



## **Knock Travel case study**

*“I’m a great believer that if you invest in your people they will deliver the goods. If I invest in their training and development and look after them really well, that goes down the line to the customer and you can see it on so many occasions, in the awards we win and the comments we get from customers.”*

Knock Travel, an award winning travel agency based in Northern Ireland, has a reputation for providing outstanding levels of customer service. Doreen McKenzie, Proprietor, believes that investing in your people is paramount to ensuring they deliver excellent customer service. If your people are happy, your customers are happy and this impacts on the business’ bottom line.

This short case study explores the wide range of training and development Knock Travel provides and the impact this has had on the business. The case study is based on interviews with Doreen, members of her team and observation of their 2008 Team Building Day.

### **Company background**

Knock Travel first opened its doors to the public on April Fools Day 1990 with four staff, two computers and a turnover of around £800k per year. Eighteen years later it employs 22 staff and turns over around £9million per year.

The business operates in two areas:

- Retail travel - which includes two branches, one in Belfast and one in Bangor.
- Business / corporate travel – which is based in their Head Office above the Belfast branch and which makes up around 65% of the business.

### **Training and development**

Training and development is important from day one at Knock Travel and all new starters receive a comprehensive Induction. This is designed to introduce the staff member to the company, its different departments and their colleagues.

Each staff member has a personalised Training Development Plan which includes core training and specialist training based on their own skill needs. In business travel, for example all staff complete the basic training modules shown in the table below and specialist and sales / marketing training modules as required:

### Core training for Business Travel staff

Basic training	Specialist training	Sales/marketing training
ISO 9000 Awareness Training	Computer Skill	Staff Meetings
ABTA Awareness & Training	Presentation Skills	Customer Care
IATA Awareness & Training	Excel Spreadsheets	Procurement Handling
	Travel Law	Telephone Techniques
	Dealing with Disability	Handling Complaints
		Researching Itineraries
		Galileo Focalpoint
		Internet Usage

Structured training is delivered in a variety of ways, through off-the-job training courses and in-house training. All training is recorded and progress reported at Management Meetings, which analyses why the training took place and how successful it was.

Retail staff are given the opportunity to specialise in an area of their choice, for example they could become the Cruising Specialist or South America Specialist. To become a specialist they complete additional training in that area and often attend familiarisation trips to further develop their knowledge and enable them to better advise their customers.

Business travel staff may also undertake site visits, for example they may travel on a new train route or stay in a hotel they regularly book for their business clients. This enables them to keep up-to-date with products and services, make recommendations and suggestions to clients based on their own personal experience and to develop relationships with suppliers.

*“A recent example is the new rail link between Belfast and Dublin. As part of our training the team and I went on this service and now we promote it to customers instead of taking the car. This has had a big impact on sales which are around 10% up now.” (Stuart, Business Travel Supervisor)*

There are also opportunities to work shadow or cross train across departments, for example someone working in business travel may shadow someone in retail to get an overview of what's happening within their department and to learn from each other.

### Training for all

Knock Travel not only invests in training and developing its own staff, they also work in partnership with their suppliers and clients to ensure everyone is as skilled and knowledgeable about their products and services as possible. They have their own dedicated training room which they use for this purpose.

Business Travel Supervisor, Stuart, organises at least two training sessions a month for his team, for example he will arrange for an airline to come in to deliver training to the staff.

This means that the team have all the latest information and are aware of any changes e.g. a new airline route or changes to business class. It helps them to talk more confidently and knowledgably to clients and meeting face-to-face helps them to build relationships with suppliers.

Knock Travel often invites their corporate clients along to the training sessions too. This is beneficial for all involved as it builds relationships and loyalty. It also means the suppliers don't have to go out to clients separately, saving them time and money.

*"We see it as a 3-way triangle – the customers, us and the suppliers. So when we train our staff we try to involve the suppliers and clients as well. We work together as a partnership. And it works for us." (Doreen, Proprietor)*

### **Having fun**

*"Injecting fun into the learning is where I come from – it doesn't have to be dull and boring...all the softer, social side, I consider that training too." (Doreen, Proprietor)*

A wide range of informal learning and development takes place at Knock Travel, including social events such as meals out and BBQs, work life balance initiatives and Team Building Days.

As part of their work life balance scheme, Knock Travel organises lunch time walks for staff, supplying them with pedometers to motivate and encourage them. Although not typically thought of as 'training' this investment in staff costs little but has a positive impact on the business. It helps staff relieve any frustrations from earlier in the day, re-energises them for the afternoon and provides an opportunity for staff from different teams to mix together.

*"You can see with the ones who do the walk at lunchtime. They really do come back in so much more full of energy and any frustrations from the morning have lifted. Our building is made up of lots of little offices and we didn't want people to be like 'us' and 'them'. They go off for their walks and they go in groups from different departments and naturally they start to talk about business and that bonds them better." (Doreen, Proprietor)*

Keen to ensure that their staff work in a healthy environment, Knock Travel incorporate health and wellbeing into fun and informative activities. For example they organise a fruit week and vegetable week each year where staff find a different fruit/vegetable on their desk each day along with information about its nutritional value and use. An especially popular activity with staff is the annual visit from a masseur who gives each staff member a free massage and advice on how to sit correctly at their desk and improve their posture.

By investing in their staff in this way, Knock Travel helps ensure that they have a happy workforce and a happy workforce means happy customers and a happy profit:

*"Nothing sells better than someone who's happy and that comes across. My thinking is that you have to make the purchase of travel a happy experience and people always comment that there's a happy atmosphere here. It's working if people think that because they'll want to come back" (Doreen, Proprietor).*

### **Team Building Day**

In addition to the structured and informal learning described above, each year Knock Travel organises a Team Building Day for their staff and some of their suppliers and corporate clients. This is an enjoyable, fun-filled event with a range of challenging team activities.

This year's event took place at Watertop Open Farm near Ballycastle and was organised by Ardclinis Outdoor Adventure. The morning started off with introductions and a briefing, followed by the two teams competing in a range of activities such as archery, canoeing and rocket building. The activities were designed to encourage communication, team work and motivation, with each member positively contributing to the challenges.

The afternoon session involved an adrenalin-inducing competition of laser quest, on a muddy field, complete with full camouflage gear (see photos) and culminated in the firing of the rockets built by each team earlier in the day. A de-briefing session with feedback and reflections on the day then took place, followed by the presentation of trophies for the winning team and prizes for all.

While the day was great fun for everyone involved, a great deal of learning also took place – often without the participants realising it. *“Although this is a fun day there's an element of training and learning.”* (Doreen, Proprietor)

The activities helped stimulate team working, helped build staff and supplier relationships in a relaxed environment, encouraged participants to use their planning and decision making skills and, by the end of the day, brought out a competitive, fighting spirit.

*“You can see from the very first task they took on to the last activity at the end of the day how they learnt to work as a team, how the natural leaders come to the surface – and they're not always the people you would expect. People realised that if they didn't work together jointly they weren't going to win and their competitiveness was coming out.”*

The Team Building Day is one of Knock Travel's biggest training expenses, but by working in partnership with one of their suppliers, BMI, they joint fund it and it is an investment Doreen believes is well worth it:

*“I don't mind spending the money because I know they're learning, even if they don't realise it, and they're all bonding at the same time. It's building up what the whole ethos of Knock Travel is and I can't not invest in that.”*

## **Business benefits**

So what are the overall business benefits of investing in training and developing your people? We asked Doreen to describe the main benefits for her business:

- **Builds unity across teams** – at Knock Travel the Head Office and retail branch are spread over three floors with lots of separate offices. By investing in social and team building events, this overcomes some of the 'them' and 'us' barriers that can occur in offices.
- **Helps improve sales** – sales and product training help people to make and close sales, for example a cruise company came in and did one-to-one training with staff members on how to sell cruises as a product to a specific audience. Within 48 hours two members of staff had made four bookings.
- **Keeps you ahead of the competition** – trained and knowledgeable staff help you to stay one step ahead. This is especially important with the internet as staff need to be more knowledgeable and experienced than the customer.
- **Helps you compete in difficult economic times** – with the current credit crunch, business is down in many parts of the travel industry. At Knock Travel business was down 40% at the start of the year, but by re-focusing and doing more product and sales training they've turned that around to -15% which is a significant

achievement and far better than many are currently performing in the industry:  
“We’ve had more training in the last three months on product knowledge and how we can proactively sell more. We’re bucking the trend and a lot of that has to be down to training.”

- **Gives staff confidence and ability** – if they are more confident, they are more likely to provide excellent service to the customer.
- **Staff retention** – there are lots of factors involved in staff retention and training is one of them. If they are confident as a result of training they’re more likely to be happy in their job and more likely to stay in their job.
- **Reduces mistakes** – trained staff are less likely to make mistakes or errors.
- **Improves customer service resulting in high levels of repeat business** – skilled, competent and happy staff provide a higher standard of customer service. This helps make sales and encourages repeat business. At Knock Travel around 80% of their customers are repeat customers.
- **More productive and efficient staff** – knowledgeable staff save time and are more efficient.

In short, by investing in training and development and creating a positive learning culture, Knock Travel ensures that everyone benefits – their staff are happy, their suppliers are happy, their clients and customers are happy and so is the bottom line profit:

*“There’s no doubt that trained staff will bring more business – if you invest in training it will increase your bottom line profit, there’s no doubt about that. I’ve believed that from day one and I’ve proven that because for the last 18 years we’ve been totally successful and profitable. For me, happy staff equals happy customers which equals happy profit.”*

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