

A Pass to Play

Whistler's Spirit Pass is not just a key to the mountains; it's a key to the town's success

by Dorothy Raffo



Why live and work in Whistler? It's a fair question. This isn't a cheap place, and with short summers and long winters it's not ideal for some. However, for those who love the snow it's a Mecca. Living in the shadow of Whistler and Blackcomb the slopes are always on our minds, it's a craving that must be sated and can only be done so with a sought after season's pass.

For many, however, a season's pass is out of financial reach. That's why, 25 years ago this year, business owners and resort stakeholders came up with the idea of offering a discounted pass in return for a few hours spent learning how to help make the visitor experience in Whistler second to none.

It was the birth of the Whistler Spirit Pass — and today many would argue it is even more important and valuable as the resort fights to stay a top choice for tourists in an age of financial stress.

Getting the message out to all of

Whistler's "ambassadors" that the resort is an awesome place to play, live and grow all year round is a key strategy for success.

And that's a message new Spirit Pass attendees can't help but take away.

"It gave me a wider perspective of the resort," says Liam Daly who arrived in Whistler from Scotland a couple of months ago and is now working behind the bar at The Mix by Ric's.

"I had heard about a discounted pass before I got to the resort, and although it's a huge bonus that my employer gets the discount for me, I would have done anything to get a pass and stay in Whistler."

But for some paying for a full price pass simply isn't an option.

Newcomer, Leanne Jagger, who works for Just Cleaning, says, "It saves me money, that's the main thing, for three hours of my time it's definitely worth it.

Without the discount it would have been a difficult decision, it's just so expensive."

When asked what she gained from attending she says, "It was interactive and interesting, it was good to hear people's favourite things they'd done so far — it gave me a few ideas! I went to the session alone and after the girl next to me won a Starbucks card we went for coffee after — it's a great way to meet people and ask questions."

The Spirit Pass Program is one of three customer service initiatives, which make up the "Whistler Service Strategy" run by the Whistler Chamber of Commerce. Launched at the beginning of each winter season the program aims to train all resort staff in customer service so that visitor experience is outstanding and becomes part of seamless holiday memory filled with good times.

But for the staff it is so much more than that — it is how they make a dream come true. The discounted Pass is their ticket to heaven on Whistler Blackcomb for the whole season and beyond.

And for the organizers of the program it's a key competitive factor in the resort's success.

From its inception in 1986 the Spirit Pass program has grown ten fold, from 450 people attending to a staggering 5,000 today.

"It is amazing how this program has developed over 25 years, and how it has taken a more articulated role in Whistler's fight for excellence in customer service," says Fiona Famulak, president of the Whistler Chamber of Commerce.

"It benefits everyone. The service training that we provide benefits the community at large, and the business community, because it helps us to move the dial. It helps us to move towards the vision of making service one of Whistler's key competitive advantages.

"The value of it hits at a variety of levels, at a community level, business community level, employer level and employee level. For the community and business level it's big picture, the Whistler Service Strategy helps to ensure that service is one of Whistler's key advantages so whatever we do for Whistler Service Strategy the objective is to ensure the guest experience is memorable. This means they will return, it will keep Whistler on the

international stage, and attract new visitors.

"From an employer's point of view this is a great retention tool; it's a perk."

"For the employee they get a discounted pass — they get to work hard, then play hard. Not every business has the structure in place to create their own training, feedback or reward programs, the Whistler Service Strategy gives them this opportunity at an affordable level, giving every member of the Chamber the opportunity to train, measure and reward their employees in an economical way. It's accessible for all. The ongoing challenge is to keep the program engaging and relevant."

The Spirit program's success is measured through the results of the ServeUs Challenge, a mystery shopper reviewing program that focuses on rewarding employees and recognizing businesses that deliver extraordinary service.

And while there is much anecdotal evidence to suggest the Spirit program is successful measuring it empirically has been a real challenge for the Chamber.

In the most recent go-round of the ServeUs Challenge only 13 per cent of businesses took part.

"The Challenge gives us benchmark figures, and though the resort is going in the right direction with the results slowly climbing, we need more businesses to take part to really see what's going on at the front line," explains Famulak.

This is where the new initiative, ServeUs 100, comes into play. In this 2011/2012 program mystery shoppers will go to businesses not signed up to the ServeUs Challenge and conduct the same survey. This allows the Chamber to gauge the level of service across the wider community and find areas for opportunity, improvement, and where the Chamber needs to provide support.

Measurable data as to the success of this program only came in three years ago, and with an additional fee to employers of \$199 + HST, it doesn't have the same incentive as the free Spirit Pass Program for businesses to take part.

Despite the cost, Core owner Bob Allison says: "The ServeUs Challenge is the measuring stick to see how staff perform when you are not watching over them, how the company training program, procedures and policies are

working, and if the consumer's interpretation of what we are delivering is what we intend it to be."

"This ongoing survey is a valuable tool that would be virtually impossible for any one business to conduct on their own. The Whistler Chamber of Commerce has done, and is doing, a great service providing this to the local businesses."

The Core won the 2011 Summer ServeUs Challenge award in the activities and service sector.

"I think the program works if you utilize it properly," said Allison.

"If you just have the same random check every time, your staff will figure it out and perform only when they think it counts. The feedback we receive from the Chamber goes through the entire chain of communication. The program works regardless of the effort you put in to it as a business, but the potential benefits are much greater if you spend time determining the feedback you want, and how you are going to use it to improve your business."

Many long-term locals and multiple Spirit Pass takers also support the Spirit program, which organizers re-invent each year with different speakers and updated information.

"I see the value in being reminded that visitors need to be treated well in order for them to return," said Dave Thwaite, who works at the Westin Resort and Spa, and who has been to nine courses over his time in Whistler.

"Anyone involved in the Spirit Program needs these visitors to keep coming to Whistler so we can continue to live the awesome lives that we do."

Added Alex Relf, of the Four Seasons Resort Whistler, who is heading into his fourth season here in Whistler: "(The Spirit program is) a good reminder of why we are all here and what makes Whistler such a special place. Having more people on board with Whistler Spirit really makes this place enjoyable for us locals, and visitors.

"Last year's session I remember being really good. I think the presenters name was "Twitchy." He made the whole thing a lot of fun and it was good to have a few laughs. His energy was ecstatic," exclaimed Relf.

Not all long-term residents feel that way though.

Says Thwaite: "I feel the program does work, but of course there are always

those people in attendance who are just there to get it over with. For the most part anyone who has done several of the programs, just wants to get their course out of the way and have their pass activated."

Added Philip Middleton who works at The Fairmont Chateau Whistler: "It's the same stuff each year, there should really be different options for long time locals."

Perhaps an on-line version might be the way to go says Thwaite: "I think after a certain number of years the on-line method would make most people happy and probably save a lot of money."

To address some of these concerns the Chamber added some new twists to the program this year. There was a new "Spirit Afterhours" event for Level 3 participants, after hearing that the luncheons did not allow for enough two-way engagement. Also dedicated Level 1 and 2 sessions for non-hospitality sector employees, specifically for those who work in trades, professional services, real estate, healthcare etc. have also been set in place for this year.

But without more businesses coming on board in the ServeUs Challenge portion of the program the success is always going to be hard to gauge.

This year the Chamber's Service Coordinator, Carissa Roseborough, will be available to signed-up businesses to attend team meetings and explain the objective of the ServeUs Challenge, ensuring that all team members understand the evaluation criteria as well as the recognition opportunities offered through the program.

Ric's Grill owner, Sunny Guptak, has been a staunch supporter of the program over the years.

"The Whistler community is small and tight, the Spirit Pass helps further glue the locals together with a perk designed just for them, because its something they want and something that has to be earned."

Some argue though that the Spirit program needs more depth.

"The spirit program is a great thing, but there needs to be more to it," says Drew Meredith, former Mayor of Whistler and a current Real Estate Agent. "There needs to be more service training and possibly recruitment."

Still other business owners believe the pass needs to be discounted even more

for workers as it takes at least a month of earnings to pay for the pass if an employee is getting 40 hours a week of work.

To put this in perspective, the Whistler Housing Authority puts the average wage of a worker in Whistler at being \$11–15 per hour, a full priced season pass sets you back \$1,729 + tax, this is reduced to \$1,224 (before tax) for the Spirit Pass, a saving of \$505, which is equivalent to nearly one month's rent.

The funding for the initiative comes in part from the Resort Municipality of Whistler and Whistler Blackcomb. In addition to this the Spirit Pass Program's operational costs are funded through the \$25 administration fee that Whistler Blackcomb charges to Spirit Pass holders. Tourism Whistler is also an important sponsor, along with Telus, and the Pique Newsmagazine.

Despite some criticism the program's apparent success has not gone unnoticed

"We receive calls now and again from B.C resorts, from resorts in the States (and) from resorts in Europe, (that) have done some research and want to know more about it in order for them to try and emulate it," says Famulak.

The Tofino–Long Beach Chamber of Commerce has a new program called the "Force of Nature Ambassador Program," which launched in April of this year, "Initially modelled after the Whistler Spirit Pass Program, the Ambassador Program will capture the core values that are integral to the region while including introductory information about the ecology, histories, businesses and communities within the area," writes Rebecca Henn, of Tofino's Ambassador Program coordinator, in the news section of their Chamber website.

"The Ambassador Program will be designed to give a healthy and accurate profile of the opportunities that exist to explore and enjoy in the community, enhancing visitor experience and encouraging longer stays."

Revelstoke Mountain Resort is only in it's fifth year of operations and has plans to take on the programs similar to those of Whistler, says Marketing and Communications Coordinator Sarah Windsor.

"To continue strong relationships with both local businesses and the community of Revelstoke, Revelstoke Mountain Resort will look at developing

an ambassador/spirit pass program over the next few years, and modelling a program similar to those existing in the industry like that of Whistler."

So how did the Spirit Pass come to be?

The way Thelma Johnston, former Executive Director of the Whistler Chamber of Commerce, tells it customer service was a hot topic of discussion in tourism circles after the 1986 Expo was held in Vancouver.

She brought together a roundtable of 8–9 people made up of the then–Resort Association (Tourism Whistler), Chamber, local business owners, and Capilano College, to discuss a customer service plan for Whistler. They brought in a speaker from the Disney University and "Share the Magic with Whistler" was presented to business owners, hitting home the importance of customer service skills when creating the ideal guest experience.

Johnston then set about bringing together a "Whistler Spirit Committee" coining the infamous phrase "Whistler Spirit." The members took on the planning of the Whistler Spirit Program, and set about determining it's guidelines and objectives. After discussion the committee fixed on several key objectives:

- To ensure that every person working in the Whistler Resort, in any capacity, both during working or leisure time is familiar with the resort so that he/she can assist guests
- To raise the morale and enthusiasm of the persons working in the resort so that they can reflect that enthusiasm to the guests and be true Ambassadors.
- To ensure service excellence in every business operating within the boundaries of the Resort.

At the time says Rick Clare, a former Chair of the Whistler Chamber of Commerce, the resort was struggling with a shortage of workers. It was recognized by the panel that they needed to develop a hook to make the resort a desirable place to work and encourage businesses to take part in the new program. Along with colleague Dave Kirk, they approached Charles Young, President of Whistler Mountain, with the idea of offering discounted passes to potential employees.

"Initially, the mountain didn't want to level the playing ground by giving out discounted passes — they had jobs to fill themselves," says Clare.

"So we had to negotiate and persuade Charles that having a resort full of people talking about their experiences on the hill would benefit everyone," Kirk adds, "We tried to convince Charles that customer service was as important to the mountain as it was to each individual business owner. We needed to the start seeing the resort as a whole."

The committee had set in motion the beginnings of something that would grow into an award-winning tourism initiative.

Two courses were developed, one for the managers, the other for front line staff. In the inaugural year 450 people took the course (this figure is now closer to 5,000), they evaluated it and the general feedback was that the course was too generic, and not specific to Whistler.

The course was tweaked and to this day feedback from attendees is an important part of what goes into developing the course in following years.

The following year the committee set about redesigning the course so that it would be relevant to the mountain resort they all knew and loved. This time Blackcomb Mountain came in on the action and the dual mountain pass was called the "Ambassador Pass." The participation doubled to 950 attendees.

At the same time the Tourism Ministry was also working on its own program called "SuperHost." And when officials looked into Whistler's program they realized its strength and quickly embraced it leading to an award from the Ministry of Tourism declaring Whistler the first "SuperHost Resort".

It had by now developed into the three-part program we are familiar with today:

- Whistler Spirit course for all new residents. (Today's Level 1)
- Whistler Spirit Day for those already holding a certificate from the previous year. This was designed as a renewal and reminder session and a showcase for all local businesses and community groups. (Today's Level 2)
- A Whistler Spirit Luncheon for employers that would be a pre-requisite for participation by employees of any business and at the same time be a qualifying activity for those in attendance. (Today's Level 3)

As the program grew in the early 90's the Whistler Spirit Committee struggled

with Whistler Mountain officials and the agreements on the Ambassador Pass became shaky. Mountain officials complained that the refund process was too complex and taking up a lot of their administrative time, so the Whistler Chamber of Commerce agreed to take over and the Ambassador Pass was approved once more.

"This was understandable," said Johnston.

"There was a lot of work to do and they had a lot going on themselves." Today the program has a strong relationship with Whistler Blackcomb.

"It provides a great opportunity, and incentive, for the business community, both small and large, to ensure their employees participate in a resort wide guest service program," says Dave Brownlie, the President and Chief Operating Office of Whistler Blackcomb.

Clare reiterates the importance of this relationship: "People forget just how lucky we are to live in a resort with so many like-minded people. We now speak as a unit, everyone together in the challenge to give our guests the whole experience and make it the best it can possibly be."

During these years Johnston received many calls from resorts eager to understand Whistler's new program. Breckenridge Resort and Knott's Berry Farm in the U.S., and even a resort in Scotland flew her out to speak on the subject.

When Johnston retired in 2001 she remained firm that the program worked because it was supported by so many partners.

At the 14th annual Whistler Spirit Luncheon she had this to say: "No one in this room would disagree that the future of this resort depends on its people and on the provision of world-class service to our guests. The Whistler Spirit Program is the first step in establishing a high standard of customer service throughout the resort.

"I have to take this opportunity to remind you and to urge you to support your staff either as new or seasoned participants in the Program. They cannot meet the ideals of good customer service in a vacuum, but only with your constant support and back-up."

By 2001, they had put a staggering 20,000 people through the program.

In 2006 the Whistler Service Strategy was formalized and the three-part

mantra of: Connect. Assist. Exceed. was developed.

A year later Whistler Blackcomb also adopted the tag line for their service training.

"As part of the larger resort service strategy, the Spirit Program has developed significantly over the years into a key component of the success of the resort community," says out-going Whistler Mayor Ken Melamed. "The RMOW has always been a major supporter of the program and sees excellent value from our annual investment in service programs including the Chamber, Village Host and Visitor Information Centre."

So what can we expect for the future?

There can be little doubt that the Spirit program has become an important part of the culture of success for Whistler

over the years.

And as we continue in times of economic uncertainty we can all understand the value of being a step ahead of the game. While some may question the investment made in the program few would argue that investing in customer service is not an important factor in the growth of this resort.

Perhaps Allison says it best: "Whistler has been known as a welcoming place to visit and this begins with the meet and greet of the front-end staff and all those involved in the delivery of the end product.

"Regardless of the weather, snow conditions, or how the food tasted, the customer service we provide will leave a lasting impact, negative or positive on our visitors and ultimately affect their decision to return again."