



3.5 VASCO Travel: Motivational Training for Tour Guides

Description of Good Practice

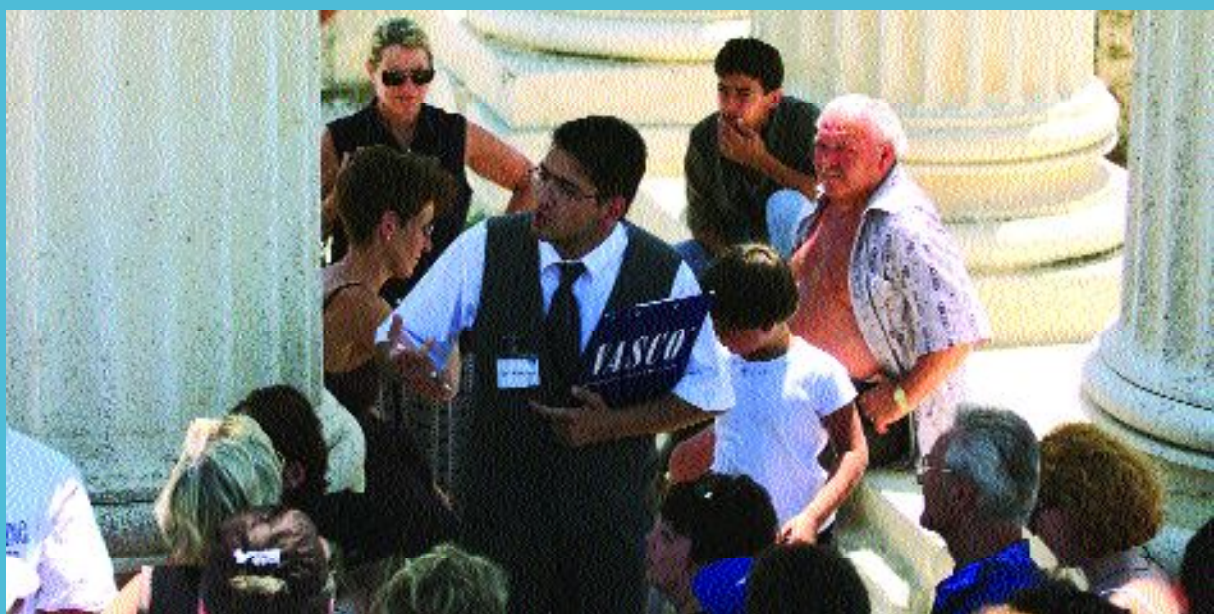
As part of its commitment to social responsibility, VASCO Travel, which offers travel services and tours in Turkey for about 200,000 customers per year from Austria, Germany, Slovakia and Hungary, has provided motivational training on sustainable tourism to its guides since the firm was established in 1995. The training seminars include sessions on personal, social and economic aspects of development; the effects of tourism on social, economic and cultural development; sustainable development in tourism; and preconditions and obstacles for intercultural learning and understanding.

The training is part of VASCO's overall Environmental Management System, which received ISO 14001 certification in 2002. The company's goal of 'respect for natural, cultural and social elements during tours' reflects its recognition that a tourist destination consists not only of sea, sand and natural wonders, but also includes the local population's traditions and customs, and the commitment to preserve its cultural identity. VASCO believes that tourism offers the opportunity for creating a bridge of understanding between different people and cultures and seeks to convey that belief to its guides through the training sessions.

The motivational seminars were created to help guides:

- Be aware of their key role as mediators in an intercultural learning process;
- Be open-minded to other people, especially those from a different culture;
- Verify and improve their abilities and communication skills;
- Recognise their own prejudices and those of the tourists, and hence correct them;
- Better understand tourists – their cultural backgrounds, personal expectations and attitudes;
- Help tourists understand everyday life in the host country; and
- Work creatively in a team of colleagues.

For example, one of the daily excursion tours offered by the company goes to a small agricultural town in the mountains, whose inhabitants are mostly conservative and fairly religious, and where sights visited



VASCO TOUR GUIDE WHILE CONDUCTING AN EXCURSION

include a bazaar and mosques. The guides use the skills gained in their training to explain the importance of local customs and traditions and to encourage tourists to show the necessary respect in their actions and attire.

Implementation

The German-based Study Group for Tourism and Development (Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung) conducts training sessions for VASCO tour guides, transfer escorts and hotel representatives. Each seminar lasts for six days and includes videos, simulation training and the assignment of practical topics, which are then presented individually by each participant at the end of the session.

Since the beginning of the programme, VASCO has provided training for 123 guides; in 2003, 15 guides will participate in motivational seminars.

Successful completion of the course results in certification as an 'intercultural teacher'. The Study Group also awards grades to the participants. Seminars take place during normal working days, at mutually convenient times for VASCO and The Study Group, and are conducted in German. The organisational details – including hotel reservations, transfers, booking of a conference room and acquiring the necessary equipment – are coordinated between VASCO's Human Resources Department and the Study Group.



VASCO TOUR GUIDES DURING A MOTIVATIONAL SEMINAR

Customer feedback is gathered through a questionnaire distributed to all clients during their vacations by the tour operators with which VASCO does business. The responses are collected before departure and are the results are evaluated at the tour operators' headquarters before being sent to VASCO for review and analysis. Letters of complaint or praise also serve as a useful tool for evaluating successful and unsuccessful handling of customer issues. The Study Group also evaluates its own success in conducting the training. Customers and other stakeholders are informed about these training courses via the VASCO web site and brochures.

Benefits

Interviews with guides following the motivational seminars clearly show a positive change in their views of tourism and tourists. Trained guides learn how to interpret tourists' expectations better, and communication between guide and tourist is enhanced, increasing clarity, reducing the chance for prejudices or misunderstandings, and promoting intercultural learning.

Comments

Because the programme is essentially a long-term process of educating or re-educating people to deal with other people, results can be difficult to measure. However, no overwhelming challenges have been met so far, mainly because the participants are excited about the opportunity to take part in the training.