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### Short-listed finalists

- Orange
- Firmdale Hotels
- Alliance Pharmacy, in partnership with Criterion Partnership
- Bradford and Bingley
- Chelsea and Westminster Hospital NHS Foundation Trust

## WINNER FIRMDALE HOTELS

### Background

Firmdale wanted to create a bespoke style of customer service evolved from the desire to be recognised for offering a unique and individual guest experience that was consistent across the group of seven hotels. Firmdale identified a need for a company wide service initiative to further establish its competitive advantage and to develop a culture of service excellence that empowered employees to go the extra mile for the guests.

From the start there was top level commitment to putting the guest at the very heart of everything the company did. Guest feedback indicated that staff had become too rigid in sticking to the rules, policies and procedures that had been introduced, and this was having a detrimental affect on the experience of their guests, who wanted greater flexibility. Focus groups were formed and staff were asked about their perception of service at the hotels and what they believed inspirational service should be. They were also asked what leadership behaviours helped them give inspiring service.

From this information HR put together a set of leadership and service behaviours and with the senior managers developed a series of modular sessions based on experiential learning techniques to train staff in the behaviours identified. For the leadership behaviours, a one day workshop was developed again using experiential learning techniques.

### The initiative

The programme was launched with Plus One Service Training (plus ones refers to exceeding the guests expectations by one per cent to inspire them) and rolled out by the director of operations and the head of HR. This was a fun session where various scenarios were role played and teams had to compete to identify the service opportunities and to offer others as well as those demonstrated.

Following this the senior managers and HR designed and then delivered modules of training over twelve months. Each session included an activity, for example, sending the attendees for various service experiences and then discussing them when then returned so they could "see it through the customers eyes". Vouchers were put in the staff handbook allowing staff to have afternoon tea, see a movie, eat in the restaurant and stay in the hotels during their first year to understand the customer experience.

Seven modules in total were delivered to existing staff in the hotels by the hotel manager. While an extra day was added to the company's induction to capture the enthusiasm



Rowena Carter, L&D Manager and Mike Williams, Head of HR at Firmdale Hotels (left) receive their award from TJ columnist, Martyn Sloman

of new staff. The sessions were called: 'Plus One Service'; 'Through The Customers' Eyes'; 'Little Things Mean A Lot'; 'Listening With Your Mind'; 'Communication And Body Language'; 'Teamwork' and 'Simply Say Yes'.

Development leadership was delivered by hotel managers and cascaded through the organisation hierarchy. Delegates put together action plans with their managers in order to transfer the learning back into the workplace. The service and leadership behaviours were then integrated into the recruitment and performance appraisal processes.

The leadership behaviours were: genuine care for their people; customer focused; involve people and empower; show consistent appreciation; show real trust; listen and act; give clear expectations; encourage teamwork; driven and passionate and ensure work is fun.

### Results

Long term evaluation of the project took place over the following six to nine months to establish its progressive impact. Statistics helped measure the impact as well as a staff satisfaction survey and the results were outstanding with a 25 per cent reduction in labour turnover and a 25 per cent increase in internal promotions to supervisory level and above. There was also a significant increase in job applicants due to a strengthened employer brand.

Guest feedback was always going to be the real telling point as to how successful the programme had been and this was measured through mystery guest visits, and monitoring guest feedback and customer complaints. Its impact on guests was significant as reflected by a 10 per cent increase in mystery guest scores from 80 to 90 per cent; a 20 per cent decrease in customer complaints; a 10 per cent increase in repeat business, up to 60 per cent on average across the group.

By defining the style of service, the standards across the seven hotels are more consistent, and the projected image of high quality and unique style has been recognised by the people who lie at the heart of everything – the guests. As a result Firmdale has achieved higher levels of return guests, lower complaints and higher levels of recognition and feedback from their guests.

### What the judges say

There was good buy in and support from the managers; while the variety and number of activities kept the programme alive. ■