

VERTEX – WINTERING YOUR COURSE

Image by JM Adventure

For some of you, you will soon be closing your courses for the winter months or cutting back on your opening hours and going off on your holidays and spending some well-deserved time with friends and families....before it all starts again in 2019!

Before you head off into the proverbial sunset it's worth making a list of what needs to and could be done over the winter months to make sure that you start the new season with all pistons firing...

Your list could include some of the following...

PPE?

It seems to be our go to subject at the moment but these quiet months are a good time to go through your PPE store, giving it a good clean and sort out. You could check through your quarantined items seeing if some of them need to be discarded, fixed or put back into service.

It's a good time to bring all your PPE equipment together in one place give it a good clean (following the manufacturer's instructions) and to carry out your PPE inspection so that you know at the start of the new season all your PPE is ready to go. It's also a good time of year to place your orders for PPE so that when you open up you're not having to wait for stock on back orders. Most PPE re-sellers increase their prices in the New Year so if you can get your orders in before the Christmas break, you may well save yourself a few pounds.

You could also check with the manufacturers if there have been any changes and updates for the PPE equipment you have for your operation and finally this down time is an opportunity to do some research on new and alternative PPE which could be better for your customers and staff.

Analyse Your Data

Over the season you'll have collated stacks of data on your customers and your staff and these quieter months are a good time to sit down and reflect on them. It may be that patterns will emerge that enable you to run your operation more effectively and efficiently. It could be simple things like looking at the times of day when you are at your busiest and quietest – these patterns could then help you plan your staffing better.

Although social media and the internet can feel intrusive at times they are one of the ways for you to get to know how your customers rate you and your staff. Reading through comments on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Trip Advisor etc. may make you realise that there are things that you could do differently or things that you're doing well and that need to be celebrated with your staff.

You may find that customers are mentioning the same thing but saying it in a 100 different ways – when you have time to focus on just this the themes will jump out at you. It might be that you need to put signs up in different places, give staff some additional training in particular areas, make changes to your booking system and website – these winter months are the time to get these jobs done.

You could take the time to look through your staff monitoring sheets – are there specific things that keep emerging where some additional training either in-house or externally would help?



Look at your accident, incident, near miss and rescue data – again you may see certain patterns emerge that highlight areas of your course that are incident “black-spots” and which with some discussions with your builder or inspector could easily be overcome. You may decide to look at your supervision levels at certain places on your course or you may need to tweak your safety brief.

Meet With All Your Staff

Bring your staff team together to ask them how they think the season went and whether they have any ideas on how things could be improved for the next season. They are the ones that are on your course day in and day out, regularly interacting with your customers, taking the phone calls and managing your operation for you. They probably have some of the best insight!

Check and Inspect Your Course

Lots of operators use this time to carry out their periodical inspections and maintenance but because of this inspectors and builders are in hot demand so it's worth getting them booked in early... you don't want your opening delayed next year just because you can't get your course inspected and repaired! If you need to find a list of approved inspectors, then one of the places to find them is on the ERCA website. For those of you who need to get components checked by either your builder or the manufacturer it's worth getting these done now rather than waiting until spring, you can always put the components into safe storage over the winter so they don't get battered by the elements.

You've probably noted down on your daily inspection sheets things that need fixing on your course and it's worth sharing this information with the person that will be coming to carry out the repairs and maintenance. There will always be extra things that get picked up by your inspector and we'd always recommend you go round with them – it's a great way to get up close and personal with your course and to see it through the eyes of an inspector.

Be a Customer for a Day

What we mean is that it's always good to experience your course through the eyes of your customers. When it's quiet or closed take a small number of



your staff (including office based) and ask them to go through the whole process from start to finish – from booking online, to arriving, parking, getting kitted up, going on the activities, trying out the café and facilities etc. Because you're familiar with how things work it's easy to dismiss things that actually need addressing and putting it down to customers being awkward or stupid! We guarantee if you take the time to do this then it will pay dividends and improve your facilities and the customer experience.

Another idea is to contact a cross section of your customers to get more detailed and in depth feedback from them – you could incentivise them by offering a discount to your facility for the next season. Often people's immediate feedback is very much "in the moment" but as I'm sure all of us have done on your way home or a week or so later you'll talk about your experience and be a bit more objective about the good and bad points.

Staffing For Next Season

What already! One of the hardest things as an operator is keeping good staff when you're not open all year round. How can you incentivise the good ones to come back to you year after year? We've come across some innovative ways including one operator who paid for some of his staff to become tree surgeons/ arboriculturists. Over the winter not only do they carry out work on their own tree based courses but they also sell their services locally....this means this operator

is able to keep his good staff on the books all year round and gain some valuable income over the winter months when they are closed – this not only helps the operator but also shows the staff they are valued.

You could consider linking up with another employer who has a winter operation where staff work in both locations providing them with year round employment.

Finally, walk around your facility as though it's the first time - is it looking fresh or tired? are signs faded by the sun? rope with green algae, platforms that could be cleaned and a million other things!

Then once you've done all that crack up the beer and champagne and enjoy your holiday!



Emma Bell



Steve Woods

