

# IDEAS LABS

ENGAGING, INFORMATIVE PEER TO PEER LEARNING

## Cultivating 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 a 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 customers than acquire 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 and not requiring that they 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

This summary is drawn from discussions with 30 tourism operators and professionals from Ontario and BC regarding practices used to keep customers engaged with a business’ brand and entice past guests to return and/or refer new customers.

*“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

### Key Takeaway

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. At this time retaining and engaging loyal customers are competitive advantages that may kick-start bookings once full operations resume.

The following are new ideas generated from the most recent sessions offered in BC:

- Call your customers – it’s more personal than an email. New owners of a business reached out to their long-standing guests to introduce themselves, start the process of creating personal connections and let them know they would be opening. Not only did past guests appreciate the introduction, it spurred many of them to make a future booking.
- Provide a range of experiences – doing so can build repeat business. When customers have a great experience they are open to returning to try something new and may book in the future. 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.
- Dedicate time to social media:
  - 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).
  - Identify the social media channels that are most important to your guests and where you need to engage fully vs. maintain awareness.
  - Empower staff that are comfortable with social media and are able to represent your brand to post and engage with guests.

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The [Belvedere Bike Hotel](#) was showcased as an example of a business that cultivates customer loyalty. It sparked a range of ideas regarding how businesses could provide stronger personal connections with guests before, during and after their visit in order to cultivate more loyal customers.

### Loyalty Starts with Great Experience Design

Session participants shared the following ideas as ways they have enhanced their experience design to strengthen relationships with their customers and build repeat visitation and guest loyalty.

- Do It Yourself (DIY) kits mailed to customers unable to visit provide fun, easy activities to do at home and help businesses engage with customers in new ways.
- 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 business. [Transformational Nature Connection](#) in Ontario plans to do this by inviting guests to plant a shrub as a symbol of their personal growth.
- While a contactless check-in and checkout procedure is relatively easy and fills a need some guests currently have, it is also important to engage with guests and provide them, especially new guests, with an orientation to the property and a contact point if a need arises. A pre-arrival call (phone or online) will allow for a higher and more personal level of engagement than an email.

- 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

- Review the automation capabilities provided through your web platform (e.g., integration with email programs). Time-savings can be applied to other customer engagement activities.
- Create communications that look to the future. 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 cancellation 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) in order to generate feedback on your experience and to identify guest needs and interests. Empower staff to act on these needs. Provide a place for staff to record this information for future use.
- Identify the essential information to personalize future guest visits. E.g.: milestone dates (birthdays, anniversaries), family names and relationships, key areas of interest (especially if they can tie into other local experiences/partnerships), preferences regarding food, bedding, etc.

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- 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.

### 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.
- 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.
- [Cobourg Tourism](#) posted videos of past entertainers to their social feeds tagged as #colbourghathome with a view to connect with past visitors in a way that would excite them about the prospect of visiting post-COVID.

*"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

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

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

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

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

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