

Case 3

Ashford Castle Hotel: Epitome of an Excellent Service Experience

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Ashford Castle Hotel is one of the world's finest five star luxury hotels, located in County Mayo on the dramatic west coast of Ireland. The castle dates from the 13th century and has been continuously occupied since then. The hotel is a member of Leading Hotels of the World, Ltd. and in 2013 was voted by Condé Nast Traveler® as the number three resort hotel in Europe, receiving a rating of 96.8% for service.

Ashford Castle was first built as a defensive castle by the Anglo-Norman de Burgo family in 1228. Although the original intention was to keep unwanted visitors out, since those early days the castle's various owners have worked hard to keep wanted visitors safe and comfortable within. In 1589 the castle passed from the de Burgo family into the hands of the Governor of Connaught, Lord Bingham, who added a fortified enclave. In 1715 the Ashford Estate was established by the Oranmore and Browne family and a French-style chateau was added, increasing the architectural splendor of the castle. Further major renovations took place in 1852 and 1868 and the estate was extended to 26,000 acres with new roads and plantations. In 1939, the castle was bought by Noel Huggard who established it as a "First Class Hotel" attracting a clientele from around the globe including, in 1951, the all-star cast of the classic movie *The Quiet Man*. In 1970 Ashford Castle Hotel was bought by John A. Mulcahy who further restored and expanded the property. Later, in 1985, it was bought by a group of Irish American investors and in 2008 taken over by Galway entrepreneur and hotelier Gerry Barrett. In May 2013 the hotel was purchased by international boutique hotels group Red Carnation. Despite the numerous transfers of ownership over the centuries Ashford Castle Hotel has retained its historical past and beauty. Its name is synonymous with excellent customer service and Irish hospitality.

The success of high-end hotels is primarily dependent on their ability to differentiate themselves from others. However, this is not always easy due to high levels of competition among hotels and the restrictions imposed by physical factors such as location. Ashford Hotel stands out from other resort hotels because of its rich historical past and architectural luxury, its exceptional range of leisure facilities, excellent location and its long tradition of providing exceptional service experience. The hotel believes passionately in its traditional heritage of service excellence and continuously strives to exceed customer expectations.

Luxurious Architectural Heritage

You know it when you first arrive at the gates: two massive towers and a huge arch tell you that you are entering somewhere special. Security is effective but discrete: there is little fuss and no security

guards, buzzers or intercoms to spoil the tranquil atmosphere. You drive along a long winding entrance road to an old stone bridge over a river and under another entrance arch and then you arrive in the courtyard of the castle. At first sight Ashford Castle Hotel is hugely impressive: massive stone walls and parapets tower over you. At your back parkland and forest stretch into the distance. To the left side of the castle the fast-flowing waters of the River Cong empty into Lough Corrib which itself extends to the horizon. As you enter the wood panelled lobby of the hotel you are greeted by the duty manager who sits down with you in some easy chairs and lets you know what you can expect during your stay. Barriers between staff and guests are avoided: in Ashford Castle there is no long counter behind which hotel receptionists usually reside. Your walk to your room takes you past the huge lounge filled with old, elegant, comfortable chairs, couches and settees. The room is warmed by real open fires. Here you can take afternoon tea, or just read the newspaper. The place oozes relaxation. You know that you are in good company. Over the years world leaders, heads of state, royalty, film stars have all stayed here. But also newlyweds, couples celebrating anniversaries, tourists visiting Connemara, business people taking a well-deserved break. Just off the lounge lies the George V Restaurant famous for its fine dining. Of course, it is named after the British monarch, King George V, because he visited the castle during his stay in Ireland before the Great War. In the words of one of the hotel guests:

“Ashford Castle is breath taking! It is everything that you imagined. The castle is beautiful, the doorman was gracious, all the staff friendly, interior had beautiful woods, tapestry and furniture, drinks and food first class, and the facilities second to none. It was truly a magical experience!”

Remarkable Range of Leisure Activities

Ashford Hotel differentiates itself from other hotels by providing a truly exceptional and diverse service experience to its customers. Apart from enjoying the luxurious stay and the spa facilities in the hotel, customers can enjoy a broad range of outside activities. Ashford Castle offers activities on the estate for all the family from tennis to golf, falconry to horse-riding, fishing to clay pigeon shooting and chess to backgammon. They provide picnic baskets for guests taking longer walks in the grounds. The hotel boasts a beautiful nine-hole golf course designed by a renowned Irish golf architect and which provides the perfect environment for golfers of all ages to hone their skills. The hotel offers guided bike tours of the lavish surrounding greenery. Customers can enjoy guided boat trips in a traditionally designed Irish boat on Lough Corrib and its many beautiful islands. Guests can go lake cruising and explore the calmness and peace of the state owned island forest-park.

Ashford Castle Hotel owns the oldest established falconry school in Ireland and offers its customers falconry sessions with their beautiful Harris hawks and a variety of eagles, owls and falcons around the spectacular grounds of Ashford Castle. Bird watchers from around the world are attracted here and their enjoyment is reflected in testimonials:

“Ashford Castle is magical...It was amazing...simply amazing to watch these birds in action truly a unique and awesome 5-star experience.”

“It was an amazing way to see birds of prey in action and up close in lovely setting. You will never forget the first time you release the bird and he comes back to you!”

Ashford Castle Estate also boasts Ashford Equestrian Centre where customers can cherish horse rides over the beautiful wooded countryside between the shores of Lough Corrib and Lough Mask and into the mountains of Connemara to the west. Families or individuals can fish for brown trout and salmon on the banks of Lough Corrib or on the River Cong. Customers looking for more adventure can participate in clay pigeon shooting and archery or explore the pedal and paddle experience in water. Those looking for greater adrenaline-rush adventures can enjoy water-skiing and wakeboarding on Lough Corrib. With this broad range of entertainment activities Ashford Castle creates a truly magical service experience for its customers.

Exceptional Service Experience

So how does Ashford Castle create this unique customer experience? It could simply draw on its extensive history, but that would not be sufficient. Staying in the hotel is much more than simply a historical experience. For many guests it is a once in a lifetime event, never to be forgotten. Others return regularly to the hotel, knowing that their experience will be equally good the next time. Staff are friendly and relaxed but also calmly efficient. Customer service is discreet and not at all pushy. Only guests are allowed in the hotel so there is less a sense of being customers, more a sense of being guests. Many guests pay for half-board so breakfast and evening dinner are included in the price of the package. The price is not cheap but it does mean that only a small number of additional, optional, items enter your final bill: drinks, afternoon tea, spa treatments. This allows staff to concentrate on serving guests rather than on selling to customers. It is no surprise that the hotel's human resources mission emphasises exceptional service, dedicated attention to guests and personalized hospitality.

“From the moment we arrived we felt so calm and relaxed knowing we were in such professional hands. The attention to detail was amazing, the service was super – efficient yet kind and understanding.”

The Five Hallmarks for Service Success: Ashford's Secret Mantra

General Manager Niall Rochford constantly emphasizes the hotel's mission: “at any meeting the first thing I do is speak about our mission statement.” He reinforces this by emphasising the hotel's “five hallmarks” (see Table 1) with staff. These are practical, daily ways in which staff can create a great service experience for guests, for example by “smiling before a guest smiles at you” and by “escorting a guest rather than simply giving directions.” Other hallmarks are: that the staff member who receives a complaint “owns” that complaint and acts to resolve it, and staff are encouraged to think creatively and pre-empt customer needs and requests. These latter two hallmarks together encourage staff to think “outside the box” and “go beyond the call of duty” for their guests. This proactive approach means that guests are surprised in the nicest possible way when they find a service provided to them unexpectedly. The fifth service hallmark is directed internally: staff are encouraged to “treat all work colleagues with respect and courtesy.” The hallmarks follow from a long tradition of

hospitality in Ireland and reinforce the “quintessential Irish experience” of the hotel. Ashford Castle has found that these simple actions make a great deal of difference to guests and this exceptional service experience is reflected in customer testimonials:

“I would especially like to give a special recognition to X ... She was always one step ahead of us in anticipation of our every need”

“Y was very professional and always seemed to “go the extra mile” to make certain that we had a pleasant stay”

“I have never contacted a hotel or restaurant before to give positive feedback, but I feel compelled to tell you that last week at your hotel my husband and I had the best vacation of our lives! Your staff was incredible...This vacation melted away all the stress we struggled with in the past year”

Dedicated Employees

The hotel is well aware of the fact that their employees play a crucial role in delivering this magical customer service experience. Therefore having a dedicated, satisfied and well trained employee is a key priority for the hotel. Ashford Castle employs over 160 professionals to look after their valued customers and many of them have been associated with the hotel for over 40 years. At least fifteen members of staff have worked for the hotel for over 25 years. Experienced members of staff promote the deeply rooted culture of customer service excellence to new recruits. Staff exude a passion for “looking after our guests.” To achieve this passion Ashford Castle places a strong emphasis on training and growth of their members. They have designed a bespoke management training program to develop future leaders for the five star hospitality profession and to ensure the international reputation of the hotel. These training programs are tailored for candidates who prefer to learn through “hands on” practical experience rather than following an academic route. The hotel has also designed a comprehensive learning and development policy that is operated throughout all departments within the hotel. However, while Ashford Castle wants staff to be at the top of their profession it also wants the “personalities of staff to shine.” Members of staff talk about creating a “magical experience” for guests, making the hotel a “home from home” so that guests can “get away from everything” for a few days.

On top of the training facilities and basic perquisites of accommodation, meals, uniform, laundry etc., the hotel also provides a number of additional benefits to staff and their family members such as discounts for all activities on the Ashford Estate and discounted rates in other hotels within the group. Thus, a comprehensive focused training program, policies and benefits for staff helps Ashford Castle to continue to deliver exceptional customer service.

Final Remarks

Ashford Castle Hotel has won numerous accolades and awards over the years for its excellent customer service experience. Recently it was voted as No. 1 Irish Hotel by Condé Nast Gold List

2013. In the past it has been voted as Best Golf Resort in Connaught (2012), No. 1 Best Resort Hotel in Europe (2010), No. 1 Resort Hotel in Ireland (2008, 2009), No. 1 European Castle Hotel (2007), and World's Most Romantic Luxury Hotel (2007).

However, becoming and remaining a member of the group of best hotels in the world is not an easy task. The hotel is subject to unannounced visits from inspectors who can check on any number of operational points from a long list of 2,500 items; the hotel must be ever-ready to meet the stringent standards of these inspectors. The strong emphasis placed on staff training and development is a key factor in maintaining these standards.

Ashford Castle Hotel faces a number of challenges to stay ahead of its competitors while simultaneously maintaining its long heritage of exceptional customer experience. With a changing economic climate and weakening euro, customers are on the one hand becoming more cost conscious while on the other hand expectations are rising. This poses a number of questions for new owners Red Carnation: Will increasing costs and a declining market prompt them to compromise on customer service experience? How will Ashford maintain its long heritage? What new innovations in service delivery will be the formula for future success? Do staff need more and different training? What role will social media play in Ashford Castle's future success?

While these questions will need answers for the hotel's future sustainability, currently Ashford maintains a careful blend of traditional prices in certain markets while appropriately tailoring rates for other markets. Ashford strongly emphasises continuous improvement practices and welcomes innovative ideas to stay ahead of its competitors. Their strategic approach to pricing along with a long tradition of consummate customer service is the formula on which the hotel depends for its success.

Table 1: Five Hallmarks of Customer Service: Ashford Castle Hotel

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- 1 *Every time we see a Guest, we SMILE and GREET the Guest before the Guest greets us.*
 - 2 *The words "No" and "Can't" don't exist in our vocabulary. We think creatively to find solutions.*
 - 3 *Escort Guest to another area of the hotel, rather than pointing out directions.*
 - 4 *Any staff member who receives a complaint "owns" that complaint and is obliged to try to resolve that problem.*
 - 5 *Treat all work colleagues with respect and courtesy as you would like to be treated.*
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