

Facilitators include (l to r) Elaine Eldridge (BNARO), Peggy Mathis (DAYRO), Diana Goolsby (reservations telephone sales representative), Phyllis Hutchins (manager—reservations sales), Cathy Schrader (UCARO), Susan Nash (INTRO), and Alice Webber (MCO). DCARO-facilitators Debbie Trole and Patricia Scott and INTRO facilitator Sylvia Curry were not available when the photo was taken.



Res goal: selling with care



Yes, the CAREsystem screens are still there, as are the headsets and pleasing voices that have made Piedmont's reservations agents the most courteous and helpful in the business.

But there's a new twist to these 2,500 women and men who, this year alone, will answer more than 33 million calls. That twist is a new emphasis on a very old idea: first and foremost, the job of our reservations agents is to sell.

"Sales is what we're all about," Phyllis Hutchins, manager of the recently created Reservations Telephone Sales Department, said. "But it's sales that must be handled in special ways, because the only personal contact we have with our customers is over the phone. So our task is to quickly respond to their needs in ways that will sell tickets the first time they call."

That's quite a challenge when statistics show that about 50 percent of all callers are "shoppers"—people looking primarily for the best fare that different airlines have to the same destination. But it's a challenge being met by Hutchins, Diana Goolsby (reservations telephone sales representative), and all reservations employees.

What they are developing is a sales program for reservations agents that will be taught at each of our six reservations centers. The program will emphasize creative sales techniques while recognizing that different techniques must be used for different callers. According to Don Shanks, vice president-customer relations, "It's the most important thing Reservations has done in 10 years."

control group

For agents, the sales program started in April with a "Control Group" at each center. The Group consists of 10 percent of a center's work force, with its members rotating every six months. Each Group is headed by a "facilitator" who coordinates members' activities and participation, and teaches sales development classes.

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Cathy Schrader (UCARO), and Debbie Trole and Patricia Scott (both DCARO).

Each Control Group tests a particular sales approach for about a week, then evaluates its performance. Approaches range from relatively large issues, such as the impact "tentative" reservations have on our load factor, to smaller issues such as how to ask for a customer's telephone number.

Perhaps in no other department is the adage "time equals money" as true as it is in Reservations. Sales approaches that might appear quite minor, like specifically asking for a passenger's area code and home telephone number instead of simply asking for the number and then clarifying whether it's home or business, can save seconds of conversation.

cost savings

"Multiplied 100,000 times a day, those few seconds represent considerable cost savings," Hutchins said.

Though saving time is a strong concern, even stronger is the drive to increase each agent's ability to give superior service with a superior attitude. This incorporates all facets of an agent's current sales skills with the enhancement of those skills and the acquisition of new skills through training. Helping accomplish this is a "Reservation Sales Skills Inventory" created by the reservationists and the Reservations Telephone Sales Department.

This inventory includes about 20 skills, such as softening voice tones when speaking, controlling conversations, improved listening, broader knowledge of Piedmont's services and departments, how to close a sale, responding spontaneously to difficult passengers, and assumptive selling (selling that takes the initiative to "assume" the customer is buying a ticket). Included in this is the recognition that different kinds of passengers require different treatment—the businessperson from Chicago generally wants fast, efficient service with little conversation from a reservations agent, while the grandmother from Kinston might want constant agreement that her trip to see her new

grandchild is an exciting event.

"We're looking at how to reduce talk time and at the same time effectively sell while giving the ultimate in customer service," Hutchins said. "What we want to reduce are 'time robbers'—those conversational practices that keep us from actually selling tickets to a customer."

rewards

The rewards come primarily in two forms: an ability to handle more calls, and the opportunity to generate more profits through increased load factors.

Another important objective of this sales effort is to let the reservationists see the results of their work, including their contributions to our bottom line. That's a major reason the department has conducted a "Ticket-By-Mail (TBM) Awareness Campaign" this year.

In 1985, reservationists had a record year in TBM sales. Reservations Telephone Sales developed an eight-minute audio tape giving them the results of their work in dollars and cents, and discussing the TBM program. Copies of the tape were sent to all reservations centers, where agents and supervisors listened on tape recorders at their convenience.

According to Diana Goolsby, "The response was overwhelming." She said the department received cards, letters and phone calls from reservationists saying how important the tape was to their morale and sales efforts. And it's probably no coincidence that so far this year, Piedmont's TBM sales have significantly increased over last year.

Now Hutchins and Goolsby are planning to develop other tapes for specific sales skills, creating what will be a Reservations Sales Skill Library for each center to help utilize supervisor and instructor time to the fullest. They're also planning to develop an educational library of video and/or slide show presentations about other Piedmont departments that have functional relationships to Reservations. And as if that's not enough, this fall they're starting a newsletter called *The Network* that will help keep reservations agents current on

sales and computer skills, give recent information about the company and in each issue highlight a destination we serve.

The staff of Reservations Telephone Sales say they can accomplish nothing without the interest and support of everyone who works in Reservations. From the agents answering the phones, to the sales facilitators, supervisors and other management, it's a team effort that's reaping excellent rewards for Piedmont.

Pat Barnett, a reservations agent at DCARO, is a member of the control group there and has seen the recent emphasis on sales develop at the center since the spring. Recently, on a day off, Barnett and eight other people from the center went to Charlotte and Atlanta on a volunteer basis. They observed our operations and, in Atlanta, that of another carrier. She said that the sales emphasis has stressed such exposure to improve knowledge about the company, and the integration of this knowledge into her job is a key factor.

first step

"You realize that doing your job right is the first step in getting passengers to the airport," Barnett said. "It's one thing to do a job because you're told to—it's quite another to do a job because you understand your importance in the company."

Perhaps nothing encapsulates the mood of Reservations better than the department's new logo that will grace its newsletter's front page. The design—a face with a headset pictured within a map of the United States—was conceived by all the facilitators and drawn by Steve Hooks, DCARO.

"It's the voices of our reservations people talking to all our customers across this land of ours," Hutchins said. "And I think our people, regardless of how difficult the situation is, reflect the kindness, caring and empathy Piedmont is known for."

For a coast-to-coast airline whose pride is its people, there couldn't be a better symbol.