

Giving history a future

Mercat Tours Ltd has evolved from a small hobby to a major business, offering tours of Edinburgh and Glasgow that play to the vogue for 'ghosts and ghouls', but are based on solid historical research. Win Brogan explains how good interpretation, professional training, and sound management are at the heart of their success.

History is a damn good story. What it needs is damn good telling.

Mercat Tours Ltd was born in the summer of 1985, the child of four young history teachers keen to find outlets beyond the classroom for their beloved subject. They were also persuaded of the need for some high-quality history tours from overhearing inaccurate accounts delivered from Edinburgh's open-topped buses.

The company began as a hobby, with a season of two tours, run three times a day, lasting the six weeks of the school summer holidays. All tours were researched, devised and delivered by the four founders.

Twenty years later, one founder remains, and Mercat Tours Ltd is his full-time occupation. The business has evolved to a limited company, with five different tours offered all year round, twelve times a day. The company employs 10 permanent staff and a further 65 self-employed guides, and since 2000 there has been a Mercat Glasgow franchise.

We believe our commercial success is built on four major factors:

- the quality of our products
- the vision and leadership of the company's management
- being active in addressing our learning needs; and above all
- the calibre of our staff.

The importance of our staff, and of how they present the tours, is reflected in the training they get. Every guide experiences a three month induction followed by a further three months' probation. Thereafter we have a team of 'mystery shoppers' who provide regular assessments on guides' performance.

Before the formal training begins the trainee is expected to go on each of our tours, to experience them as a customer. The training programme itself is a heady mix of whole-group workshops, master classes, 'shadowing' other guides, and on-the-job training. A supportive framework is essential for guides to be free to learn and develop. The trainees give one another peer support, and each trainee is attached to a specific trainer who acts as their mentor throughout.

We are very clear that we do not expect all guides to be the same. Rather we respect their individuality, and enable guides to explore the skills involved – use of voice, gesture, facial expression, movement, construction of an account – and then to deploy these in their own unique way to communicate the personality of a story.

At Mercat Tours we are clear that we give our guides transferable skills for life. The guide learns to convey information in a telling manner, within a restricted time frame, to a varied audience and to handle difficult situations.

Does it work? Is it worth it? Well, we have neither a recruitment nor retention problem. Guides are immensely loyal and proud of the company. And Mercat Tours has won many accolades, including a Scottish Thistle Award for Culture.

We have also been asked to provide training for other organisations, sometimes for guides whose volunteer status can present difficulties. Here there can be an inference that non-paid is synonymous with non-professional. Perhaps the organisation may feel less willing to insist on training and quality assurance when guides are giving of their own time. Or the guide may feel they are beyond accountability because they are not being paid. Nothing is further from the truth.

Our focus, from start to finish, is on the customer experience. Whether the customer is paying or not, or the guide is paid or not, is irrelevant. Any organisation relying on guides has to come clean on its expectations of its guides and then has to equip them for their tasks. There must be no apologies for doing so – the customer deserves nothing less, and besides, volunteers want to be associated with quality. Paid or unpaid, good guiding is professional.

Win Brogan is Head of Development with Mercat Tours Ltd.
Win@MercatTours.com

Business, you know, may bring money, but friendship hardly ever does.
Jane Austen