

# “I Think We Need Some Major Sucking Up!”

Written By: Michael Moore

While my title is just a line from the movie *Pretty Woman*, I think it applies to the camping industry right now. We know that manufacturers and dealers are not seeing the same growth as a year or two ago.

On the campground side, both large and small, occupancy is down slightly compared to last year or the year before. It's not all that surprising after record-breaking years following the COVID pandemic; but it can still be jarring nonetheless, especially if large operations have budgeted and projected much larger numbers than what's happened.

## **So, why is that?**

We know it's not because the country has too many campsites. Study after study has referenced the fact that America doesn't have enough campsites, compared to how many people own an RV or are looking to camp in the foreseeable future. Instead, it could be because the playing field has leveled to the point where many options look like the other.

Years ago, paved sites and pools would be considered “high-end.” Now? That's the minimum if you're going to attract new customers. On the other end of the spectrum are lazy rivers, glamping units and full-service restaurants. Which, make no mistake, are good things for the industry. But what happens if you're one (or several) of those properties stuck in a rut and not able to continue that exponential growth that was projected? One option is, luckily, not something that would cut into your bottom line. Yes, people are intrigued by the amenities, but is that what makes them come back to that park? What is something that is seared into their brains and makes them feel good? It's the customer service and relationships they have with people at the park. That is what the camping industry was built on, and still is, and can be lost by operators if they aren't careful.

So, what are some ways you and your staff can start sucking up? It starts from the first interaction. It could be online; make sure your website has easy-to-find information and inviting pictures. Yes, that website that turns 20 years old this year may have served its purpose; but you don't want to be pushed down the search results on Google as more camping options are coming online.

The customer experience can start on the phone for many. Do you know who is answering the phone for your business? At Texas Advertising, we have our staff answer the phone with, “It's the best day ever! I'm so-and-so; how can I help you?” It sounds corny, but I can honestly say it not only helps, but it sticks with people calling in. I learned this lesson from Jeff Crider, an industry

publicist and writer for *Woodall's Campground Magazine*. He was speaking to members of the Texas Association of Campground Owners and told the audience that 90% of them had people answering their phones that should not be answering the phone. Jeff calls hundreds, if not thousands, of parks a year and would know. Now you do, too. Listen to who's answering the phone for you, and make sure their interactions are representative of your park.

There are a million other things you and your park can do to make customers feel good. From escorting a guest to their site to brushing off that pedestal, to knowing what restaurant in town they should go to, it's the personal touch that makes their stay different from a business trip.

In fact, think of a typical business trip and where a business traveler is staying. The amenities at most hotels attempt to offer a lot of the same things—four walls, a bed, a TV and a bathroom that doesn't make you wince. So, what makes them stick out? The service! It is the friendly face at the front desk or the problem solver who helps with some issues that popped up.

That's the state of the campground industry. A lot of parks have similar amenities which, again, are much better on the whole than in previous generations, but some “major sucking up” shifts the unique value proposition to the staff and the service they're providing.



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