

Consumer Recourse - We Cannot Hide The Warts Anymore - By J. Ragsdale Hendrie

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- Guests and Visitors, who had a complaint, either had to phone or write in long hand to the Manager/Owner, the Mayor's Office or the head of the Chamber or CVB and then hope for a response.

- Written Comment Cards were our only means to gather information about Customer Satisfaction or their Experience at our Retail business.

- Promotion of our lodgings or restaurants was deferred to AAA or Mobil or Michelin, as they were the only game in town.

It sounds like years ago, but it is really only yesterday. We had the chance to change, to pay attention to our Product, Service and Facility, and become Customer Centric in this Experience Culture and Economy. But, change we did not, nor adapt. As Darwin might have postulated, some of us would disappear, they have and will. What in the world happened?

What does drive change, not exclusively, is government legislation and Consumer outrage. Hospitality is beset by both.

What and how we cook our entrees, our lack of Hospitality Standards, what we offer the Public and how we treat our employees is now adjudicated, either at the Federal, state/provincial, or local level. We expect our lobbyists to represent our interests, but the ground swell is supported by an outraged Public. We do not have a good message or history.

Our businesses are a significant driver for Economic Development, and around the world they represent a huge impact on communities and coffers. But, we are under fire. You see it everywhere: Immigration reform, saturated fats, Living Wage, bed bugs. If we do not pay attention, individually and collectively, we will be told what to do, and that is what is happening. Shame on us! We did not listen or act.

In this Information Age, the Internet has extensively changed how we do our business. Now, everyone is a critic and an author, with a forum which is alive, time-sensitive and potentially deadly. For us, it is an amazing tool for marketing and communication. For our Consumer, it is a means to dissect their Experience with us, right away, no holds barred, right or wrong. The Internet is the new word of mouth, and we are bandied about with 'User Generated Content', fancy words for John Q. Public's opinion.

These can appear on bulletin boards, in blogs and as reviews on Hospitality related providers. Potential Visitors have access to any number of sources, which will influence their decision to buy. So, when someone types in your business name, they do not just get one entry with your web site. Oh no, they may get pages of pertinent information about your business - the good, the bad and the ugly.

We have been complicit and complacent. Our business is very complex. But, can we substitute a warm body for talent, reduce our services, pay less attention to quality, cut here, hedge there, duck around the corner, 'not my job' - you know the routines and excuses.

Perhaps, it is time for a reality check. The wagons are circling, folks. A new determination and inspiration must be forged, and we are all part of the mix and the solution. We now have been dared to be great, and the cavalry to the rescue resides right inside that circle - sharpshooters, old scouts, daring youth, determined women and rock-solid men - the change agents.

No matter what your role, from Association or DMO Executive, to Restaurant owner, to General Manager at a hotel, to that server, Front Desk clerk, ticket taker or retail clerk - everyone who 'touches' a Visitor/Guest/Patron, impacts their Experience.

Yes, there are obstacles, daily challenges and, for many, a down economy. We may be an easy target, but we have brought it upon ourselves. Become a transformer, offer the filet rather than be filleted. Deliver on the Brand Promise!

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