

Red Carpet Service On-line: Helping Rural Communities Capture Tourism Dollars (2010 Update)

Impact Summary

Red Carpet Service is designed to give frontline employees the tools they need to promote regional tourism, practice skills to identify and respond to traveler needs, and sell their community in a positive way. In December 2009, the training went on-line to make it available 24/7 for users on a community subscription basis. Participants in the on-line training show an average 36.2% increase in knowledge, understanding and ability to meet visitor needs after completing training.

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 frontline 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 *Red Carpet Service* in partnership with UNL Extension. The program provides hospitality training for frontline 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 its inception in the fall of 2004 as a traditional face-to-face class, 515 people have completed *Red Carpet Service* classes in twenty-two locations in Nebraska and four locations in neighboring South Dakota to become “Red Carpet certified.” In the first 9 months that *Red Carpet Service On-line* has been available, 187 people in 10 Nebraska communities have completed the training.

Impact of the program

On-line evaluation is done in the form of two pre- and post-test questions at the end of each of the five subject-matter modules. Evaluation shows that participants increased their knowledge, understanding and ability to provide customers with tourism information in all 10 areas surveyed. On average, respondents showed a 36.2% increase with the greatest change indicated in the following areas:

- * Understanding of the importance of tourism to the region’s economy (+52%)
- * Ability to share information about several “hidden treasures” in the area (+44%)

* Understanding of the importance of hidden treasures in attracting tourists to the area (40%)

* Knowledge of where additional local tourism resources are located (+40%)

On-line participant comments:

**"All the while I was going through the modules I was thinking of people in Grand Island that could use this course and I thought of just about anyone in business. Now some know what it takes, but there are many that don't have a clue. This would be an excellent course for them to take. I like how you can stop anytime and pick up where you leave off." – Grand Island NE resident, population 42,954

**"The on-line tutorial was great!! Many things we knew, but it is always good for a refresher to be reminded of them." – Atkinson NE resident, population 1244

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 worked closely with leaders in a rural Nebraska community to design the training to meet community needs. The program began as a face-to-face training class, but time constraints of meeting individual schedules of frontline employees were an on-going challenge. There was a realization from the beginning that a format that would be available 24/7 would be more ideal so individuals could complete the training at their convenience. The new, on-line class makes that possible! It is a workforce-friendly training opportunity which offers complete flexibility for business owners and their employees.

Red Carpet Service On-line is laid out in eight modules along a learning trail. Modules include: Introduction, Economics of Tourism, Secrets of Service, Giving Directions, Resources, Hidden Treasures, Summary Activity, and Closing. The program is self-paced, interactive, research-based and tailor-made for staff and management of local attractions, convenience stores, service stations, restaurants, retail shops, lodging and more. Each module takes 15-30 minutes to complete. The learner can complete one of more modules at a time. It's easy to stop and return to the place where one left off. As a module is completed by an individual learner, a green check mark appears on the sign post making it easy to keep track of progress.

Red Carpet Service On-line is available to communities on an annual subscription basis. Typically a chamber of commerce, convention and visitor bureau, tourism committee or economic development board subscribes however, "community" is self-described, and scenic byway organizations have also enrolled. Each community is assigned a unique access code which allows anyone in that community access to the program any time during the subscription year. Learners complete the program at their own pace and,

upon completion, a personalized certificate can be printed to verify certification as a *Red Carpet Service* provider.

Reference:

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