



## Disney Institute Helps the University of Tennessee Athletic Department Improve Leadership, Customer Service Skills

### SUMMARY

The University of Tennessee's athletic department has a well-earned reputation as one of the nation's most successful collegiate programs. Recognizing that even the best program can always improve, management turned to *Disney Institute* to learn how Disney's brand loyalty, creativity and outstanding customer service practices could boost their customer satisfaction results. After implementing many of the lessons learned at a one-day program, the department is well on its way to making a great operation even greater.

### "WAYS TO EXCEL"

"Our goal is to consistently improve," says Joan Cronan, the nationally known, award-winning women's athletic director at the University of Tennessee. "We are consistently striving for ways to excel."

That constant desire to improve has helped Cronan and men's athletic director Mike Hamilton build the University of Tennessee's program into one of the country's most successful and respected. So it's no surprise that Cronan and Hamilton were among the first intercollegiate athletic department heads in the nation to turn to *Disney Institute* for advice on "how to go from being great to even greater."

Hamilton and Cronan, along with about 30 of their management staff recently took part in day-long, custom-tailored *Disney Institute* programming at their Knoxville base. Why would a college athletics department go to Disney for advice?

"We wanted to learn first-hand how Disney could help us sharpen our leadership skills and improve our customer service," explains Cronan. "Think what Disney means: Large crowds, great customer service and lots of fun," says Cronan. "And what do we want to do in athletics? We have the same goals as Disney. We both want our Guests to have fun and go away wanting to come back. Even our demographics are similar to Disney's."

### EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS

*Disney Institute* consultant Dennis Frare led the group through an intense, engaging and entertaining presentation, Disney's Approach to Leading and Sustaining a Service Culture.

"We're here to look at ways Disney continually exceeds our Guests' expectations instead of just meeting them," Frare says. "I am also going to show you how to use the tools Disney uses to do that."

Frare explained that while an athletic department cannot control what happens on the field, managers and operational workers can certainly enhance the fan experience. He offered a few examples of how the sports industry needs to exceed fans' expectations "from driveway to driveway."

"Details count," said Frare. "You have to ensure your fans know how to find you; you need an address and a map on your website. The person who answers your phone has to have

a smile in their voice. Fans have to be able to navigate your parking lot."

"That really resonated with us," says Cronan. "We often speak of the athletic department as the university's front porch. It's not the most important part of the home but it's the most visible. It's our job as athletic directors to keep that porch clean and strong and appealing. So customer service is very important to us."

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## CASE STUDY: UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE ATHLETICS

### NEVER-ENDING PROCESS

Improving customer service is a never-ending process, said Frare. He explained how Disney works hard to exceed Guests' expectations with the goal of earning an intent to return and intent to recommend. From replacing a child's dropped ice cream cone to volunteering to snap a family's picture, Disney Cast Members are taught to go above and beyond.

And, added Frare, they know management has empowered them to do so.

He introduced Disney's Service Recovery Tool, the H-E-A-R-T model, which closely relates to UT Athletics' desire to enhance the fan experience. "What do you do if something goes wrong and you have an unsatisfied fan?" Frare asked his audience. "First you **H**ear, or listen. Then you **E**mpathize, saying you are sorry. Then you **A**pologize and **R**esolve, or make it right. Lastly, you **T**hank the fan for bringing this to your attention; explaining it is the only way you can fix it."

"Most of us have been to Walt Disney World or Disneyland and we could easily visualize how Disney used the tools Dennis was telling us about," remembers Cronan. "That made it real. And we got it! We also began thinking of what we could do within our program to simulate that."

Frare also stressed how important it is for management to communicate its vision.

"I'm not talking about the vision statement you use to guide your decision making," he says. "More importantly, a leader has to communicate to his or her staffers what the department vision is. You need to talk about it constantly; relentlessly. Or it won't resonate with your people."

### PERFECTING THE PERSONAL TOUCH

"*Disney Institute* really helped us kick start our efforts to improve customer service," said Cronan. "Like other athletic programs, we know we are always competing with movies, television, even Little League baseball, for our fans' time. So it's important to make our fans feel like they are important. We need to perfect that personal touch that Disney does so well. If we just sell people a ticket and that's all we do, we're not doing our job."

Hamilton, Cronan and their managers are just beginning to implement many of the suggestions their staff generated from the *Disney Institute* presentation. But they can already point to changes. Invariably someone at a management meeting will be discussing a solution to a problem and a staffer will ask, "Is that the Disney Way?"

Recently, Hamilton and Cronan noticed a staff member picking up some trash off the floor after a meeting. "That was something straight out of Dennis Frare's presentation," says Cronan. "He used it as an example of an employee 'walking that extra mile' and he reminded us that it was important to recognize those efforts."

At the next departmental meeting Hamilton complimented the staffer on "going above and beyond." Says Cronan, "It was the Disney Way and now it's our way too."