

by Krista Boehnert

# The Town That Tourism Built

## Get stoked with Whistler

**W**histler is an easy sell to any ski buff, snowboarder, mountain biker or gondola lover. Nestled close to Vancouver, the picturesque tourist town practically sells itself, but the Whistler Chamber of Commerce and its members aren't content to rely on its beautiful vistas alone. No, when you come for a visit, they want to offer you the ultimate customer experience: impeccable, personalized service no matter where on the mountain you visit. You can try to shake it, but exceptional service will follow you wherever you go. Locals have coined it The Whistler Experience, and it's proving to be a game changer for the town that tourism built.

Launched in 2013, The Whistler Experience is the brainchild of the Whistler Chamber of Commerce. Looking for a solution to spotty service levels throughout the resort town, and to bolster employee retention, the organization determined that town-wide service excellence training would provide a long-term solution to the struggles its members were facing. The Chamber partnered with Gustavson—known for expertise in service



management—to take on the challenge of teaching customer service excellence to the entire town. Visit a restaurant, hit the slopes, or pick up a souvenir—the ambitious vision involved nothing less than the same stellar service at each and every service point.

The Whistler Experience has grown exponentially since its inception. The original 140-person pilot group has expanded to over 16,000 trainees with the program under their belts. This number is the equivalent of

approximately 50 per cent of the total annual workforce in Whistler. Most businesses have adopted The Whistler Experience service framework—helping to standardize service practices across the resort, in line with the master plan. The result? Repeat visits and happy customers, which in turn makes for successful businesses.

But The Whistler Experience also offers benefits for resort owners and employees that are more immediately fun than balanced books.

#TheMostStoked is one example. If you want to see people loving their day jobs, the annual Instagram contest highlighting the happiest people and businesses in Whistler gives you a front row seat to the excitement that The Whistler Experience generates amongst its ranks. And stoking that excitement is lead instructor Dr. Mark Colgate. With his trademark rapid-fire, quick-witted delivery, Colgate takes participants through his 3Rs of Service Excellence: Be Reliable, Be Responsive and Build Relationships.

Colgate's 3Rs of Service Excellence draw from human behaviour research and service management best practices. "Our goal is to provide participants with a framework and a toolkit they can immediately implement in their customer interactions," says Colgate. "Part of the power of The Whistler Experience is that you can see results in one season. Participants are highly motivated to begin using the 3Rs because they see the science behind it and that it is pragmatic. Employers enjoy the fact that staff now have a simple structure to use, which leaders can use in coaching. And most importantly, they have happier clients. It's a model that's working extremely well for the community."

Photos: Mike Crane, courtesy of Tourism Whistler

And the Whistler community echoes that sentiment.

Whistler Councillor and private ski instructor Andrée Janyk says of her experience in the program, "The Whistler Experience training has provided me with increased knowledge of guest services. I always knew that building a relationship was important,



but to know that reliability and responsiveness are just as important to complete the experience for the guest has truly added more thoughtfulness to my relationships with my guests."

The Whistler Chamber of Commerce couldn't have hoped for more. "When we started the program we saw it as an opportunity to elevate the customer experience throughout the resort," says Chamber CEO Melissa Pace. "But it's proved to be a transformational change for our town. Implementing The

Whistler Experience service model has had a positive

economic impact for Whistler, both in terms of employee satisfaction and retention, and in positive guest experiences."

Yes, there's definitely something special happening in Whistler, and it's getting noticed beyond the town's borders as well. Earlier this year, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) recognized Gustavson and The Whistler Experience as one of 35 Innovations That Inspire for 2017. The international recognition honours innovation in business education delivery. The Whistler Experience was selected from a total of 315 submissions across 33 countries.

What started as a business initiative turned into a community movement, with an entire town embracing a new way of delivering customer service, and is now growing in prestige as the world begins to take notice of the magic they've created in their mountain resort. And who wouldn't be stoked about that? ■



Whistler is a top global tourist destination year-round, in part because of its world-class service