



Hallmarks of an award-winning business

- Add value
- Provide an experience
- Act on feedback
- Create a service culture among staff
- Work in partnership with other businesses
- Reinvest and refurbish
- Provide a greener experience
- Give attention to detail
- Provide a personal approach



Some of this year's VisitEngland Award winners share their tips and advice on how to become a successful establishment with *Jane Duru*

What makes a business not just good, but great? The winners of the VisitEngland Awards for Excellence seem to have discovered the secret. Selected by a panel of tourism industry experts, the awards are now in their 25th year and showcase the very best of England's tourism sector. Visit any of the winners and you might come away thinking that excellence is effortless, but behind the scenes you're guaranteed to find hard work, a well-targeted strategy and impeccable service. With consultants PwC estimating that 14,000 extra rooms will become available in 2014, the market is getting ever more crowded. Maintaining a competitive edge has never been so important.

It's the little things

Many businesses like to shout about their main offering – excellent food, the top-notch facilities – but the devil's in the detail. Having won 32 accolades over the past three years, including Tourism Pub of the Year Award, the Feathered Nest Country Inn in Oxfordshire is clearly doing something right. It's known for its sophisticated food offering but, to owner Tony Timmer, the small things are key. "The customer is getting much more fickle," he says. "For me, it starts from the minute you look at your road sign. If it's dirty and unkempt, you already know there's no interest in the place itself." Messy signs, beer barrels left in the car park and cigarette butts on the ground may

give the impression to customers that a business doesn't care.

Philip Callan, General Manager at the four-star Hell Bay Hotel on Bryher, Isles of Scilly, which won a Highly Commended Award for Small Hotel of the Year, echoes this sentiment. "Our recent success has been because we listen. Ten years ago, our guests' expectations were much easier to fulfil; now they are more diverse, but we're learning to adapt." Honeymooners at Hell Bay not only receive the usual champagne and flowers but also a special 'honeymoon box' of goodies, and Philip makes sure their suite has a sofa rather than just individual chairs – a small, but significant change which came about through listening to feedback. "It's not about what you want to give guests, it's about what they want from their stay," he says.

Make staff stakeholders

Excellent staff are the linchpin of any customer-facing business, but a lack of training can often mean a less-than-desirable guest experience. Recruiting the right people, investing in them and making sure that they are advocates for your values and ethos are paramount.

Jane Kelly, Marketing and Business Development Manager at





Above: The Galleries of Justice Museum team collect their award

Left: Hell Bay Hotel on Bryher, Isles of Scilly

Sandcastle Waterpark in Blackpool, believes that excellent staff culture is what propels a business from being good to great. “There’s a culture involved in the business that runs right from the Managing Director all the way to the guys who clean the changing rooms, and that is commitment, service and tourism for all.” With staff undergoing rigorous disability awareness and guest service training, Jane believes this focus is what elevated Sandcastle Waterpark above others to win VisitEngland’s Gold Award for Access for All in 2013 and Silver in 2014.

Award-winners have another characteristic in common – sharing their wisdom. Coming from a commercial banking background, Nicola Burley, Executive Director at the Galleries of

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Justice Museum in Nottingham, which won Gold for Small Visitor Attraction of the Year, can’t stress enough the importance of partnerships. “Don’t be frightened of working with other attractions on campaigns,” she says. “Sometimes you see people as competition rather than allies, but in the heritage and arts sector you’ve got to work together to survive, and we try and do that wherever we can.” Running promotions and marketing campaigns with other organisations has led to the diversification of the museum’s offering and it now holds regular beer festivals, street markets and after-dark events, all of which have helped visitor numbers increase from 22,000 to 30,000 over the past three years.

Diversification has also helped the five-star Gold East View Farm Holiday Cottages in Norfolk to exceed customer expectations – guests can drive a steam train and local spa >

Providing a positive customer experience



“I usually say we acquired the place by accident, which sounds quite careless, but that’s what happened,” says Jeff Sutheran, of his decision to buy a 200-year-old Presbyterian church in Northumbria with wife Jill, and convert it to St Cuthbert’s House B&B.

The aesthetic appeal of the building is no doubt a factor in the success of the B&B, which won the Gold Award for Bed and Breakfast of the Year. But it’s only one part of the story. “What we’ve learnt,” says Jeff, “is that people don’t just want a comfortable bed; they can get that in any number of places. People want an experience. We aim to give them that.”

Attention to detail is what he believes sets them apart. At St Cuthbert’s, every bedroom contains a small washing-up kit and a tea towel in the bedrooms, saving guests from having to use a dirty mug for their morning cup of tea. “You wouldn’t believe how many people comment upon that!” he laughs. Jeff advises fellow B&B owners to “take care of the fine detail and the big stuff will take care of itself”. Marketing is important, Jeff says, but the internet has changed everything. For St Cuthbert’s, online activity is beginning to take precedence over print, where the return on investment is hard to measure. Jeff recommends boutiqueandbreakfast.com, whose online audience matches the St Cuthbert’s client base.

Jeff sums up his strategy simply: “We’re just trying to give people the experience we would want if we were in their place.”



> companies will come to them. “It’s up to you as an owner to add value,” explains proprietor Jane Pond. The cottages won Silver in the Self-Catering Holiday Provider of the Year category.

Running an award-winning business also means keeping your property up to date. Reinvesting some of your profits into the business, says Jane, is key. “Too many cottage owners just have the property there and let things get tired.” Having spent thousands refurbishing two cottages twice in the past decade, Jane’s advice is to start with kitchens and bathrooms; these show wear faster than other rooms and are the first things people notice.

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Last, and often least for many proprietors, comes sustainability. However, a 2012 report by the Travel Foundation and Forum for the Future found that 70% of consumers believe companies should be committed to preserving the natural environment and 66% would like to take a greener holiday.

To Rosie Hadden, owner of the five-star Gold Little White Alice in Cornwall, and Gold winner of VisitEngland’s Sustainable Tourism Award, it’s more than just ticking a corporate social responsibility box. Here, everything is done with environmental impact in mind. The six cottages feature heavy insulation, with solar panels and a small wind turbine generating electricity. Woodburning stoves and a woodburning hot tub are fed by off-cuts from the local builders’ merchants, while water is recycled through the use of a reed bed sewer system.

Rosie advises businesses to start small and join like-minded organisations to get ideas before embarking on expensive overhauls, as she did with the Cornwall Sustainable Tourism Project. “Over the past three years, I’ve noticed people coming to us because we’re a sustainable option, and not just because it’s a nice place,” she says. There’s a big shift in awareness.” ■



Luxury treatment

Having given up dairy farming in 2004, Liz Pursey set out to convert a former calf-rearing granary into a five-star holiday let. Trevasse Cottages was born in 2007 and a second property, Penblaithe Barn, opened in 2010.

It cost about £700,000 and Liz decided early on that while preserving the barn’s character was key, all eight bedrooms should have en-suites. “The fact there’s a bathroom with every bedroom is the most sellable thing,” she explains. Each bedroom is individually decorated, and luxuries such as Egyptian cotton sheets and light fittings imported from South Africa appeal to the upmarket clientele that she caters for; design provides another chance to differentiate the cottages from the identikit styling you might find in a chain hotel.

The success of Trevasse Cottages has mainly come from repeat custom, via word-of-mouth recommendations. “I don’t do any paid advertising,” says Liz. “I’ve got a good website and we’re with Premier Cottages.”

From meeting and greeting every guest to providing information on the website, Liz emphasises how important it is to take “a personal approach”. Getting involved with every aspect of the business is especially important when handling the negatives. “You have to like meeting people and be approachable; if you’ve received some criticism, deal with it,” she says. “It’s a good business to be in, but you have to be prepared to go the extra mile.”

Below: Little White Alice in Cornwall



How to apply

Go to www.visitenglandawards.org for more information on the awards. Details of how to apply for the 2015 awards will be available in September.