



Cultivating Customer Loyalty – A Visitor’s Lens

Industry Topic Specialist

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Specialist Highlights

- Loyalty built with customers through the post-visit experience helps a business cut through the competition by cultivating such strong community amongst its guests that they keep returning.
- Retaining a larger percentage of existing customers for a longer life cycle builds a profitable, predictable revenue foundation. It costs 5x less to retain current guests than to find new ones.
- New customers introduced by past guests have been pre-qualified and are more likely to be the right type of customer.
- Businesses that excel at post-visit engagement cultivate exceptionally loyal customers. They connect personally with guests, meeting them where they are, not requiring the guest to always come to them (i.e., staff at The Belvedere Hotel will comment on a guest’s Facebook feed as appropriate).
- Creatively tap into your guests’ common interests as a way to reconnect, share memories and entice visitors to return.

Discussion Ideas & Tips

Designing an amazing end-to-end visitor experience is important. However, creating and nurturing a loyal community of past guests can be the difference between having customers who just like you versus cultivating raving fans and advocates. During COVID-19 retaining and engaging loyal customers is a competitive advantage that can kick-start bookings once resumes full operations resume.

“When a company focuses on loyalty, it makes customers’ lives so much better that they keep coming back, and they bring their friends.”
Rob Markey
Harvard Business Review

Discussions regarding practices that have been used to keep customers engaged, post-visit, with a business’ brand and entice past guests to revisit or refer new customers have been held with 39 tourism operators and professionals in Ontario and British Columbia.

Tactical Practical Take-Aways

- Connect with your customers at a personal level. While this can be done through social media, businesses realize that not all guests are comfortable online. Some businesses found success by sending handwritten/crafted Christmas Cards or calling customers. These approaches also suggest a special effort is being made which is appreciated by customers.
- Connect your niche audiences with what is happening in your area, e.g., let the birders know what is showing up now, first sightings, etc.
- Identify what you can do to strengthen and deepen relationships with the local community. ANDARA Gallery did this by creating a safe welcoming place in their barn to take a photo in front of a huge decorated tree and make a Christmas memory. There was no charge however, visitors were asked to go into the new gallery and make a donation to the local hospital fund creating a win for all.
- Dedicate time to social media:
 - Empower staff comfortable with social media and able to represent your brand, to post and engage with guests.
 - Identify the social media channels that are most important to your guests and drop those of lesser value.
 - Create a schedule of regular communications in addition to posting “in the moment” (immediacy can be effective and it takes less time than doing later).
 - Create private groups for past customers in your social media channels. They provide the ability to connect in a more meaningful way to keep the memories of their time with you fresh and top of mind between visits.

- Identify essential information that you can use to personalize guest communications and experiences – milestone dates (birthdays, anniversaries), family names and relationships, key areas of interest (especially if they can tie into experiences/partnerships) and any personal preferences (e.g., food, bedding, etc.).

Additional ideas shared

While no one participating in the discussion had seen or experienced post visit engagement at the level of the Belvedere Bike Hotel, it sparked a range ideas regarding how businesses could provide stronger personal connections with guests to cultivate more loyal customers.

Loyalty Starts with Great Experience Design

The following ideas were shared as ways to enhance the experience design to strengthen relationships with customers and build repeat visitation and loyalty.

- Think of ways to elevate the opportunity for connection when someone makes a large purchase as a the ANDARA Gallery does with the “Big Reveal” – a small exclusive gathering in the gallery when a commissioned piece of art is shown for the first time.
- Do It Yourself (DIY) kits mailed to customers unable to visit can provide past customers with fun easy activities to do at home. Incorporating videos is a great way to build engagement with your brand and can be a potential new revenue source.
- Offer new and special experiences over several weeks rather than a few days to provide time for word of mouth to build and community interest to develop.
- When creating Instagramable photo ops for one event, consider how to bring those same people back (and others) with a new themed setting (e.g., if did a Christmas set up, bring them back for Valentines, Easter, etc.).
- Provide a range of experiences to build repeat business. When customers have a great experience they are open to returning and trying something new. This can be achieved by offering activities at different times of day (the same activity at night can offer a very different experiences), for different ability levels, or in different locations.
- Orientation tours provide guests with a sense of place and allow staff to highlight what the business is doing to keep guests safe.
- Small, private (bubble) tours allow operators to deliver more customized itineraries that have resulted in strengthening guest relationships.
- Food sensitivities can be a real issue for many and when a business is able to unobtrusively address them they show customers they care. For resorts offering dining, placing an icon on the guest’s name card at their place setting is an indicator for staff to check the records for the issues and address it in an unobtrusive manner with the guest.
- Provide guests with an opportunity to create a permanent connection with your experience. Transformational Nature Connection in Ontario plans to do this by inviting guests to plant a shrub that can be seen as a symbol of their personal growth.
- Make time to socialize with guests, it provides a personal connection that expresses an interest in who they are and their well-being.
- Hotels and resorts that tier customers on loyalty/spending, have been known to provide bathrobes in different colours/styles so that staff can identify VIP guests when at the pool/spa and address them appropriately.

Tools & Tactics for Strengthening Loyalty

- Identify the elements of the experience customers particularly enjoy and comment on. Consider how you can use those elements to connect with customers, e.g., send them the recipe of a favourite food from the area, provide a reading list of books about the area they might enjoy, etc.
- If located in an area with poor Internet connections live virtual events are not possible, consider having a private YouTube channel and post videos there.
- Create communications that look to the future and create hope. Many consumers are getting restless and want to start planning travel. They will appreciate a hopeful tone and be open to booking your experience if your cancelation policies are fair and address unforeseen travel issues.
- Don’t forget your suppliers, they are likely having a rough time too. Reach out to see how they are doing. Identify if there are opportunities to work together.
- Train staff on how to connect appropriately with guests: say hello, introduce themselves and their role, storytelling, etc. Staff will feel more involved and engaged at work; guests will feel a stronger attachment to the business.

- Develop a set of questions to ask guests when in casual conversation (not a survey) to generate feedback on how your business is doing and identify guest needs and interests. Empower staff to act on these needs. Provide a place where staff can record this information for future use along with what, if anything, they followed up on.
- Review the automation capabilities on your web platform (e.g., links to email programs). Time-savings can be applied to other customer engagement activities.
- Retain a customer database with information about your guests. For accommodation providers check your property management system to see what tools they offer. If using Microsoft, [Access](#) may be a helpful program. [Hubspot CRM](#) is a free too that some have found helpful and better than using a protected excel spreadsheet. Play with and test how you will use customer data before making a significant investment.
- Virtual walks and lessons related to the culture of the area are approaches taken by the [Residence Villa Rosa - Garda](#) on their Facebook page ([Fam Bertamè](#)). In addition to stunning photos showing the beauty of the area, they are also taking fans in walks of the area and more recently have been providing Italian lessons. Not only are they connecting with past guests they are building a following of potential new guests.
- Facebook Live experiences can be relaxed, unscripted and more personal than email communications. Operators have indicated that their past guests have been reaching out since COVID restrictions started to see how they are doing. One operator treated this as an opportunity to engage, and invited their guests to a Facebook Live event where they talked about what was going on and answered guest questions.
- Create private groups on your social media channels where you can connect with your guests and they can connect with each other to keep the memories of their time with you fresh and top of mind between visits.

Ramp Up Your Post-Visit Engagement

- Reconnect with guests' passions – they likely have an interest in the activities you offer as well as where you are located. Some examples identified to connect with guests included providing book lists (or starting a book club) that focuses on novels about the area/people/activity, providing recipes of regional specialties with a live demo of how to make them, talks with stories from staff about what they miss and how they are doing.

“Social media is an instrument to keep in touch, a window where we can share our moments and above all maintain the warm contact that we have with our guests.

We see what they love doing, we study it and we try to entertain them during this difficult time. And I can tell you that at the same time we keep our guests united, we also keep our team of staff united.”

–Marina Pasquini, owner, Hotel Belvedere

Additional Helpful Links

The [Hotel Belvedere](#) in Riccione, Italy

[Are You Undervaluing Your Customers?](#) Harvard Business Review Jan/Feb 2020

Forbes article: [Personalized customer experience increases revenue and loyalty](#)

[Know Your Customers! "Jobs To Be Done"](#) Harvard Business Review Sept/2016

Adventure Travel Trade Association research [COVID-19 Survey Results](#)

HR training resources are available through [Tourism HR Canada](#)

[Maintaining Customer Loyalty and Trust During Uncertainty](#) Article from Deloitte

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