

Glamping

BUSINESS americas

ISSUE 9, JULY/AUGUST 2022

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GLAMPFORCE

THE ESSENTIAL GLAMPING BUSINESS INGREDIENT

BY TODD WYNNE-PARRY



While the similarities between traditional lodging and outdoor hospitality are many, there are several distinct and challenging differences. Remote locations with sensitive natural environments, forest fires, floods, storms, and small detached accommodation units constructed with a variety of materials are a few examples. However, the most costly and challenging difference in a glamping business

is a remotely located seasonal workforce – or its “Glampforce”.

So why is the Glampforce so essential in outdoor hospitality? Whether you listen to Stephen Covey, Richard Branson, Simon Sinek or Bill Marriott, they will all tell you generally the same thing: business starts with your employees. That is, if your employees are treated well, they will treat your customers well and business will be good. This, however, is challenging for even the best of leaders in the hospitality industry. I have been amazed at how many leaders give lip

service to these values, but then oversee toxic corporate cultures. Given the intimate size and soft adventure situation that outdoor hospitality presents, there is no room or time for anything less than a great work culture. A glamping business provides precious guest/employee interactions that can happen anytime, anywhere on the property with any of the staff members. There are no corridors to hide down, back rooms to duck into or elevators to escape guest’s inquiries. Therefore, it is a fundamental key to have an effective and inspired Glampforce.

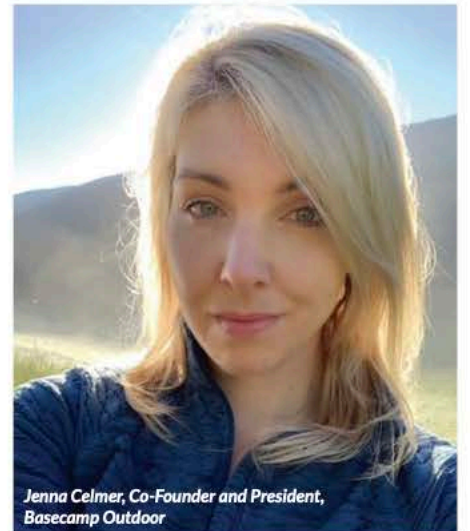


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Who are today’s Glampforce participants? For the purposes of this article, I focus on remote locations with seasonal operations. These two situations, provide the most challenging workforce environments for business owners. If an outdoor hospitality operation is within commuting distance from a medium to large city, it will have less problem both recruiting and retaining staff as well as limited to no workforce housing issues. Additionally, year-round operations will avoid the challenges of post-season layoffs and pre-season hiring. These easier situations will still share many of the challenges, opportunities and demographics as presented in this article.

The demographics of the Glampforce in the remote/seasonal environment is currently dominated by Gen Z’s 20-somethings. These younger employees both at the line and managerial level are highly motivated to be working outdoors and sharing their outdoorsy enthusiasm with every new guest. However, these team members need to be comfortable with the day-to-day work environment as well as who they will be working with and reporting to. This suggests the lure of working outdoors is not strong enough to reduce the importance of a strong company culture. The next clear demographic group that fills out the Glampforce are the Gen X 50-somethings. These employees are experiencing a new chapter in their lives and share the younger generation’s appreciation for working outdoors. They tend to thrive on the flexibility and lifestyle seasonal work provides. Many glamping operators remain pleasantly surprised at both the life experience these older staff members bring to the team, but also their fealty to the business by coming back for several seasons. The only challenge with this demographic can be the occasional conflict between the experienced mind and less experienced. For this issue I highly recommend Chip Conley’s book *Wisdom @ Work: The making of a Modern Elder* for both employers and Gen X employees.

There are a few other burgeoning sub-sets of the above larger demographic groups. Leading



Jenna Celmer, Co-Founder and President, Basecamp Outdoor

recruitment firm Basecamp: Outdoor Jobs’ Co-Founder Jenna Celmer is seeing growth in certain employee groups that are relatively new to outdoor hospitality. These groups see this sector as having “value alignment” and/or fitting their more nomadic lifestyle. In particular, she identified up and coming groups such as single 55+ mothers re-entering the workforce, younger mothers looking for part-time work and recently discharged or retired military personnel. Celmer confirms that across all these major and minor demographic or psychographic groups, company culture and the treatment of employees is the

most important employee concern. Jenna points to membership in her Basecamp and websites such as outdoorindustryjobs.com, Indeed.com and Malakye.com as popular sites for recruiting.

Recruiting during the pandemic and throughout 2021 was quite challenging as outdoor hospitality demand reached record levels, while employees were reluctant to return to the workforce for a variety of reasons. This has corrected a bit in 2022 as employees return to the workforce. Operators' initial response to the difficulty in finding remote workers was to enhance the offering. As Noah Ellis of Yonder Hospitality confirmed, "we had to adjust our approach from being a 'buyer' of staff, to a 'seller' of positions". Accordingly, remote operators had to offer higher hourly wages and sign-on bonuses or retention bonuses for employees who stayed more than 90 days. In addition, for some operators subsidized or free housing, meals, healthcare, and other benefits are rolled into offers.

The issue of workforce housing remains a challenge for many nature-based remote businesses not just the outdoor hospitality sector. To address the issue, some local authorities are now requiring workforce housing to be constructed as a condition for approval of new accommodation developments or expansions. In response to the market operators are designating pads for remote workers to park their own van or trailer or just providing trailers for workers. This is particularly true where the destination has a contingent of J1 visa workers, which are now returning to the USA. Other operators will lease a house locally and provide rooms complimentary or at a subsidized below market rent. This approach has been negatively affected

by many of these houses now being sold on VRBO or AirBnB. Obviously, workers are more attracted to positions where the housing issue is well thought out, safe and affordable. As the trend for remote or nomadic workers continues apace, this consideration will remain a key selling factor for attracting your Glampforce.

While hiring for personality and attitude will greatly help the overall esprit de corps of the Glampforce, it is also important to curate their overall experience. Firelight Camps' Co-founder and CEO, Bobby Frisch has a full season of company culture enhancing programming to keep their employees engaged and motivated. Pre-season they have an employee party that includes employee's families where everyone stays in a Firelight Camp tent. Bobby notes "it is really important that every employee knows what it's like to be a guest here and how it feels to stay in the tents". He also has events through the season, such as local wine or beverage tastings for his bar staff and a post-season party when the breakdown of the tents and equipment is completed. These efforts have proven successful as Firelight Camps have maintained a strong 50+% retention factor on their seasonal employees.

Glamping's goal to make nature more approachable and expose more and more people to the wonder of the great outdoors is truly noble. Providing this transformative experience rests on the shoulders of the entire staff. This obligation and honor seem more genuine and weightier when delivered to guests outside and more importantly outside their comfort zone. In summary, of all the issues inherent in providing a great glamping experience to your guest, none will be more critical than establishing a formidable Glampforce.



Yonder Escalante, photos by Amy Sibert

About Todd G. Wynne-Parry

A seasoned leader in the hospitality industry, Todd has over 30 years of hotel development experience, having held senior leadership positions at several major hotel brands and most recently AutoCamp and Two Roads Hospitality. A dual-citizen of the US and Australia, Wynne-Parry has lived and worked in the U.S., Asia, Australia and the United Kingdom. He was instrumental in the development efforts for IHG, Starwood and Marriott in the Asia Pacific region and for Two Roads Hospitality globally. He began his career as a hotel consultant in the San Diego office of Laventhol & Horwath, the predecessor to Horwath HTL. He is now Managing Director of Horwath HTL and leads the Outdoor Hospitality practice for North America. Horwath HTL is the largest independent hospitality consultancy with 52 offices worldwide.

Todd earned an MBA from Thunderbird Graduate School of International Management and sits on the advisory council of the American Glamping Association. In his spare time, Todd enjoys fly fishing and exploring the western US in his 1953 Airstream.

