



Paul Hansen, owner of the West Coast Wilderness Lodge, checks tables in the lodge dining room. Hansen says returning staff are great role models for new employees and drive high service levels

# Strategies for retention in a seasonal business

To get temporary staff to return year after year, treat them like permanent employees and keep in touch with them during the off season

By Jenny Wagler

In the service-driven hospitality and tourism industry, good staff can be the difference between success and failure. But in an industry with seasonally fluctuating staffing needs and a reputation for high turnover, companies need clear strategies to attract and retain the employees that will drive their success.

Cori Maedel, CEO of HR consulting firm the Jouta Performance Group, said the cost of high turnover is "huge" for the hospitality industry. Besides costs associated with hiring and training, she said, turnover hurts service levels.

"The more turnover you have, the more training you have to do, the more uncertain it is for me as a client," she said. "When I walk in and I expect a certain level of service and all of a sudden you've got somebody green that hasn't been trained and hasn't been invested in, I'm not going to want to come back."

West Coast Wilderness

Lodge on the Sunshine Coast faces the challenge of a highly seasonal business. The lodge employs approximately 35 staff between May and mid-October, then scales back to a team of seven or eight for a functions-based low season.

Yet lodge owner Paul Hansen said he's managed to keep turnover to a minimum, with only six new faces amongst his high-season staff this year. That consistency of staff, he said, drives service levels and thus business growth.

"When you have a nucleus of staff who know their job and are excited about doing good jobs, they make it very difficult for somebody who isn't on the same page," he said. "They tune up the staff. This is how things are done here. They're mentors. They lead. And so our young junior staff that come on as breakfast waiters or gardeners or housekeepers - they have great role models to follow and they learn an awful lot."

How has Hansen kept his staff coming back?

"Providing a person with

an opportunity to grow as an individual and as an employee, and to feel part of the success in the overall business growth - I think those are really key ingredients for people to return," he said.

**"If you have no growth and no evolution in your business, then there's very little incentive or excitement for your staff to stay because they get bored too"**

- Paul Hansen, owner, West Coast Wilderness Lodge

He noted that with only a short corporate ladder, he keeps employees engaged by keeping the company growing and evolving - such as a successful push for international clientele that has taken the lodge to capacity and is necessitating a 16-room

expansion.

"If you have no growth and no evolution in your business, then there's very little incentive or excitement for your staff to stay because they get bored too," he said.

Hansen added that while compensation at the lodge is pretty standard for the industry, he pays slightly higher-than-norm wages for entry-level positions such as housekeeping and waitstaff.

"They're the key people, they're the people that your visitors really interact with and [who] make a first impression, so they're just as important as your chef. So we pay a little higher."

Nicholas Gandossi, general manager of Opus Hotel in Vancouver's downtown core, said the hotel has a strong retention rate, and still has 27% of the staff it opened shop with nine years ago. That staff consistency, he said, has been a key boon to the hotel.

"It's everything. It's our brand," he said. "When you have people that have seen the complete evolution of how we've become who we are, you

## Family atmosphere: Create positive company culture

can't put that into a book or a training manual."

Gandossi said that as a boutique hotel in the downtown core, Opus doesn't have the dramatic "pendulum swings" in staffing of larger downtown players or seasonal resorts. But he said staff levels do fluctuate somewhat, and the biggest retention challenge is how to keep part-time or seasonal staff coming back.

His strategy for retaining those employees?

"It sounds kind of corny but it's that family atmosphere," he said. "I truly believe in it. I'm of the mindset that if you put people in the right culture and in an environment that they have fun in and enjoy and with people they trust, that's when great things happen and that's when you accomplish good things."

Pulling that off, Gandossi said, involves careful hiring and then fostering positive company culture through team-building events, such as summer and winter parties. He added that the hotel also uses incentive programs to engage staff in driving the company's profitability.

Maedel said basic retention strategies for the hospitality industry include:

- creating an employee handbook that explains what the company is about and what it's trying to achieve;



Nicholas Gandossi, Opus Hotel general manager, says staff retention is key to the hotel's brand. "When you have people that have seen the complete evolution of how we've become who we are, you can't put that into a book or a training manual"



Cori Maedel, CEO of the Jouta Performance Group: retention of seasonal employees requires treating them like permanent staff and keeping in touch during low season

- creating opportunities for employees to learn and grow; and
- creating incentives to recognize performance.

To tackle the specific challenge of getting seasonal staff to return, Maedel said employers need to focus on treating them as well as they treat their permanent staff.

"If you can honour employees, even if they're hourly and even if they're temporary, in the same sense as you would a permanent, there's a better likelihood that they'll do great for you while they're there -- and that

they'll come back."

She added that hotels and restaurants can also up their chances of landing returning seasonal staff by following up with them by e-mail during the off season.

"Keep in touch," she said. "Once a month or once a quarter - just saying 'Hey, just checking in with you, hoping you're still going to consider working with us in December.' If I got a random e-mail from somebody like that I'd go, 'Wow, that's cool -- they actually think I'm good.'" ■  
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## B.C.: Best five resorts in Canada

from *Chilly, IT*  
Canadian Ski Council (CSC) for operational excellence.

Once a year, the CSC collects data and surveys guests from ski hills across the country.

"Basically they rate us on everything from first impression -- the parking lots and the ease of getting tickets -- to the quality of grooming," said Hemlock's director of operations, Samuel Hicks.

"Our season pass sales are up about 2% from last year, so things are looking good"

- Ian Grant,  
CEO,  
Silver Star Mountain Resort

"The CSC also considers rates us on value -- the amount of money spent on the rental experience down to how clean the bathrooms are to the taste of the food."

Hemlock attracted about 60,000 guests last year -- a 25% jump from the 48,000 guests who visited the mountain in 2009, Hicks said.

His company is also in the final stages of getting its 25-year master development plan approved. Resort operatives have been in close contact with the provincial and federal governments, as well as the Chehalis

Indian Band, on details of that grand vision.

The plan envisions five hotels and two golf courses at the year-round resort.

It's that perception as a year-round resort which Hemlock has been trying to cultivate recently.

Whistler Blackcomb, which has ranked as B.C.'s most visited ski resort for decades, has long tried to position itself to summer day-trippers as much as it does to those who want winter adventure.

Its Pan Pacific Whistler Village Centre resort recently ranked as the fifth most popular resort in Canada, according to *Condé Nast Traveler Magazine*.

B.C. resorts ranked highly overall in the *Condé Nast Traveler* survey of its 28,876 readers, which was made public October 13. Readers voted that B.C. has the best five resorts in Canada.

Ahead of Whistler's Pan Pacific Whistler Village Centre, which was ranked on a range of aspects and achieved a 91.6 score, was:

- Rosewood, B.C.'s King Pacific Lodge (97.0);
- Field, B.C.'s Emerald Lake Lodge (94.9);
- Vancouver Island's Long Beach Lodge Resort (92.2); and
- Vancouver Island's Wickaninnish Inn (91.8). ■  
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