

'Help huddles' boost in-house security

The Macerich Co. analyzed the pros and cons of in-house versus contracted security staff.

Senior executives concluded, surprisingly, that converting to a contract provider could increase costs without significantly improving service.

Security accounts for 1,000 employees, the biggest department within Macerich. Guest services, with 400 people, is the second largest. Macerich decided to merge the two, bucking the industry trend of contracting out security, a strategy that's meant to save money but can sacrifice the quality of customer service.

All 1,400 of these employees would now be responsible for providing a more socially dynamic experience for shoppers, and that required a thorough training program.

Implementation

Macerich dubbed the mission of the newly merged security and guest-services staff "Here to Help."

The security manager at each property became the security/guest services manager and the head of the whole "front line" operation, managing personnel and day-to-day functioning. The guest services supervisor at each center helped merge the departments and mentored other employees. Also, each center selected a Here to Help "specialist," an enthusiastic leader with a passion for service who became responsible for launching Here to Help.

The program began with a customized training effort, developed by Janine Sabin, who created a nationally recognized program at Los Angeles' The Grove.

Macerich security and management/marketing executives held a cross-country road tour to launch Here to Help in their respective regions. Each meeting included a collaborative brainstorming discussion about the opportunities and potential problems of a merged security/guest service department.

Two-day regional "Train the Trainer" sessions were held to teach 140 trainers (one Here to Help specialist and one security/guest services manager from each of the 70 centers) how

to train the rest of their staffs. Employees at the malls eventually received pocket notebooks including detailed service expectations, feedback forms, business cards, name tags and more.

At the beginning of each work shift, mall employees hold a "help huddle" to exchange information and encouragement. The huddles are meant to integrate all departments, including any contracted services such as housekeeping. Once each quarter, the centers recognize outstanding achievements in service.



Employees, termed "ambassadors," collected more than 6,500 exit surveys from customers that Macerich later used to assess how well Here to Help was working.

Results

Before Here to Help, Macerich had 400 guest service representatives. By merging the staff with security, 1,400 people went through customer-service training.

In the shopper-satisfaction surveys, 78 percent of customers reported noticing mall security, and of those, 62 percent said the staff member greeted them or somehow improved their experience. Shoppers who described their customer-service experiences as "generally positive" were more likely to have noticed security staff than those who described their experience as negative.

Shoppers who described their experience as positive spent \$83.14 per visit, 9 percent more than those with negative experiences. Satisfied shoppers shopped 7 percent more frequently than those reporting "average" experiences. (The overall shopping frequency at Macerich centers is an average of six times per month, nearly double the industry's 3.2 monthly visits.) A positive experience also translated to a longer stay, 62.1 minutes, an 8 percent margin. ■

Here to Help

The Macerich Co.
Santa Monica, Calif.

Expenses: \$134,398

Professional Recognition: Charles Waldron, SCSM, senior vice president, property management, Susan Valentine, SCMD, senior vice president, consumer marketing, Gene Thompson, vice president, security Phil Vise, SCMD, vice president, consumer marketing, Janine Sabin, vice president, security, independent consultant