

## Case study – Tourism training project

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### *A case study looking at a new approach*

This case study looks at an innovative tourism training project funded by the London Learning and Skills Council to offer marketing training in four different formats to people working in tourism in seven South London boroughs in 2003. The case study considers:

- the factors that can act as barriers to people taking up training opportunities;
- the relative popularity of different training delivery methods;
- lessons learnt from this project that could benefit other organisations and recommendations for the future.

### **BACKGROUND**

There is widespread recognition that there are skills shortages within the tourism industry. Further and Higher Education establishments offer an ever-increasing range of tourism related courses but there is still a lack of training for people already working in the industry. This problem is particularly acute in small to medium sized businesses whose staff need training to up-skill and develop a competitive edge, which will in turn safeguard jobs.

The South London Tourism Training Project was set up to provide marketing training for such companies. It was funded by the London Learning and Skills Council and specifically targeted small to medium sized businesses (SMEs) in the hospitality and tourism sector in South London. SMEs are defined as having less than 250 employees. Tourism Officers and destination marketing staff were also targeted so they could pass on their newly acquired marketing skills to others working in the industry.

The tourism training project covered the London Boroughs of Bromley, Croydon, Kingston, Merton, Richmond, Sutton and Wandsworth. The project began in August 2002 and ended in November 2003.

Lead project management responsibility was held by Sutton's Tourism Officer, Alex Smith. This included management of the budget, co-ordination of delivery partners, and reporting to the LLSC.

The Tourism Network was responsible for developing the original project concept, and working jointly with the project manager on detailed task, timescale and budget planning. The Tourism Network also co-ordinated and delivered the majority of tasks, including promoting the project, developing the content of the training modules, and delivering or sub-contracting the face-to-face and e-learning.

Borough representatives were responsible for some aspects of project management through the project steering group, along with delivering specific tasks including carrying out a training

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needs analysis, providing destination marketing information and a database of tourism businesses, promoting the project within their borough, and in some cases directly delivering destination marketing training.

The project targeted people working in several different types of “business”:

- Hotels, guest-houses and other accommodation providers
- Visitor attractions including museums and galleries
- Destinations - including marketing consortia, tourist information centres, town centre managers and tourism officers
- SMEs in sectors that provide services to visitors such, as retail, transport, and eating & drinking.

### **BARRIERS TO ACCESSING TRAINING**

The majority of people working in the tourism industry face several barriers when trying to access training:

#### **1. Lack of practical training which is tailor-made for their needs**

There is a perception that much current training is not practical or relevant enough. Training organisations provide general marketing courses, usually on subjects such as “how to write a marketing plan” but rarely focus on more practical marketing

subjects such as the use of individual promotional tools. There is an urgent need for “just-in time” training, whereby a participant learns how to write a press release in the morning and can actually send one off in the afternoon. Training needs to be very practical, immediate and relevant.

Most of the general courses target a general audience. We have found that tourism businesses prefer to attend courses that relate directly to the tourism industry.

We have even found that accommodation providers won’t attend training workshops that appear to cater for other sectors of the tourism industry such as museums, perceiving the workshops to not be relevant to them.

#### **2. SMEs generally don’t want formal qualifications**

While it is useful for staff to work towards some form of additional vocational qualification such as NVQs, it was found that people working in SMEs didn’t feel existing courses were relevant to them. This was either because the course subjects were not considered practical enough, because they lasted too long or because owner-managers are simply not interested in gaining qualifications. Their approach is that they are “self-made” and gather precisely the information they need to run their business rather than to collect course certificates.

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### 3. Inappropriate timing of training workshops

Another major barrier to accessing training is that most workshops take place during the day and at times when owner-managers of SMEs are very busy. For example, owner-managers of guest-houses and small hotels can rarely attend training workshops that start before 10.30 because they are still busy with guests checking out and don't necessarily have staff to replace them. The same applies after 4.00 pm when guests start to check-in.

Many people working in SMEs feel they can't take time off during the day, especially if it takes some time to travel to the training venue.

### 4. Cost of available training courses

There is a resistance to investing in tourism training among SMEs and even in larger organisations. Many available one-day training courses cost up to £500. In addition to the lack of cash, there is a fear that the courses are not going to be useful and it won't be possible to implement the lessons learnt. There is the additional fear of wasting time.

#### Breaking down the barriers

Given these barriers, the key objective of the tourism training project was to provide a package of tailor-made and practical training.

A training needs analysis conducted in advance of developing the training programmes helped to establish what subjects were likely to be most popular. The Tourism Network's 15 years of experience of running marketing training workshops also helped to suggest popular subjects.

The project was a pilot and therefore also sought to examine the relative popularity of different training formats. Where appropriate we were able to signpost and direct beneficiaries towards other relevant courses including NVQs, CAM Foundation, and Chartered Institute of Marketing. At least one participant is known to have gone on to study for the Chartered Institute of Marketing Diploma but we did not specifically try to track this as an output.

### DECIDING WHAT TRAINING TO OFFER TO WHOM

The design of the recruitment phase was based on the Tourism Network's previous experience of delivering a similar but smaller project in East London. The key elements of this phase were:

1. To develop a database of tourism businesses
2. To conduct a training needs analysis amongst a sample of businesses
3. To assemble a package of training modules in response to the training needs analysis
4. To promote the project to businesses, and secure their commitment to access the training modules.

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### 1. Developing a database of tourism businesses

The database of potential beneficiaries was assembled from individual databases provided by each borough. Two of the boroughs had pre-existing databases which were therefore readily available. The other boroughs needed to start from scratch in assembling their database, so additional time needed to be built in to the project plan to achieve this.

The quality of the databases varied enormously. Unfortunately much of the inaccuracy was only discovered at the later promotion phase, when up to 40% of email addresses and some postal addresses were found to be inaccurate.

The number of businesses on the overall database was around 500, with an unknown total number of employees. The original funding bid had proposed that the training would target tourism and retail businesses separately. This case study only deals with the former. The original funding bid to the London Learning and Skills Council (LLSC) had split the overall target of 850 beneficiaries into 650 from the retail element and 200 from the tourism element. This number of beneficiaries was an initial “guestimate” as it was not known how many businesses there were in the area.

This was amended at this stage to focus a greater proportion of effort (and budget) on the tourism element. With the agreement of the LLSC, the overall target was therefore revised downwards to 500 beneficiaries, and the split amended to 150 from the retail element and 350 from the tourism element.

An important question was about what type of businesses were included in the definition of tourism. For some boroughs it included tour operators, swimming pools and play centres, whilst others focused on attractions, hotels and transport providers. The management team accepted this in the context of the project needing to be flexible in responding to the varying business needs of each individual Borough.

### 2. Conducting the Training Needs Analysis

The objectives of the training needs analysis (TNA) were to understand the marketing training needs of tourism businesses, and gauge initial levels of demand for the different training modules. Conducting the TNA was also intended to act as initial promotion of the project to businesses.

The Tourism Network had already drawn up a suggested list of training modules. We then asked respondents to identify which of these or other marketing topics they would be most interested in. We also asked which delivery format they would prefer. The borough tourism officers then circulated this questionnaire to businesses on their database. Some of them also followed up by telephoning a sample of businesses in their borough, and addressed businesses in their existing tourism forum meetings. One of the boroughs provided information from a previous business survey.

The main outcomes of the TNA were:

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- There was interest in all of the modules offered. There was greatest interest in the “Internet Marketing” and “Practical Promotions on a Small Budget” modules
- There were very few suggestions for new training modules
- There was interest in all of the delivery methods: Face-to-face training in groups; One-to-one surgeries; and e-learning with less interest in workbooks

Some boroughs were more successful than others in securing information and generating interest in the project. Initial reactions from businesses varied enormously - in Richmond businesses appeared very positive, as opposed to Croydon where only one response was secured. This indicated at an early stage in the project that there might be differing degrees of success in selling the training in different boroughs.

Some techniques were more effective in eliciting responses. Where email addresses were available, this resulted in a good level of interest, particularly from people interested in e-learning. In contrast posting out a printed questionnaire generated a very limited response until followed up by the borough representatives.

Another key discovery at this stage was that regardless of location across the south London area, small operators such as bed and breakfasts tended to be quite negative about the project and didn't believe they needed any training. In contrast, larger organisations were generally more interested.

However, further research in Richmond by an accommodation specialist who had existing relationships with the bed and breakfasts showed that they did recognise a need to improve the quality of their business. They were most interested in knowing more about the Disability Discrimination Act and how it would affect them. The main conclusion drawn by the specialist was that their currently high occupancy levels were a decisive limitation on their motivation to take any action.

The accommodation specialist followed up with many of the businesses and was able to deliver a significant number of one-one training surgeries focusing on quality issues. The “carrot” that was used in order to encourage take-up of this option was the potential to be accepted on to a major online booking system so the businesses could see a direct benefit to them. An important lesson was learned here, in understanding the importance of well-established relationships with businesses in obtaining accurate information and generating interest in the project.

### 3. Assembling a package of training modules

Based on the outcomes of the training needs analysis, a package of ten training modules was assembled by The Tourism Network. These were:

1. Introduction to tourism, who's who and what's what (this was in the context of the changing tourism environment with the merger of the British Tourist Authority and English Tourism Council into VisitBritain, new role of Regional

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Development Agencies like the London Development Agency and changing roles of Regional Tourist Boards which caused much confusion in the industry)

2. Developing a marketing plan
3. How to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act and target the “disabled” market (we believed that it was more productive to demonstrate the economic importance of the disabled market rather than focusing on legal issues)
4. How to get free publicity with PR activities.
5. Writing successful direct mail letters
6. Sales success
7. Using search engines to promote your website.
8. Better brochures - copywriting secrets.
9. Better brochures - print & design.
10. Customer care.

In addition, a “Destination Marketing” module was developed specifically for the accommodation sector. This module aimed to improve the ability of front-of-house hotel staff to answer their guests’ queries about activities and attractions in south London. As a knock-on effect, it also aimed to improve the accommodation sector’s word-of-mouth marketing of the area.

Training was offered in a variety of formats to suit the needs of key staff:

- Small group classes in a neutral location

- **Small onsite group classes** - e.g. for all reception and front office staff in a hotel
- **One-to-one “surgeries”** which offer an opportunity for 100% tailor-made training and support
- **Self-completion workbooks** which can be completed whenever the trainee wishes
- **E-learning** - specially developed training materials that are accessed via the internet and can be used by individuals when-ever and where-ever they want, provided they have internet access. Where appropriate we promoted the use of broadband internet access in local libraries so that e-learning was accessible to everyone. Participants were required to register online so we could monitor how many people took up this option.

#### 4. Promoting the project to businesses

We decided to build on previous experience and to send out mailings by post and email. Based on the knowledge gained from the TNA on the relative ease of securing commitment in some boroughs compared to others, the project team agreed to implement a **phased delivery** across the area - starting with Richmond and Kingston in the west, moving through Wandsworth, Merton and Sutton, and then onto Bromley and Croydon in the east. Richmond and Kingston were chosen as the starting point on

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the basis that they had the best-developed tourism infrastructure. In short, if the project didn't work in those two boroughs, it wouldn't work at all.

The first stage therefore was to send **promotional emails** to businesses in Richmond and Kingston. Emails were sent both by the Tourism Network and the borough Tourism Officers, for several reasons.

We wanted to overcome any barriers businesses might have - either about receiving 'unsolicited' emails from a private company, or from any negative perceptions about public sector delivery. We also wanted to provide 'mutual back-up' in order to demonstrate to businesses that this was a product they could have some assurance of quality. Some businesses had good relationships with the tourism officers while others already knew the work of The Tourism Network.

The first email simply set out basic information about the project and detailed the modules on offer. The second email set out a programme of dates and venues for specific modules, encouraging businesses to sign up as soon as possible.

These initial emails generated only a handful of beneficiaries for face-to-face delivery of the modules in the two Boroughs. This was significantly less than expected, especially in the light of the relatively positive responses to the TNA.

This raised an important question - why had businesses expressed interest at the TNA stage, but had not then made the commitment

to take part? The answer may lie in the convenience factor since many businesses did go on to access the online format. Others responded better when personal contact was made with them by the borough representatives.

In addition to The Tourism Network's emails, the Tourism Officers in Richmond and Kingston Councils made use of their existing personal contacts, and also endeavoured to make new or improved contacts through the TNA process and their tourism forums. It was these personal contacts and approaches by the tourism officers which generated the best response from businesses, and generated the most beneficiaries for the face-to-face delivery.

Having piloted this approach in Kingston and Richmond, it was subsequently rolled out across the other Boroughs. However not every borough had as well-established a level of personal relationships with their businesses as Kingston and Richmond, and the response rates were correspondingly lower in those boroughs.

Some borough reps made considerable efforts to develop these relationships, by holding meetings with individual operators to discuss their training needs in more detail and to promote the project. This proved a successful tactic in generating beneficiaries, although very time-consuming for the borough representatives.

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### Mid-term review

At this stage of the project (about halfway through the timescale) the project team assessed progress towards the overall beneficiary target of 350, and discovered that the beneficiary numbers were considerably fewer than expected. At the mid-term stage in the project only 100 people had participated.

The team concluded that a review of promotional and delivery techniques was required, and developed a revised approach, focusing on promoting the web-based training by email and promotion by personal contact.

### TAKE UP OF DIFFERENT TRAINING BY FORMAT

An overall analysis of beneficiaries by the end of the project indicates:

Format	Number of beneficiaries
E-learning workshops	383
Destination marketing small group workshops at beneficiaries' workplace	46
Face-to-face small group workshops	113
One-to-one surgeries	32
Other (including Train the Trainer)	20
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>594</b>

There was also good breadth of participation – beneficiaries were representative of different sectors of the industry, including accommodation, attractions, public sector, and consultancies.

### Huge success for e-learning workshops

The ten training subjects were offered as e-learning courses, which were via two websites. These were within the “tourism trade” section of the existing destination marketing site for the area – [www.VisitSouthLondon.com](http://www.VisitSouthLondon.com) and on The Tourism Network’s own site [www.tourismnetwork.org](http://www.tourismnetwork.org). The latter was already known to the industry and had a reputation for running training courses and organising very well-attended tourism network events. The Tourism Network also promoted the courses through Tourism Network events and mailings.

It was this approach that generated by far the largest number of beneficiaries – over 300 in around 5 months, with the majority of registrations coming within a week of The Tourism Network sending out emails about the workshops. Encouragingly, most people who accessed one e-learning workshop went on to do at least another. Many people completed all of them.

Participants were required to register online to access the e-learning workshops so we could monitor response rates. The e-learning workshops each took about an hour to complete and because they were accessible online could be undertaken at any time, to suit the participant. We believe this was a major factor accounting for the success of e-learning as well as offering very

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practical straight-forward information that could be immediately used for the business's benefit.

Businesses responded well to emailings which were simple for them to respond to, by clicking through directly to the website and participating. However there was some evidence that not all employees had access to the internet at work - this was especially true of front-of-house hotel staff. This may therefore have acted as a constraint on take-up. We promoted use of broadband internet access at local libraries for those who didn't have internet access at work or home. It wasn't necessary to have a fast connection to access the e-learning workshops but of course broadband did make the workshops quicker to use.

We believe that some people used the e-learning workshops as "anonymous refreshers". These were participants whose job titles meant they probably ought to already know the workshop subject inside out but perhaps didn't want to admit to needing a refresher. We did come across a couple of participants who admitted to having lied on their CVs to get better jobs and then needed to develop the skills they'd professed to have already! One wrote to me to say thank you for helping them to cover their tracks. We're not sure if this is the sort of output we were aiming for...

The online delivery was the only format which was free of charge to businesses, although the other formats were as cheap as £15 per person. It was originally planned to charge for e-learning workshops but the costs of setting up credit card payment and registration would have been larger than the income (since the

workshops were heavily subsidised) so it was decided to make them free of charge.

This was also a factor in its effectiveness in generating take-up, although subsequent research has shown that businesses would have been prepared to pay moderate fees for the e-learning workshops, providing that good ease of access was preserved.

### Training in small groups

It was surprisingly difficult to encourage participants to travel even short distances of three miles or more to go to different town centres to take part in training.

We also believe that part of the reason for low take-up of training in small groups was the difficulty that small businesses find in taking time off their businesses.

### Face to face delivery

Take up of this service was initially slow but those businesses who took part were very complimentary about the help offered

### Workbooks

There was surprisingly low take-up of printed workbooks. This may have been due to the greater ease of accessing the online format or perhaps the name "workbook" sounded too much like hard work!

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### Destination training at workplaces

Destination training offered to the accommodation sector generated a low take up compared with previous experience in East London. This is possibly due to higher levels of occupancy in South London, generating less motivation to access training in order to improve business performance. When sold on a personal level by the borough representatives, particularly in Richmond, there was considerably higher interest. Word of mouth referrals to other hotels were also good, as were levels of repeat.

### KEY FACTORS AFFECTING TAKE-UP OF TRAINING

*The key factors in generating good levels of take-up on this project were:*

1. **Provision of training in a format which is convenient and easy to access**, as demonstrated by the success of the online format. In this instance, 'easy to access' meant that people didn't have to travel away from their workplace, and could access it at a time convenient to them. Using email to promote e-learning added to the ease of access – people could 'click through' from the email direct to the website.
2. **Development of strong personal relationships** with key decision-makers within the target businesses, either by the borough representative or The Tourism Network. This

sometimes involved developing a good understanding of each individual business's training needs.

**3. Low cost of training.** The fact that the training was heavily discounted was clearly a driver. Providing training free of charge undoubtedly increased take-up overall, but at the same time a proportion of businesses were happy to pay. We also found that there was initial resistance to the idea of accepting very low cost or free training, with public sector funding because some businesses feared that it wouldn't be practical, geared to their needs or high quality. The Tourism Network's track record in delivering practical training to SMEs and big businesses helped overcome some of these fears.

### UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES FOR THE PROJECT

In addition to planned outcomes described above, there were a number of unplanned and positive outcomes.

The first of these was the building of relationships between the Borough representatives and businesses in their area. This was best highlighted in Sutton, where the Tourism Officer spent additional time with larger accommodation operators conducting the TNA, and selling training modules as a 'bespoke package' tailored to each establishment's needs. Sutton's Tourism Officer confirmed that building these relationships had generated closer working relationships with businesses so the local authority can now pursue other tourism initiatives.

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Other relationships were built and strengthened - for example in Kingston upon Thames, Blue Badge Guides were employed to deliver some of the destination marketing training to accommodation providers, with the result that the Tourism Officer and Blue Badge Guides are exploring further joint initiatives.

Elsewhere the project contributed to raise the profile of tourism. In Croydon for example a partnership of key tourism organisations from the public and private sectors has been convened.

### Customer Satisfaction

Feedback from beneficiaries indicated a good level of overall satisfaction from the training they received. In particular once people were initially recruited, many participants went on to access more training in more subjects. Some typical quotes from participants include:

*“Just writing to thank you for the really useful session I had with you last week. Your comments were really helpful and if you look at my URL (<http://www.beaumont-london-apartments.co.uk>) I think you will find that I've taken all your hints on board.”* Alan Afriat, Beaumont Apartments

*“Many thanks for the follow up notes and the “surgery”, which I found immensely*

*useful. We also had a highly productive managers meeting later that day, brainstorming some of the ideas we touched on.”* Martin Senior, Wildlife and Wetland Centre, Barnes

*“Once again thank you for such fantastic 2 hours of pure education.”* Kamila Jaskot, Richmond Inn.

### LESSONS LEARNT FROM THIS PROJECT THAN CAN BE IMPLEMENTED ELSEWHERE

- Research is one thing - reality is another! The initial training needs analysis gave some early feedback on what businesses wanted but it was only when we started to promote the courses that we really knew what subjects and training formats were really going to be successful.
- No matter how much funding you have, how good the training is, you need a very good database in order to promote it. It is worth taking time to develop an accurate and up to date database. Email addresses are essential.
- It is important to acknowledge the importance of well-established relationships with businesses in obtaining accurate information and generating interest in the project. Participants were more likely to take part in some form of training if they either knew or had heard of the

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trainer or if they were asked to take part in the training by some-one they knew, such as the local tourism officer.

- Success was also partly dependent on outreach and the active involvement of Borough representatives - the project was more successful in generating beneficiaries where the Borough representative had pre-existing business contacts and relationships, or used this project to build new contacts.
- Businesses wanted to feel that trainers had good knowledge of their industry and preferably direct and practical experience of it. They wanted to know they were working with well-known industry figures with a good reputation.
- Small businesses are more interested in developing skills that will enhance their profitability than collecting certificates and additional qualifications. Some individuals are aware of the benefits of additional qualifications but are also interested in gaining practical skills that will help them do their job better or get a better job.
- What works in one area doesn't necessarily work in the same way in another area. The Tourism Network delivered a similar project to the one described here in East London. East and South London are not very far away from each other but different attitudes, business conditions and histories prevail. Even within South London there were

different attitudes between businesses in different boroughs. It was important to acknowledge these differences and work around them. Flexibility was important. For example, the tourism "product" is better established in South London so there is a stronger sense of "we know it all". Within South London it seemed that there was a stronger community spirit and willingness to participate in say Kingston than Croydon.

- In terms of lessons that "beneficiaries" such as people working in hotels, attractions etc might learn from this project, they might be interested to now realise that various public sector organisations want to help them benefit from different training initiatives. If they feel the initiatives are not appropriate to them, if they want to receive a different form of training or perhaps training in a different format, they need to make their views known to those organisations.
- Just as there is a need for public sector and training organisations to have a better understanding of the private sector and their needs, there is a need for potential trainees to step forward and make sure that their voice is heard.
- The good news for anyone who wants to take part in a training course is that there has probably never been such a good range of opportunities as there are now.

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### WHAT'S NEXT?

This project was a pilot and we are pleased with its success. There are now several ways in which we can build on this success, that are still under discussion. These are the options:

- To add additional, more in-depth and comprehensive information to the existing training modules. For example, a workshop on PR activities could also include more exercises, sample releases (good and bad) and sample press lists. The Tourism Network is already working on this option in other areas of the country.
- To offer workshops at a variety of levels. For example, some businesses have said that they would like to be able to access management training in a similar format to the previous e-learning workshops.
- To roll-out the project over a wider geographical area - for example the whole of London or beyond. It would make sense to build on the success of this pilot and focus on e-learning.

It remains to be seen which of these options is more likely to happen as they all depend on external funding. However, several other areas have already contacted The Tourism Network and asked to run similar projects. We are also now starting to offer some more in-depth e-learning workshops to individuals on a paid-for basis and are confident that the future for tourism training lies

in a variety of practical formats. SMEs and others seem particularly likely to develop a taste for e-learning as it is so flexible and relatively cheap to offer.

Susan Briggs is Director of The Tourism Network ([www.tourismnetwork.org](http://www.tourismnetwork.org)), a leading provider of training, practical marketing support and networking opportunities for the tourism industry. Susan Briggs has been personally responsible for delivering marketing and business development training to over 2000 participants. She can be contacted on 020 8947 4053 or by email [susan@tourismnetwork.org](mailto:susan@tourismnetwork.org).

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