

Integrated Real Estate Development, Construction and Management Company Minto Looks to *Disney Institute* for Help with Company-Wide Customer Service Program

SUMMARY

Since its founding in 1955, Ottawa-based builder and developer Minto has grown to become one of North America's most successful integrated real estate companies. But the company needed to transform the company's asset-based culture to one that is more customer-driven. Minto's leaders enlisted the help of Disney Institute and are now seeing promising improvements in customer satisfaction, employee engagement and more.

"WE NEEDED HELP"

Like many successful companies, Canada-based real estate developer, builder and management company Minto is always looking for ways to differentiate itself from, and stay ahead of the competition. "A few years ago we realized we needed to transform our company's asset-based culture to one driven more by customer insights and their experiences with our brand," explains Peter Pleckaitis, the firm's vice president of marketing. "Simply put, we decided it was time to improve our customer service."

With 1,430 employees spread across several divisions and locations, changing Minto's corporate culture was a tall order. The firm builds over 2,000 homes a year and manages 15,300 residential units, more than two million square feet of commercial space, a hotel and more. A new program would have to engage everyone from maintenance personnel to senior management; from those on the front lines with the public to those behind the scenes.

Management understood it would take more than a retooled website and a new mission statement to inform and enthruse Minto's staffers. "We needed help," says Gerry Meyer, VP of human resources. "We knew where we wanted to go but not necessarily how to get there. We looked for someone who excelled at customer service and

could inspire our employees to go above and beyond. We chose *Disney Institute*."

A MULTI-DAY PRESENTATION

"Minto's leaders had already identified their goal of transforming their customer service culture when they came to us," remembers *Disney Institute* Senior Sales Manager Scott Moore. "They needed our help in implementing that change." To design a program specifically tailored to Minto's needs, Moore and *Disney Institute* Consultant Dennis Frare met with the top executives and senior Minto management in Orlando and visited the company's offices in Canada.

Armed with the insights he gained from these meetings, Frare designed a multi-day presentation that drew from Disney's core business practices such as Quality Service, People Management, Leadership Excellence, Brand Loyalty and Inspiring Creativity. "With input from Minto we put together a program that addressed the main challenges they were facing," says Frare.

Before the tailored program was rolled out to Minto's different divisions in Canada, 30 senior and mid-level managers went to Orlando to take part in *Disney Institute*'s three-day presentation. "We chose managers from across all of our operating groups," explains Pleckaitis. "It was important that our senior people were all on the same page."

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Because Frare knew some of the Minto managers may have been wondering what Disney had to teach them, he started out his Orlando program by asking his audience, “Why the heck am I standing up here to tell you how to build and manage houses and apartments?”

He paused, and then answered, “I’m not. I’m not here to tell you what to do. I’m here to show you what Disney does, how it works for us, and to work with you to determine how you can apply those best practices to Minto.”

Meyer says: “That got everyone’s attention and set the tone for the entire program .”

SMALL DETAILS MADE A BIG IMPRESSION

The importance of identifying and delivering first-class customer service was a large part of the *Disney Institute* program. Site visits to various Disney attractions, opportunities to step into these ‘living laboratories’ reinforced these lessons. “These visits gave us the chance to see first-hand how Disney put their theories into practice,” says Pleckaitis.

For example, Minto managers were taken into the Magic Kingdom at the Walt Disney World Resort early one morning before the attraction opened. They watched how the park’s staffers came outside of their shops to wave at and greet the throngs of visitors who were hurrying up Main Street. “This showed us that each and every Disney employee, no matter what their job description may be, is engaged in ‘bumping up’ the visitors’ experience,” says Pleckaitis.

Other small details made a big impression. The Minto managers noticed Frare and other Disney Cast Members (Disney-speak for employees) picking up any garbage they saw on the ground. As they walked through the Magic Kingdom, the Minto staffers joined in.

“I realized we were modeling that behavior because the culture at Disney is so persuasive,” says Meyer. “It showed us how easy it is for an organization to effect a culture change when the leadership models behaviors you wish to see in your employees. It was another Disney idea we could adapt.”

Following the Orlando multi-day presentation, *Disney Institute* conducted several similar programs for Minto’s middle management and front line employees in Canada

and Florida. Attendees at all of these Disney Institute programs were charged with coming up with ways Minto could adapt Disney’s best practices. “There’s no better way to solve problems than getting employees together,” says Frare. “It’s also a great way to get those employees to take ownership of those ideas.”

“ALREADY PAYING DIVIDENDS”

After returning from their *Disney Institute* program, Minto’s leaders saw exciting improvements in their organization. A company-wide customer service program, dubbed “beInspired,” has been expanded to incorporate many of the lessons learned at Disney Institute. “It’s how we keep this new culture alive and spreading throughout the company,” says Doug Brundson, vice president, Minto Apartments.

A group of employees have been named “beInspired Ambassadors” to help keep the movement vital. Minto staffers who go above and beyond are offered “You inspired me today!” employee recognition awards, another idea adapted from Disney’s best practices.

There are numerous small successes, which Minto calls “beInspired Moments,” like a maintenance man who set down his mop to hold a door open for a resident. A Minto building superintendent discovered an elderly resident had arthritis and offered to switch her kitchen tap handle from a standard tap to a more ergonomically efficient tap for seniors. In one building an employee took the initiative to buy a luggage cart for use by the residents. “These may be small details but they add up,” notes Brundson. “They show us our recent training is paying dividends. Our people are going that extra step.”

Perhaps more impressive is that employees report they are more satisfied in their jobs. In 2004, Minto’s probationary pass rate (the percentage of new employees that stayed on after their probation period) was between 70-75 percent. Today it is 99 percent. “We are hiring the right people, and they are happier with their positions,” says Meyer.

Adds Pleckaitis: “Changing a company’s culture takes time but we are off to a strong start. *Disney Institute* inspired us to translate our ideas into a workable program. They helped us discover a clear message for a complex undertaking.”