

Lessons from Wentworth by the Sea

The power of dreams, community, customer service, and customer retention

by **Stever Robbins**

Come join me at a remarkable hotel. The Wentworth by the Sea was a grand New Hampshire fixture through much of the 20th century. Home to the peace talks that ended the Russo-Japanese War, everyone who was anyone stayed there. Movie stars, politicians, the rich and famous—all could be found summering at the Wentworth. Yet the hotel gradually faded and closed its doors in the early 1980s. By the time I first saw it in 1997, all that was left was a rotted, weathered facade. You could see right through it. It was a protected historical landmark, but no one had the time or money to repair it. We sat in our car and dreamed of how wonderful it would be, fully restored.

Last year, while surfing the Web, I found a story that the Wentworth had been purchased. It was being renovated and would be opened under Marriott's management in May, 2003. I started calling for reservations a year in advance, and arrived on opening day, May 16, 2003, for the hotel's first weekend in operation.

The weekend was remarkable. Restored, the hotel was beautiful. But even better than the building and the grounds were the people.

The Wentworth's service was hands-down the best I'd ever had. We were very challenging guests. We forgot clothes in our car. The valet ran out and got them for us. We ran out of gas, and the concierge arranged a refill from a nearby boat marina. We wanted a special dinner on opening night, opposite a hundred person catered function, and the chef treated us to the best meal of our lives. I had stayed in Marriott hotels before and while the service was good, it wasn't like this. The staff was going far out of their way to provide a superb experience.

What went right

I had to know why, so I spoke to Kris Francis, Marriott's on-site training manager. In all the hotels she had ever opened, Kris related, the Wentworth was by far the most exceptional.

The Wentworth was more than a hotel to people. It symbolized an era. It was a national landmark, and for years had been a site where locals would drive past and wish for its restoration. People had invested great emotional pride, longing, and energy into the building over the years.

When Marriott announced the restoration, six years before, the hotel's draw was so great

that Marriott employees requested a transfer years in advance to help bring the building back to life. People from as close as nearby Portsmouth and as far away as Key West asked for a spot at the Wentworth. The staff ended up drawing from people for whom the Wentworth is more than just another hotel; it is part of their personal dreams. They are serving far more than just the guests—they are making their own dreams come true.

Of course, Kris assured us, the guests were just as important. People married there decades before came back to enjoy the hotel's resurrection. Their stories and reverence for the hotel just reinforced the staff's dedication to making the hotel experience exceptional.

A devoted staff gives great service. Devoted customers make the staff feel great. The staff gives better service, and the customers have a great time. The interaction becomes self-reinforcing. Once the initial delight shifts to business as usual, the Wentworth will have to continue to be run as an excellent business. But with this kind of energy behind the launch, I have few doubts that the Wentworth can be hugely successful again. Heck, I'm looking for an excuse to hold events there!

This week's action challenge: unite people with a dream

What does your community long for, just beneath the surface? Find out what it would take to offer the community the dream, and engage both the people who will make it happen and the ones who will enjoy it once it's done. It may be as huge as re-opening a grand hotel, or something as simple as setting up an old fashioned soda fountain for an evening at the local drugstore, or even just restoring a sign by the corner store. Because sometimes it's just as important to build community as it is to build business.

Stever Robbins is President of Leadership Decisionworks, Inc., providing professional speaking, strategic planning facilitation, and leadership coaching around decision-making. He has appeared on CNN-FN, in the Wall Street Journal, and in Harvard Business Review. You can reach him at LeadershipDecisionworks.com or by phone at 1-617-354-1446. ●



Stever Robbins is president of Leadership Decisionworks. He can be reached at:
P.O. Box 400158
Cambridge, MA 02140-0002
+1 (617) 354-1446