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Interview with Bill Caruso

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INTERVIEW WITH BILL CARUSO

BY

MARGARET BOBB

ABSTRACT

Bill Caruso is personnel director of Sesame Street Place and is an individual who has a special perspective on the development of the field, especially its career opportunities. His basic philosophy is that there are many opportunities and that future professionals have to be more sensitive to the area of change if they are going to stay viable in the profession.

PROFESSIONAL STAFFING

QUESTION 1: What is the basic nature of the work force in terms of seasonal employment in the theme park industry?

ANSWER: Most theme parks employ local high school and college students for the summer. Some of the areas or parks offer housing and other amenities but a park like Sesame Street Place does not offer these amenities and, therefore, recruitment is an additional problem. Over 95% of the individuals who we employ in the summer do not have a background in the field. This presents a little problem with training but it also provides the advantage of diversity. Some of the theme parks try to focus on homogeneity and we have found the diversity that exists in our group of individuals helps relate to the variety of groups that we serve. Seasonal employment is one of the best ways to gain experience to obtain or lead toward career employment.

QUESTION 2: What is the nature of career employment in the theme park and attraction industry?

ANSWER: Over 50% of management do not have a college degree. In fact, they first started out as operators and worked their way up through the organization toward their current position. One of the important dimensions, as current management sees it, is practical experience. This practical experience is an essential ingredient in understanding the operation and indeed making inroads and contacts to the obtaining of employment. This does not say that there is not employment in the field without practical experience first because in those specialty areas such as hospitality, retailing, and food and beverage service where specialists are required, a college degree and little experience can

obtain you employment.

QUESTION 3: What competencies or skills do you look for in the employment of career people?

ANSWER: The types of individuals that we look for must possess two skills: one is an ability to communicate with different types of people and the other is an ability to put out much effort and show creativity. The employee, especially at the primary level, is constantly in contact with a diversity of people. They have to be able to handle complaints, long lines, and be able to handle these situations tactfully so as to not alienate the consumer and indeed take a situation that is negative in many cases and turn it around to one that is positive so that the client will want to return to the park. The individual must also have an ability to improvise, because in many cases, there are situations that are created that the individual must show initiative and leadership and react to on the spot. For example, if there are long lines, entertainment and such activities is essential to keeping the participant occupied and happy while they are waiting on the rides. Another important element is the long hours. In some cases weather is a factor that influences the business and we do not get a large volume of individuals on one day. Long hours will have to be worked another day in order to get the volume of business to maintain a profit season-wide. Another important but secondary skill is the ability to budget money and cost considerations, especially in the operations of the business. The most important element that an individual must remember is that he/she must put forth maximum effort and be willing to get down and get involved in primary operations.

QUESTION 4: What is the future of the industry and some of the major trends as you see them?

ANSWER: At one point in time, the theme park industry was in an exponential rate of growth and most were showing profits. But the primary question in today's market is one of efficiency and effectiveness. There is no longer the investment potential in the thrill rides anymore because the costs are too high and they are not attracting the volume of business. The tastes of the public seems to be changing toward a more participant type of activity. The current trend toward soft play areas is an example of such a phenomenon. The cost of these participant type attractions are considerably less and seem to have the attraction power. Sesame Street Place is built upon this concept of participant interaction. This trend is going to allow greater diversity and specialty in the area of theme parks and attractions. The primary theme for the future is away from operation and toward more types of creative programming in the using of resources in some type of participant style attraction. The interaction with guests is essential and those who have an ability to creatively use and program will be successful in the future.