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We are speaking today with Mr. Greg Marston, CEO and owner
of Vermont Bicycle Touring Company (VBT) based in
Bristol Vt. (www.VBT.com).

The focus of today's discussion is on customer service and
empowering staff as leaders. If you would like to nominate
a "C" level executive for an interview on either Leadership
or Customer Service please contact Dr. Jim Dillahunty at
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Dillahunty: Greetings Greg and welcome to the
NewParadigms leadership forum! To get started tell our
listeners and readers how you got started in the travel
business.

Marston: It goes back to really, my childhood, in
summer camp. I did not want to go to summer camp, I was
happy in my neighborhood playing ball. But mom and dad
suggested I go to 2 week YMCA camp on Lake Winnepesaukee,
NH. After I got there, I didn't want to leave.

Dillahunty: When you send your kids to camp they
miss their moms at first, and then after 2 weeks they ask;
who is this mom person that keeps sending me stuff?

Marston: My biggest memory of a camp experience was in New Hampshire on a 2 or 3 day hiking excursion. I climbed my first mountain by myself, that is, without mom, dad or my siblings. Getting to the top of Zealand Mountain was really quite an achievement and I got to see what was on the other side. That started a love affair with venturing off. That turned me toward the Outward Bound School where I broke my leg. The following summer I took the full course of the Outward Bound School, each time venturing a little further west.

Dillahunty: How did you get to Outward Bound?

Marston: Well I am in the northeast and my mother's good childhood friend, started the North Carolina Outward Bound School. And the man who brought Outward Bound to the US from England, Josh Miner, was a family friend. So Outward Bound was always inspiring to me because it challenged me, and it really showed the core of who we are.

Dillahunty: Why did you go to Outward Bound? Did your parents send you?

Marston: No, I wanted to. It was my heart that was steering my path.

Dillahunty: So that gave you a rush for travel and adventure. But how did you get in to VBT, because I noticed, you acquired the firm in 2005?

Marston: Right. There is another step in my story.

I had Outward Bound under my belt and I enrolled in University of Vermont, but still had the desire to travel, so I arranged to travel to New Zealand and study at the University of Otago. Really, my interest was to travel. I was supposed to be back in November, but I traveled around the whole country hitchhiking and met so many people. From New Zealand I went west and worked a while in Australia. From there I took trains across Indonesia. In Indonesia I met someone sailing around the world, so I sailed with him to Sri Lanka.

Dillahunty: How old were you when you went to New Zealand the first time?

Marston: 21.

Dillahunty: Right out of school?

Marston: No, I hadn't even finished college yet. I didn't want to go through 4 years of school and look back and say, that is all I have done. My travel experience took me across Asia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, all these countries we can't visit today. But the result of it was that I developed a desire to travel, for meeting people and experiencing how others lived, and how really similar we all are. Eventually I settled into a career in financial

services and after 22 years uncovered an opportunity to get into the travel business.

Dillahunty: How did you get started in the bicycle touring business?

Marston: While in the financial services I still wanted adventure. I had a great spouse, 3 kids, house, country club, a decent car; the way ahead was paved. So I asked myself, how am I going to combine this passion for travel work, and raise my family?

Then in 1996 I identified the company Vermont Bicycle Touring (VBT) for acquisition and brokered the deal for Grand Circle which acquired VBT in '97.

In 1999 Grand Circle asked me to run the VBT business. So I worked as president of VBT from '99 till January 2005, and bought VBT in 2005.

Dillahunty: When you ran VBT for Grand Circle, what was the culture of customer service?? Did you find a company that already had a strong culture of customer service?

Marston: That is a good question. Grand Circle has a strong culture of customer service. Now, the job was to overlay that culture of customer service into VBT. The most effective way I found was to establish regional leaders who were also natives to the area. When I came in,

all our leaders were Americans; now all our leaders are natives from the regions they work in. That serves the customers in a really genuine way.

Dillahunty: When an employee joins VBT as a tour leader, do you enroll them in a formal customer training program?

Marston: Most of our leaders come with a solid track record of working with tourists. All candidates go through a screening process where we meet with them in the region. There is a stream of interviews. Then they are graded. Then the folks who did all the interviewing sit down and spend some time going through each candidate and grading them.

Dillahunty: What characteristics are you rating on the 1-5 scale?

Marston: We evaluate people orientation, bike skills, athleticism, and personality.

Dillahunty: If you hire them, how do you orient them to the VBT culture?

Marston: That is part of the orientation process. We educate them about who we are, what we do, and why.

Dillahunty: Where does orientation take place?

Marston: In the region of the world where they will be leading.

Dillahunty: Is it a formal class room training or on the job training?

Marston: It is a 3 day orientation program about VBT, what we do, why we do it, and what is required of each leader.

Dillahunty: Do you pair them with a senior leader.

Marston: Yes, there are 3 veteran leaders that go out with a rookie. The four of them work together on at least one training tour.

Dillahunty: How do you empower your employees? If it's a rainy night, the car breaks down and they have it towed, do they have the authority to make commitments on behalf of the company?

Marston: Sure. I would expect that. They more than likely would contact their direct manager or the lead manager who are always accessible.

Dillahunty: 24/7?

Marston: Yeah. If there is a problem they tell them; here is the issue, the options, and the action we need to deal with it.

I even empower the leaders to ask a guest to leave a tour if one guest is really disruptive. We refund all their money. This action is sometimes necessary because we do not

want one person to ruin the experiences for other guests.
This is a pretty extreme situation.

Our goal is to have our leaders, be evaluated by our guests. The guests evaluate and rank the experience of our leaders, our food, our vendors, our bikes. They rank them excellent, good, fair, and poor. Leaders have to achieve a 92% positive feedback or better.

Every once in a while a new leader hits a home run on day one. One of our Italian leaders in Puglia, Deborah T., consistently hits home runs in the eyes of our guests on every tour she conducts. We did not recruit her, she saw our vans, inquired of our reputation, and applied for a position.

Dillahunty: A tour director has to be 92% or better. Suppose you have a director rated at 88, is that cause for follow on training?

Marston: Well we thank them, because 88 is still excellent.

Dillahunty: What point would you talk to a leader about low performance?

Marston: Less than 80 percent.

Dillahunty: So at 76, what happens?

Marston: Well we go through each of the tours with the leader and we ask, "What's up"? Was the issue

leadership, mechanical, working with the other leader, route directions, or knowledge of the region?

Dillahunty: Your leaders are typically under 30, what is your turnover rate, and is turnover something you normally expect?

Marston: We don't have a lot of turnover.

Dillahunty: So they join you at 18 and -stay how long?

Marston: Our average age, is north of 30.

Dillahunty: So, how long do you expect to keep them? 5 years, 10 years, 20 years?

Marston: At least. I have 2 people here who have been with the company for north of 20 years.

Dillahunty: As tour guides?

Marston: Yeah, he is still leading tours after 27 years. His wife is a former tour leader who now works in the home office. But she could still go out and lead a tour. We have Anne, in charge of our worldwide technical systems and she started as a leader about 13 years ago. Most of our European leaders joined in the spring of 2000, when we made that transition to regional leaders, and we haven't lost any.

Dillahunty: It sounds like your success in customer service is in large part due to your recruiting the right people in the first place. You hire leaders who are action oriented, gregarious, courteous and have good manners.

Marston: That's correct. We look for core values. We do not bring them into a university style training using a manual. We do have a manual however that describes VBT.

Dillahunty: Did you write the manual?

Marston: I have edited various versions over the years. The manual describes VBT what is and why we exist. It describes the 4 characteristics of a VBT tour; value, the pace of the tour, choices, and discovery.

We exist to introduce Americans into a bicycle vacation that immerses them into the local culture.

Dillahunty: Do you have someone who is in charge of customer service?

Marston: There is one person in charge of recruiting, hiring, training, and managing leader performance. Dillahunty: One person worldwide?

Marston: One person. She is supported by other staff for nuts and bolt issues.

Dillahunty: Do you ever interview your customers??

Marston: Good question. I do go out into the field and meet our customers. I am leaving this afternoon for

Normandy, and will spend 5 days on a tour as a guest. I will ride with the other guests, talk with them and ask how can we be a better company?

Last year, in Sicily, I had an incredible conversation with a brilliant guest. He wrote me a long email with comments and suggestions and I passed it onto our marketing staff.

Dillahunty: This gentleman in Sicily; what were the insights that came from this individual?

Marston: He suggested an interactive web site where guests can return to share photos.

Dillahunty: What criticisms have your guests offered?

Marston: Probably the routing of our air travel.

If you are going to Paris, it is hard to go through Frankfort to get to Paris. We are trying to be the best value there is in the industry, and we could offer Air France direct flights, but we chose Lufthansa, for 2 reasons; more flights, and lower costs.

Dillahunty: As part of our service assessment do you talk with your suppliers, and other VBT stake holders?

Marston: Absolutely. I want to know our vendors, because our vendors are our service conduits. It is also important that I get our vendors to mingle with our guests as well.

So that is the passion that I have in the travel experience. Meeting the people is where it is at. That is what is going to impact my life in a positive way.

Dillahunty: Do you mean "social networking"?

Marston: Yeah. Yeah.

Dillahunty: Greg Marston, thank you for your time today to chat with me about customer service and empowering staff as leaders at VBT

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