



The Olympic rings welcome international visitors on Eurostar trains at London St Pancras Station

A WARM WELCOME OR A DAMP SQUIB?

As two consumer surveys reveal that the majority of the British public don't think the UK will be ready to welcome visitors in time for the 2012 Olympic Games, is it time for businesses to up their game in customer service?

HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM

businesses have an unprecedented opportunity to impress during the Games, but the latest feedback from consumers casts doubt on whether the industry is prepared for the challenge.

A recent survey by the People 1st Training Company and YouGov found that three in four Brits (73 percent) think service standards need improvement before the Games, while just 14 percent think Britain's hospitality and how we welcome guests is the aspect that will most ensure we are a good host to international visitors during London 2012.

It seems that they are not alone in their opinions. Another poll, by Sidona Group, found that over a quarter of respondents think hospitality businesses only deliver 'acceptable' experiences. Just two percent felt they had an 'outstanding' experience at hotels, with five percent reporting a similar experience at restaurants.

And most worrying of all was the

assessment, from 59 percent of respondents, that the UK will not be ready to deliver a world-class visitor experience in the lead-up to, and during, the 2012 Games.

"We are obviously not quite there yet when it comes to making sure front line leisure and tourism businesses deliver the sort of experience our visitors expect," warns Anne Blackburn, customer experience director at Sidona. "With VisitBritain estimating that tourism outside London is set to benefit by £620 million as a result of the Olympics (£2 billion across the UK in total), it is critical that we get the experience right if we are to benefit long term."

Her views are echoed by Brian Wisdom, chief executive of People 1st, "The Olympics provide a once in a lifetime opportunity to transform international perceptions about our visitor offering in the UK, and it's now absolutely critical that we get our

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welcome right," he stresses. "While we undoubtedly have some excellent examples of customer service in the hospitality industry, this recent research indicates that many consumers still feel that their expectations are not being met.

"It is essential that businesses are given the right tools to address this issue, which is why we have launched an ambitious campaign to train 200,000 people through the WorldHost customer service programme before the 2012 Games."

Originally developed in Canada, regarded by many as the global leader in customer service, WorldHost is also the only customer service programme to have been used at a recent world-class event on the scale of the summer Olympics. Over 39,000 tourism staff and volunteers received WorldHost training in the run-up to the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games.

"Research has shown that, when it's embedded in organisational culture, customer service training can boost sales by as much as 10 percent," says Brian.

"Our people ARE the experience, and now is the time to invest in them. You can spend months getting your products and processes right but, if the staff delivering them don't have the softer skills that make visitors feel welcome, you will be missing that special something that makes customers return to your business."

Anne Blackburn also stresses the importance of addressing customer handling skills for employees: "With over 50 percent of an experience coming from the emotions staff evoke when interacting with visitors, and this could be negative – frustrated, neglected, disappointed – or positive – valued, cared for, pleased – it is vital the experience generates the positive emotions that leave lasting memories visitors will treasure and, most importantly, share."

The good news is that there is still time for employers to put appropriate solutions in place. With the right training and commitment to addressing customer service standards, the industry could transform perceptions of its welcome, both at home and abroad.

Ultimately, it could be a legacy that will reap dividends for years to come – but the industry needs to act now if it is to go for Olympic gold. ●