-trainer format, and adaptability of the program to rural areas will enhance the program’s potential for future growth.

### **Description of the process**

Research suggests that a self-development strategy involving a local organization, investment of local resources, and local control of program results increases the likelihood of program success. That's the basis of Red Carpet Service. Extension faculty work closely with community organizations to customize training to their needs. The program takes a train-the-trainer approach with participants going on to train others in the community following the initial class.

Red Carpet Service is offered in two, two-hour sessions. Topics covered include why tourism is important, the basics of giving directions, using community resource materials and other resources, tourism Web sites, principles of working with customers and real-life customer service situations. A fourth session, a “hidden treasures” tour to be arranged by the local sponsoring organization, is highly recommended.

Red Carpet Service is available statewide with a fee that includes instruction of one two-

session class and the curriculum customized to the location for their future use. The training is scheduled through a sponsoring organization which takes responsibility for promoting the class to business owners/managers in the region and for teaching additional classes in the future.

**Table 1.** Red Carpet Service: Comparison of Retrospective Evaluation Post- the Pre-Test Means (N = 289)

<b>Desired Customer Service &amp; Resource Issues</b>	<b>Pre-test Mean</b>	<b>Post-test Mean</b>	<b>Percentage of Perceived Change</b>
<b>How would you rate your <u>level of understanding</u> about:</b>			
1. Tourism’s importance to the region’s economy?	2.78	3.79	36%
2. Importance of your role in providing service to travelers?	2.77	3.77	36%
3. The secrets of customer service?	2.79	3.80	36%
<b>How would you rate your <u>ability</u> to:</b>			
4. Give accurate directions to travelers?	2.58	3.41	32%
5. Share information about several “hidden treasures” in the area?	2.26	3.49	54%
6. Apply service principles to real life situations?	2.70	3.47	28%
<b>How would you rate your <u>knowledge</u> of:</b>			
7. How to locate and use local maps?	2.80	3.54	27%
8. Where additional local tourism resources are located?	2.53	3.64	44%
9. The main attractions and “hidden treasures” in your area?	2.40	3.64	52%
<b>How do you <u>feel</u> about:</b>			
10. Your ability to help travelers/tourists?	2.75	3.55	29%
11. Your level of enthusiasm, confidence and commitment to meet traveler needs?	2.91	3.69	27%

Scale for questions #1-3: 1 = very little; 2 = some; 3 = quite a bit; 4 = a lot

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Scale for questions #4-11: 1 = poor; 2 = fair; 3 = good; 4 = excellent

**Reference:**

Korsching, P. F. and Allen, J. C. (2004) Locality based entrepreneurship: A strategy for community economic vitality, *Community Development Journal*, **39**, 385-400.