

# Kentucky State Parks

CHANGED EMPLOYEE BEHAVIORS AND GAINED  
MORE VISITORS



## IN BRIEF

### BACKGROUND

The Kentucky State Park System faced cuts from state funding and sought ways to reduce expenses and increase revenues. The 17 parks that offered overnight lodging averaged a 53 percent occupancy rate. This was a logical place to increase revenues.

### CHALLENGES

The state legislative committee considered training a substantial expense with no guaranteed return on investment. Most park employees had no formal training and, with 17 park locations, consistency and accountability to the same performance standards were often difficult.

### SOLUTIONS

Signature successfully helped the park commissioner demonstrate the potential value of sales and service training and quantify the opportunity to increase room revenues. Signature implemented its Transient Edge® program designed to improve the sales and service skills of front desk employees. The program used a proven system of reinforcement and reporting to show improvement in skills and return on investment.

### RESULTS

Participating parks saw an average of a 16 percent increase in conversion rates within two months after the training event. Employee skills improved substantially at all parks, showing a 26.4 percent jump in “mystery shopping” scores. Park managers saw an increase in staff professionalism and motivation. The parks commissioner was pleased with the new level of accountability and consistency in service across his park locations.

### Background

The Kentucky State Park System receives a large portion (\$29 million) of its operating dollars from a general state fund. The remainder of those dollars comes from the parks’ revenues of \$53 million. In a down economy, Kentucky and other states reduce budgets, leaving park systems seeking ways to cut costs and increase revenues.

When George Ward, a new park commissioner with extensive experience in the hospitality industry, joined the Kentucky State Parks in February 2004, the 17 parks in the system with overnight lodging averaged a 53 percent occupancy rate. Drawing from his hospitality experience, Ward knew he could increase these rates through a training program to improve the sales and service skills of the parks’ front desk employees.

Ward first “mystery shopped” the parks himself to see how each location answered the phones and booked reservations. He found employees were helpful and friendly, but most simply answered questions and never attempted to learn more about the caller or build value by describing the park’s attributes.

A few months later, an initial assessment during the parks’ busiest season of the year revealed that just 47 percent of calls were being converted into reservations.

### Challenges

**STATE APPROVAL:** As a state funded organization experiencing budget cuts, training was initially deemed a costly expenditure without a guaranteed return on investment.

**EMPLOYEE ATTITUDE:** Employees at the parks, many of whom had been on staff for years, had never received any formal training. Some were apprehensive about a new training program and the subsequent changes in management’s expectations of them. As hourly government employees, there was also no monetary motivation to improve sales.

**ACCOUNTABILITY:** With 17 different park locations of varying sizes and features, expectations of each park’s revenue potential was different. There was no consistent way to set goals, measure success or hold teams accountable for their own performance.

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## Solutions

Armed with statistics relating to increased revenues through sales training programs, Ward presented his case for Signature's Transient Edge® training to a state legislative committee. While the initial proposal was met with skepticism, ultimately the examples of successful training programs Signature had conducted and the promise of a return on investment helped secure approval for Ward's program.

In August 2004, The Kentucky State Park System implemented Transient Edge to teach front desk employees a simple Magic Formula for handling inquiries, improving caller experiences and selling more rooms. The one-day training sessions were highly interactive, easy to absorb and fun for participants, taking any employee apprehension out of the process.

Signature's unique training program was based on a reinforcement system that includes ongoing coaching with Signature experts as well as seven "mystery shop" calls per month to each location to assess how employees use the skills they learned. After each shop call, employees and managers went online to listen to their calls and view their scores using Signature's Web-based reporting tool. All calls were tracked and compiled into a monthly report accessible by park management.

## Results

The consensus at The Kentucky State Parks was that the Signature program helped change the way the parks did business, treated customers and sold their location to prospective guests.

**INCREASED RESERVATIONS:** After just two months, the average conversion rate for all parks increased by 16 percent, with some parks increasing up to 26 percent. "This puts us light years ahead of our competition," said Scott Ringham, park manager at the Jenny Wiley State Park.

Monica Conrad at Barren River State Park saw an increase in all reservations, but notably in group sales bookings, since her staff learned the right questions to ask callers. "It has really helped them sell to each caller's needs," she said.

**ONGOING IMPROVEMENT OF SKILLS:** According to Jim Carroll, information officer with the Kentucky State Park Systems, an average of all 17 parks' mystery shop call scores showed an increase of over 26.4 percent over a four-month period. "This really proved to us that Signature's reinforcement program worked and employees continued to improve their skills over time," Carroll concluded.

**INCREASED PROFESSIONALISM AND MOTIVATION:** Ringham noticed his employees displaying much more professionalism and motivation than before the training. "They don't 'sit down' on the job anymore," he explained. "And they never let a phone call get to three rings. It's a source of pride for them now."

"This puts us light years ahead of the competition."

Park Manager, Scott Ringham  
Jenny Wiley State Park

**BETTER ACCOUNTABILITY:** Signature's monthly reports on all locations' scores had increased each park's accountability for their performance. "Every time I call a park and ask them how their scores are, they always know exactly where they stand and why," Ward said. "This also levels the playing field in terms of expectations for each park. The smaller parks can easily outperform the larger parks on their conversion rates and scoring if they are motivated to do so," he added.

Ward looks forward to the continued success of the program. "It's still a work in progress and when we do our annual review of our occupancy rates, it will feel good to present those increased numbers to the state legislative committee and show them how well the park staffs have performed. It's truly a success for everyone involved."