

"Service Excellence" Conference

Achnagairn House, Kirkhill

What was it?

Bearing in mind our recent and ongoing push towards a brand identity for the area, this event seemed to fit in well with the aims expressed in our criteria.

(See: www.celticfringe.org.uk/brand.pdf : The criteria are on the last page)

The conference was built around the idea that

"change is ever present and those businesses who have seen long-term success and growth are driven by people who have stood out from the crowd by sticking their heads up in the air (not in the ground!) and embracing it."

With this in mind, each of the speakers represented a business or individual that focused on a drive for quality and continuous improvement for themselves and their clients. Showing how this reflected in a profitable business and satisfied customers was very much the theme for the day.

Who was there?

Out of 130 of a target audience, 90 turned up. The disappointing aspect to this was that Celtic Fringe were not only the sole representatives from the West Coast, but appeared to be the only tourism association there at all. The end result was that while there were folk there from Speyside, Inverness shire, Caithness and Sutherland, Perthshire etc, this report may be the only way you ever hear any details!

A whole range of media was apparently used to spread news about the event - did you hear about it?

The speakers.....

Gillian Lacey-Solymar was first on stage. Apart from being Consumer Affairs correspondent at the BBC, University lecturer, Science and Innovation teacher, and working on the BBC lunchtime "Business" programme, she and her husband also restore derelict properties! The latest venture was the venue itself, Achnagairn House! Basically, this has now been turned into a 24 bedroom property, either for conference usage or for weddings, special events, or private hire (if you can afford the £10,000 for the weekend!)

Each one of the bedrooms has been given its own identity, and they all have the very latest top-end fittings and furnishings to go with the rest of the building. There are fully fitted kitchens, living areas, and a ballroom included in any hire, along with access to local caterers and services.



There were a couple of sorry stories to do with the work itself, however. Take an unnamed window cleaning company, based locally. They came up to see the work required - which would have been a good long term contract for them – but commented “*Can’t do it – too many windows!*” And the work itself was carried out by a highly effective team of Polish workers, because no local company seemed interested enough to even quote, never mind do the work.

This work was carried out against a backdrop of the developing economic crisis, and although the Lacey – Solmars have a relatively high income, they are like so many other folk today – they have borrowed heavily to develop their concept, and still wake up in the morning half expecting the bank to be on the phone. Despite this, they are doing their very best to achieve their target of becoming one of the premier venues for this type of event. As to the current economic climate, she commented :

- The strength of the pound should result in extra visitors
- Know your market – Things are grim just now, so people will enjoy a treat
- Have passion about what you are doing – this will ensure you survive and grow, as indifference shows quickly
- Cash flow is vital – Do not take your eye off the bottom line

Bob Downie, Chief Executive of the Royal Yacht Britannia was our next speaker. The RYB has been owned by a self funding charity since 1998. It has gone on to be a five star tourist attraction, and has received the highest ever quality assurance grading from Visit Scotland.



Bob’s talk centred around how attention behind the scenes aimed at making sure you have a happy and committed workforce can pay dividends at the customer end of the business. *Doesn’t apply to yourself? Don’t have a workforce?* Whether one of your family helps out, or whether you have somebody in to help with the rooms – it all adds up.

Bob's approach is that you generally get the competition you deserve ie: the better you become at what you do, the fewer competitors you have.

He also emphasised the fact that if you take staff to a level where they recognise that they are good at what they do, then they will generally try their best to take this further.

- A happy workforce is an effective workforce
- Try and see yourself as others see you

Moving closer to home now, in some ways at least, **Caroline Gregory of the Lovat Arms Hotel** gave a presentation. This followed on closely from some of the key features of the previous speaker.

The name may be familiar to some, as Caroline's father is David Gregory, as in Loch Torridon Hotel. They took over the Lovat Arms Hotel in 2005, and have given it a total refurbishment. Up to date things such as a biomass heating system are saving nearly £1000 per month compared to previous costs, and they have no less than quadrupled repeat business since 2006.



I suspect that many of the factors behind the continuing success of the "Torridon" are being employed at the "Lovat", because staff working conditions and active involvement with the running of the hotel feature highly. Employees are taken away for development days, team spirit is encouraged, along with promoting values of self belief – honesty – trust – and commitment to the business.

Another good idea is that of "Event Ideas" for the staff to become involved in. The concept is simple –staff are encouraged to come up with a good idea for an event, sell it to the hotel, and 5% of any profit goes back to the individual that came up with the proposal in the first place.

And when somebody makes a mistake over something, there is what was called a "BooBoo" chart. The mistake concerned is put on to a chart for all to see, and to comment on. These mistakes are hardly ever repeated, and the whole system works in an open and constructive manner.

And on to lunch.....

Which was one of the more interesting mid conference lunch breaks I've experienced! For a start, all the food appeared locally sourced – there were no sandwiches, it was all freshly cooked, and showed several traditional Scots / Highlands dishes to their best advantage. Salted Herring, fish pie, cheeses, broth etc. Lovely!

All catering appeared to be done by “Cairngorm Mountain”, Aviemore, who were one of the main sponsors – whether they provided their service free or not, I don't know, but they were really good.

The food was followed on by a guided tour around the house. Believe me, the rooms may be superb, but the attached en suites were the piece-de-resistance. No photos, unfortunately!

The next presenter was a fellow called **David MacNaughton, of Zoned In**

Performance: 15 years ago he had nothing – apart from several addiction issues to confront & his personal life was at a very low ebb. He had one of these “epiphany” moments, though, and managed to stop his problems in their tracks. Not an easy task, but he has shown that it can be done and is now one of Scotland's most exciting business coaches.

Much of his presentation is difficult to convey in words, as there were quite a number of visual tricks and gestures that were employed – however, once again, there were a number of anecdotal quotes that are worth mentioning:

“When Walt was asked what he saw as the future for Disney (*this was at a time when the Disney fortunes were NOT on the scale that they are today*), Disney's reply was “**Nebulous – Big and Glowing**”. He never lost that drive and optimism”.

“Even when the sun is hidden by clouds – the sun is STILL there”

And one that I thought was particularly good:

“The Chinese symbol for “crisis” contains two characters – **Danger & Opportunity**



We may well be in a credit crisis, but the message there is clear as day!

And so to what was the closing presentation – this one to do with a subject close to my own fingertips: Use of IT in developing your tourism business.

This was presented by the eloquently named **Rene Looper, of TuMinds & 4TM Ltd.**, who provide IT and Social Media services to the tourism industry.

Basically, this was about what was described as the Internet V.2 – Social Media websites such as Trip Advisor / Bebo / Facebook and so on.

There were a number of interesting and worthwhile items discussed during this session, some that I was aware of, some not. In order, then:

- Social media employs what can be described as “Word of Mouth marketing”. You market yourself through providing a good service to somebody - they will go and tell others
- **74%** of people trust reviews, only 14% trust adverts
- **44%** of all tourism purchases are now made this way
- **30Million** people visit Trip Advisor each month
- **Facebook has approx 150** million users now
- Besides Facebook and Trip Advisor, there are Bebo, Qype, Twitter, Flickr and several others
- **NOTE: I found over 100 by typing in “social media sites+list”**

I think we can agree that the statistics are pretty fierce! 150 Million users equates to quite a few people, and certainly more than your average newspaper advert.



How is this relevant to you? (And please feel free to let me know if I picked this up wrong.....). Well, although you may not be on any of these, it's a simple matter to go on line and create a page that will operate essentially as a basic advert. The theory is that this will be picked up by somebody, who might know of somebody else looking for a holiday in Scotland, who might be in a party of four...etc etc at 150 million users, this WILL happen. Also, certain types of Iphone and others mobiles can now pick up the Internet on the move without any trouble, so your advert is accessible (in theory) absolutely anywhere there is a signal.

Some of them (twitter, for example) can even send a message to you to let you know that person “x” is thinking of travelling to Scotland soon – you can then let them know about you and your service!

Do they work? I started using Trip Advisor over three years ago to help out when planning a short break or holiday. *It has never let me down yet.* Allowing for the fact that occasionally somebody will probably put in a favourable review because the owner of the hotel / B&B is a friend or whatever, by and large, you are reading accurate and honest reviews about places made by the general public. In the last couple of years, a party of 8 of us have made trips to both Paris and more recently, Krakow – we have had excellent and characterful accommodation each time with no disappointments. Have a look around Scotland and see what's in it. **Not all our restaurateurs or accommodation providers read this I suspect, because some of the reviews should be setting off loud alarm bells about standards of service or facilities!**

As a final example as to whether these work or not, Rene set up a Facebook page saying that he ran a B&B in Inverness – the page probably took an hour to set up. From that moment, he simply left it alone and didn't advertise the fact or anything.

Several days later, there was an enquiry. Then a few more. Then some more. He and his wife now have a double room in Inverness at their house that they let out as B&B!

What all this is saying appear to be: If you really want to ride out the recession, and to build a successful quality service, then you have to put time and effort into this. Learn about the various ways of promoting your business that are a bit “out of the box”, and don’t rely on others to do it for you.

So, that was it.....

This report can’t really convey the enthusiasm, interest, and general discussions that went on during the day, but it was a valuable opportunity to find out just how folk feel about the tourism industry today, and how it can ride out the current financial issues.

There is a great future for tourism here, but it will be reached only through attention to our visitors, taking care of those who work in the industry, and making sure this becomes one of the great quality destinations of tomorrow.



Who was there, how do you contact them?

www.achnagairn.com/

Achnagairn House, Conference venue, weddings and events, private hire.

www.royalyachtbritannia.co.uk

As above, venues / events etc. Or just to have a look around it!

www.lovatarms-hotel.com

As per the above, and a hotel as well. Have a look at their environment efforts to see how they reduce their carbon "footprint". Click [here](#) for directing to that page.

www.zonedinperformance.com

Business consultancy, leadership development

www.knockomie.co.uk

Knockomie House Hotel

<http://4tm-services.com/>

Social media marketing

www.cairngormmountain.com

Everything to do with Cairngorm, it would seem, from the mountain itself to corporate services, the funicular railway and snow sports

www.prime-promotions.com/

The Event promoters!

www.tourism-excellence-scotland.co.uk

The event organisers!

Other names and addresses there:

www.snowmarketing.co.uk/

New Inverness based marketing company: marketing planning and coordination to events and project management. (*Owner from Wester Ross*)

www.spoff.co.uk

Locally sourced range of cereals, porridges etc

www.connage.co.uk/

Range of Highland Cheeses

www.bouvrage.com

Natural Drinks using Scottish products

www.stoatsporridgebars.co.uk

Oats, porridge bars, natural products