



The economics of empathy

By Grant Woolliams

As the line in a prayer delivered at Will and Kate's wedding instructed: "Extend hospitality to strangers..." It could have gone on to say something like "...because they ultimately put food on your table" (their wedding will be worth billions to Britain).

If NZ Inc plays its cards right, arguably the most important lasting tourism benefits from the Rugby World Cup will be had from bums on New Zealand-bound airline seats in the years following the tournament, rather than those sitting in stands during it.

Achieving that will require positively influencing two primary groups: those watching in their home countries (virtual visitors) and those who come here and become ambassadors of New Zealand as a destination because they have a great time (at a reasonable cost).

Physical visitors will use social media to send their tourist stories around the world while here and then repeat them face-to-face back home.

So what type and style of anecdotes will help deliver "legacy" tourism benefits? Without doubt, the most positive Kiwi ads will be created by those on the hospitality front-line who are genuinely empathetic - those who put themselves in the same waka as their guests.

Genuine empathy will generate great stories that brand and market Destination New Zealand.

How does this work?

Patrick Curtis and Rachael Lloyd own the Cathedral Cove B&B at Hahei on the Coromandel.

In January they had the Medvedeffs, an Argentinian family of four staying when Cyclone Wilma hit the region, closing roads and stranding the family who had to get to Auckland to catch a non-refundable flight home. The Medvedeff's were in a panic.

Pat drove to the flooded river causing the problem and waded across to test the depth and footing. To the family's amazement he then loaded them and their luggage on to his tractor, past the line of stranded vehicles and across to where the Medvedeff's pre-arranged transport whisked them off to Auckland, and their flight home.

From Buenos Aires, Victor Medvedeff nominated Pat for a monthly KiaOraMai Awesome Service Award, saying he and his family would never forget Pat's kindness. And Auckland Chamber of Commerce chief executive Michael Barnett made Pat the March 2011 award winner.

In talking to Pat, who was a very reluctant KiaOraMai Awesome Service Award winner (for reasons of acute Kiwi modesty), he mentioned that he and Rachael shared similar views about what constitutes inspirational hospitality.

In January, they met a Canadian couple staying nearby and invited them to dinner. In the course of conversation the woman told them that she and her husband were not happy with their accommodation. Rachael invited the couple to shift into their place. Not just their B&B - it was booked out. Her and Pat gave the couple use of their bedroom while they went and stayed with local friends for two nights.

Great marketing? Absolutely - but mostly on behalf of NZ Inc: Rachael and Pat didn't accept payment from the couple.

Keep in mind that they never expected, nor wanted, these acts of award winning hospitality to see the public light of day. But it is exactly the type and style of hospitality and viral marketing that produces enduring economic benefits long after winners and losers are decided in 80 minutes.

Tourism Coromandel chief executive Jim

Archibald says some people are a perfect fit for tourism and Pat and Rachael are great examples. "They're positive and proactive people who always deliver quality service. I've had staff in challenging situations where Pat and Rachael have gone out of their way to look after them just as they have helped travellers from around the world."

"These stories filter throughout the tourism industry and around the world. They help put New Zealand, the Coromandel and individual business such as the Cathedral Cove Bed and Breakfast on the map."

What's certain is that a million or so Patrick and Rachael's would put a big dent in any real or perceived RWC cost-benefit deficit.

To salute someone in business for giving you exceptional customer service, go to www.awesome-service.co.nz and nominate them.

And to find out about inspirational Kiwi customer service training go to www.kiaoramai.co.nz.

* Grant Woolliams is a director of the KiaOraMai Awesome Service Awards.

