

Judith McCaskill
Sandy Lake Hotel

Categories:

1st Choice: Building Business

2nd Choice: Contribution To The Community

March 1, 2013

Introduction

In almost 12 years Judith McCaskill has more than tripled the Sandy Lake Hotel's gross sales. She has expanded its service offer so this country hotel is now a gathering place for a variety of communities and people from many walks of life. Her hotel has become a destination for great food, a beverage, accommodation or to be entertained. While growing her own business, Judith has worked with others to make her small community a better place to have a business or just live in. Some of the highlights include: raising nearly \$225,000 for local organizations and charities in the last 10 years; leading the establishment of the Sandy Lake Merchants Association Inc.; and bringing health and fitness programs to the community. These are especially great feats in rural Manitoba where keeping businesses and communities sustainable is a continuing challenge.

Mission and Vision

Judith's mission is to be the "Cheers" of rural Manitoba. She strives to create a lifetime of memories for her valued customers through outstanding hospitality, food, beverages, accommodation, services and activities offered at her small town country hotel.

Her work is done in a holistic manner realizing success is not achieved by one but rather a collective effort within her own business and staff as well, with other businesses and community members.

Judith's vision is all Sandy Lake Hotel's patrons feel like honoured guests who not only return but tell others as it is the place to have a memorable experience in small town country hotel.

Business Overview

Judith worked in the investment industry for twenty years before being part of a major life transformation. In August 2001 Judith and her husband purchased the Sandy Lake Hotel. The business was partially financed through the sale of their Brandon home.

Many locals cautioned Judith and her husband they would never survive the first winter. For the first six months, she commuted each weekday to her full time position with RBC Dominion Securities in Brandon. When in Sandy Lake she worked in their new business and took care of her family.

In the first winter they began to take the first steps of evolving the hotel from a country beer parlour to a clean, friendly place where everyone is welcome. They began to make some strategic hotel renovations targeting a May grand opening. They targeted the spring so when the seasonal residents returned there was something new in town and it would be evident to them

and the full time residents there are new owners and they all could be part of the fun and activities of the grand opening.

However, in their first winter they also seized the opportunity to use the new Sunday opening liquor law. While many rural hotels ignored and chose not to open on Sundays the Sandy Lake Hotel became a seven-day operation that helped better serve weekend recreationists (e.g., snowmobilers) and even the Sunday breakfast crowd.

Five years into owning the Sandy Lake Hotel, Judith and her husband divorced. She chose to meet this personal and professional challenge, and continue as the sole owner. This took admirable courage, especially being a woman in a pre-dominantly male trade. It also provided her with the opportunity to move her vision forward and shift from being the person behind the scenes to the sole face of the business.

She bought out her husband through a pre-approved loan and faced the responsibilities of being a single mom and solitary hotel proprietor. "I now know what pressure is!" says Judith when speaking about those days, "Raising two teenagers and running the hotel with its restaurant and bar! Long days and even longer nights were filled with learning to cook, delegate responsibilities, and mentor dependable staff while ensure our family stayed intact".

Under Judith's sole care the hotel has grown in many ways with new services and an ever-expanding client base.

She has tried a number of marketing and promotional initiatives over the years. This has included flyers, posters, radio and television advertisement, and website. She is refining her tactics to ensure she gets the best return on investment.

Her employee base has grown from five staff to two full time, eight part-time, two on-call plus many family and friends who offer their services especially during busy event days. To her credit she also has had many of her customers from a variety of professions offer their services to her.

In the last 11 years Judith has invested nearly \$215,000.00 in renovations and equipment to improve her business operations. Her gross sales in this period have more than tripled. In three years time her business will be completely debt free. Judith is very excited when that day comes, who knows what the new possibilities will be.

Products and Services

Sandy Lake was once an agricultural service centre, due to changes in the economy it now primarily relies on recreation and tourism. The Village has 350 permanent residents and grows to nearly 2000 residents in the summer. The Village is surrounded by lakes, cottages, and

campgrounds, is adjacent to the Trans Canada Trail, and is part of the Parkland Tourism Region, which includes Riding Mountain National Park.

The Sandy Lake Hotel not only draws in local villagers but also surrounding community members and tourists.

The hotel provides food, beverages, entertainment and accommodation in a carefree, clean, safe and friendly environment to a range of customers. Through the year the hotel offers a series of special events including a weekly “Meat Draw” which has become a major community fundraiser.

She sees her hotel as a place of experiences; whether you arrive on a cold quiet February day or a busy special event day in the summer you are in a country hotel that is warm, welcoming and memorable.

Considerable amount of care has been taken to bring a warm and cozy country charm to the entire hotel whether it is the hand crafted log furnishings, the quality wildlife prints or the cozy dining room.

Many people come to the hotel to get away from their day-to-day pressures. Most come into connect with others. They want a warm, welcoming and relaxing country atmosphere, yet they want many of living and service standards Canadian urban society expects – whether its quality food, vast selection of beverages, clean and safe environment, professional yet casual service, entertainment, multiple payment methods to even good cell phone and internet service. This atmosphere and combination of services is what makes the hotel unique, as many rural hotels have not successfully found a way to provide that combination of elements for its customers.

The hotel has a blend of customers, some of the primary groups include:

Rest, Relax and Recharge Crowd – many are seasonal and weekend cottagers and campers. They just want to get away, relax and connect with others.

New Retirees – baby boomers moving to the area permanently, looking for a place for food, entertainment and connect with others.

Youth – Spreading their Wings – they want new adventures with their friends that create stories and memories. Though many will not admit it, they want to feel safe as they test their boundaries.

Living the Life Crowd (motorcyclists, snowmobilers or motorists) – the hotel is their destination or a stop along the way of a larger adventure. They want a unique place to get refreshed or to build upon their adventure.

Outdoor Sportspeople – they come to the area, as it is a known hunting and fishing destination not only for locals but Canadians and Americans. They want a place not only to eat and drink but share stories and connect with locals.

Memory Seekers – they come for an event offered by the hotel (e.g., band, fundraiser or hypnotist) or an activity arranged by others (e.g., reunions and stagetes). They want to have fun and to build memories. For some they want to give back to their charity of choice.

Local Community Members – many are part of the groups above. They want a place to go to with their family or friends to eat, drink, or to find entertainment.

Place to Meet – groups that want a place to gather and have a meeting, they want to have supporting services whether it is internet access, meals or even privacy from others.

Primary products include: food; beverages; entertainment; and accommodation. Secondary services include; WiFi and cell phone service; shuttle services; catering; food delivery service; visitor information; and ATM services. The Hotel also offers its own events as well supports larger community events throughout the year.

Strong relationships with her customers are a core foundation of her business. With a sense of humour and light-hearted banter, Judith can converse with *ALL* her clientele in an inviting and cheerful manner that is enjoyed by everyone who visits the hotel. She is commonly introducing customers to each other.

Special Events – Bringing Customers In and Giving Back to the Community

Special events have also become part of the product offer but also how the hotel gives to the community. Judith constantly is trying to contribute to improving her community as well. Her contribution to events is those that are solely at the hotel, those that enhance other larger community events and those completely external to her business.

Throughout the year she has a variety of entertainers in the beverage room ranging from bands, karaoke to even a hypnotist.

Many of the events have been fundraisers for charities and organizations.

- In the spring of 2003, Judith introduced what has turned out to be undeniably her most significant charitable contribution to the Sandy Lake community “Meat Draws”! Although not an exclusively original concept, it’s embraced by the over 25 organizations who take turns receiving the profits from an evening’s camaraderie. To date, just over \$223,000.00 has been donated back to these organizations! Judith says: “It feels so good to give back to a community who supports us so well!”
- When contacted by the Westman Dreams for Kids Foundation in 2005, Judith turned an annual summer weekend event into a massive money making drive! Proceeds from

raffles, auctions, draws and a portion of her drink sales all go to the charity. In true Judith fashion, “fun and function” came together for a benevolent reason.

- At three separate times, Judith joined forces to help set up trust accounts for community residents with serious, life-challenges and held fundraising nights to bolster these accounts.
- Judith promotes other community events at her business, and is known to have closed her own restaurant and posted posters encouraging her customers to attend a local fundraising breakfast.

Judith also contributes to community events in the area. Some of her contributions include:

- Judith is an enthusiastic participant to Sandy Lake “Western Days” by participating in the local parade, providing outdoor barbeques and erecting extra tents in her Hotel’s backyard and supplying bands for the two entertainment nights.
- She was instrumental in helping the Sandy Lake Curling Club obtain liquor licensing for their annual weekend bonspiel and has volunteered to assist. When required she has catered this event, sponsored teams and provided prizes for the bonspiel.
- She has donated money to many community events even beyond the Village. This has ranged from money for the Keeseekowenin First Nation baseball and fishing derbies to the Erickson Elementary playground fund. She annually gives each graduate from Erickson Collegiate and Strathclair Community School a hand written card with a gift certificate from the hotel,

Beyond Events – Giving Back to the Community

Beyond growing the business, her vision reaches out to working with others to improve the quality of life for permanent and seasonal residents by offering a range of services and activities in the community.

Without a seniors’ congregate meal program, her restaurant supplies their own “meals on wheels” plan for elderly shut-ins dinners from her restaurant. This selfless effort is no small act for those who utilize and appreciate this service.

Judith is proud to give back in many other, and often more personal, ways. She is the leader of the TOPS (Take Off Pounds Sensibly) group. She has brought exercise programs for the entire community including a “Chair Yoga” program this past year. Judith is also keen in finding a location for a small local community gym.

In February of 2012, Judith was formidable in forming the Sandy Lake Merchants' Association. The association focuses on common business goals including promoting the Village. This past year the group has sent out promotional materials to many surrounding communities. They also developed a promotional video. She is striving to get the all of businesses to better communicate amongst themselves, so they can better co-promote each other. In its first year the group jointly hosted with Ducks Unlimited a golf tournament, dinner and auction; due to its success it will be an annual event. The group will also be hosting its inaugural Fishing Derby in March.

Marketing Objectives and Growth Strategies

The primary markets are found within a hour drive of Sandy Lake. However, some of the cottagers and campers permanently reside farther away e.g., Regina to Winnipeg.

Judith's hotel is within an area that has many lakes, cottages and campgrounds in the Parkland Tourism Region. It is adjacent to the Trans Canada Trail and Riding Mountain National Park. It is also in an area that attracts sports fisherman, hunters, and snowmobilers in the shoulder seasons. Thus her marketing reach is considerable considering it is in one of the main tourism destination areas in the province.

The hotel's advantage it is in a hub of visitor attractions and activities and so the hotel can build upon offering products and services that enhance the experiences people are drawn to the area.

The hotel's niche is catering to visitors who want the experience of a country hotel, to connect with others, and build memories while consuming the hotel's products. While they want that casual country feel they also want quality and a level of service Canadians are accustomed to in larger urban centres.

Being within a tourism area much of the marketing trends she has embraced is relationship marketing and experiential tourism. She is constantly working to best connect with her customers, create memorable experiences and provide excellent customer service to meet her customer needs so they return once again. While providing some urban comforts she has taken efforts to ensure the hotel does not lose its casual, warm and welcoming country hotel experience.

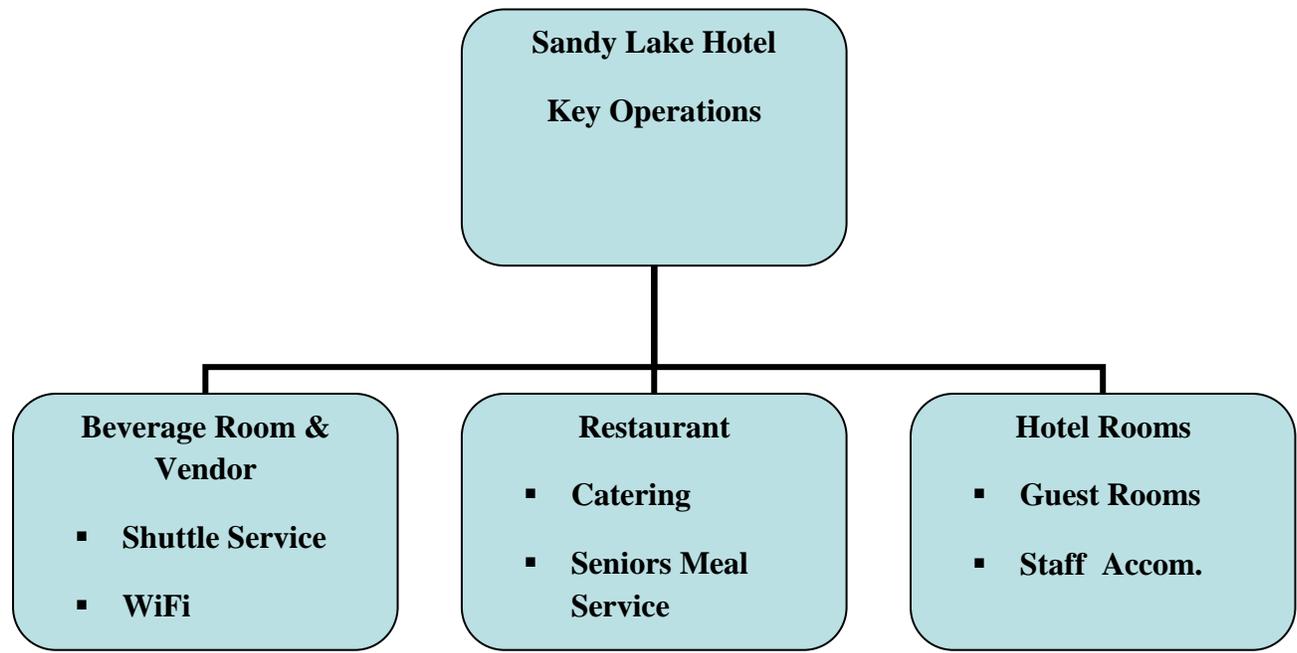
Judith is working on developing the social media for her business. Work is being done to refine her website so it better reflects her brand as well, how it can be the "go to place" before coming to Sandy Lake. She is also investigating other online tools e.g., facebook to connect with her, when they are away from the area and they wish to be part of a club.

Judith is seeking ways to build upon her shoulder seasons and winter visitation to maximize use and stabilize revenues so it is not as stressful to operate through the winter.

In three years time the business will be entirely debt free and Judith will have permanent bar and restaurant managers to oversee the day-to-day responsibilities. This will free up Judith's time to

explore her forte and passion – further growing her own business as well, further enriching her community.

Management Structure



Judith is the sole owner of the hotel. However, she works with a team

Key to the entire operations is striving for excellent customer service where people feel relaxed in a country setting and everyone feels valued and appreciated and special. To accomplish this, the entire operation must run smoothly so everyone can focus on the customer.

It is the “nature of the beast” in the hospitality industry staffing can be constantly changing. Judith is seeking ways to better retain employees, for example mentoring core staff to take greater leadership roles and moving them into career positions. She also encourages her staff to continue their personal training for their own development.

She has worked on developing a new employee procedures manual for her employees to ensure the hotel’s brand plus her expectations and responsibilities are clear and transparent. She is working on developing an online version so it is easier for employees to access it, as well update it in a timely manner.

Judith carries out considerable amount of hands on coaching and training with her team. She strives to lead by example and believes it is important to demonstrate excellence in customer service, problem solving and being proactive. Judith emphasizes the importance to treat people the way you want to be treated. To make the effort to ensure everyone feels welcomed and valued. When issues arise, stay calm and try to resolve the matter in a professional manner.

She has developed systems in place to ensure that core preparation work is done throughout the week and especially in quiet periods so when the busy periods arise all staff can focus on the customer.

Good service to Judith also means being proactive in providing products the customers want. The foresight to introduce new programs and services (e.g., WiFi) has strengthened Judith's business. Her knack to read the wants and needs of her customers has productively married well with the promotional ideas she instigated. "Following your customers' lead" has been a motto Judith keeps.

To her, good customer service is being dependable and your customers can trust you, for example you are open and ready for business the hours you are posted seven days a week.

Judith is making a conscious effort to constantly upgrade her professional training in tourism, marketing and management so she is up to date on major trends and build the skill to more effectively lead the business.

Over the past decade, Judith demonstrated impressive initiative to meet her mission and vision. Equally impressive is her ability to be flexible, remain optimistic and see opportunities in what can be trying times in a turbulent industry.

- When many hoteliers announced new tighter drunk driving or smoking legislation would impede them, Judith increased her level of service to her patrons. They offered a free shuttle service to ensure their bar patrons got home safely. They built an outdoor deck for smokers and later expanded it to a stage area for summer use and large events.
- With increase customer reliance on ATM services Judith purchased her own cash machine to continue to offer the service to her clients and maximize her profits. It was the only cash machine in the community for nearly 10 years.
- When she could not have her spring promotional flyer mailed to the cottage owners, she had arranged to have them hand delivered throughout the entire community and other surrounding lake areas. Ron Ball, owner Precision Toyota and seasonal cottager commented she was the only hotelier that asked for their business. Rather than keeping this excellent promotion tool to herself, Judith recruited other local businesses to work with her in developing a singular promotional flyer. They later added coupons for better tracking and retention of material.

- When bookkeeping systems were taking too much time from her day-to-day operations including time with her customers, she worked with her accountant to develop more efficient book keeping systems. She also developed better financial analysis systems including completely automating her liquor and restaurant sales and inventory controls.
- In 2009 she installed a \$3,000.00 cell booster on the building's roof so customers could use their cell phones and computer Wi-Fi in the Village. This was a tremendously welcome addition for tourists and locals alike, and increased traffic on a daily basis.
- With aging infrastructure and changing client needs, Judith has fully renovated the Hotel over the past ten years: restaurant, bar, hotel rooms, staff residence, foyer, kitchen, washrooms and storage areas. She proactively brought the entire building to code (e.g., fire and building) before she was required to.

Conclusion

Judith believes she is truly blessed with the unconditional support of her partner Bob, her children, parents, family and dear friends.

Judith shows no sign of letting up on her imaginative and vivacious life as a successful hotelier and principal community partner.” I am so happy that even after 11 years I still have a passion for my hotel, of providing excellent customer service, and making my community a better place.”

Current Community and Business Associations

Sandy Lake Merchants Association Inc. (December 2011)

Founders and Current Secretary

TOPS (Take Off Pounds Sensibly) (September 2004)

Current Leader