

INVITING SPACES

Tips for making guests feel welcome



There's no doubt that your property is naturally beautiful. After all, camps and conference centers are in some of the most incredible locations in the country. But is your property also inviting? Have you relied on its natural beauty while potentially missing how your campers and guests need to interact with the property to feel welcome?

Photo courtesy of Word of Life Fellowship



Creating an inviting space can include the amenities you offer, the design and function of buildings on your property or the interaction guests have with your staff. Let's consider the various experiences of a guest at your camp or conference center. ►

Arrival and Check-In

Like most of us, I imagine, I rely heavily on my phone's map to get me where I'm going. But once I arrive at a camp or conference center, the map is no longer helpful. That's where great signage comes into play.

A sign at the entrance of your property can welcome guests as they drive in, but as they continue past that sign, do they know where to go? Clear signage that makes it obvious where guests should park to check in helps someone feel welcomed and confident they're landing in the right place.

Is your registration office, desk or check-in station clearly marked? Do you have a staff member greeting people as they enter the property and pointing them in the right direction? If you find that new arrivals are wandering the grounds looking lost, they probably are. How would you feel visiting your property as a first-time guest?

When considering signage around the property, senior project manager at Brandstetter Carroll, Inc., Jackie Kaminsky suggests you invite someone unfamiliar with the property to offer input on where signs may be missing or if they're misleading. In addition, Kaminsky recommends that you:

- Use clear fonts and minimal text.
- Use high-contrast colors for the best visibility.
- Position the sign where it will be visible to the user (i.e.: someone in a vehicle vs. a pedestrian).
- Place signs at key intersections.
- Consider illuminating signs for safety and aesthetics.
- Use unique symbols for each structure that are also represented on a printed or digital camp map and labeled on buildings.

Beyond signage, Kaminsky advised helping new guests feel welcome as they enter a space "by adding an accent-colored wall, piece of art or interesting lighting to draw people into the space." ►



Photo courtesy of Camp Lebanon



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Entering the Guest Room

Most camps and conference centers want people to spend more time focused on God and His creation than sitting in their rooms. But, when your guests retire to their rooms for the night, you want them to feel comfortable and welcome. Whether it's a rustic cabin for teen campers or a hotel-style room for adult guests, there are simple ways you can make the space feel inviting.

Consider the needs of your guests. If you allow campers to have cell phones during camp, does your cabin provide enough outlets for charging? (Parents wanting to stay in touch with their campers will thank you!)

Are the outlets in your buildings (especially the girls' cabins) capable of handling multiple charging devices, blow dryers and flat irons at the same time? Do your guest groups have people who may be bringing work along with them and need access to Wi-Fi and power in their guest rooms?

On a recent visit to Redwood Christian Park (RCP) (Boulder Creek, California), I walked into my guest room happy to find not only a charging adaptor in the outlet that had space for multiple plugs and USB cables but also a hotel-style lamp with charging capability.

I was surprised (and grateful) to also see an essential oil diffuser on the dresser. According to Shireen Miller, operations director at RCP, guests are often greeted with a calming scent already at work in the room when they open the door.

Miller knows that not everyone wants to be greeted by essential oils, which is why communication and relationships with guest group leaders are so important to her and the team at RCP. Groups are told ahead of time that they can bring their own oils. If someone has expressed a sensitivity to scents, the team will simply turn on the soft glowing nightlight feature and keep the diffuser empty.

Providing high-quality linens, towels and toiletries for adult guest groups gives them hotel-quality accommodations amid God's creation.

Lighting is another way you can make someone feel welcome. Kaminsky has several recommendations:

- Maximize natural light with more windows and skylights where possible.
- Consider the orientation of windows and shading devices in relation to the position of the sun.
- Install dimmer switches to allow users to adjust the intensity of the light according to the desired mood.
- Incorporate a mix of lighting sources like ambient, task and accent lighting. ►



Photo courtesy of Word of Life Fellowship



“Install dimmer switches to allow users to adjust the intensity of the light according to the desired mood.” —Jackie Kaminsky, senior project manager at Brandstetter Carroll, Inc.

Does someone with a food allergy or dietary restriction know how to get food that is safe for them to eat?



Photo courtesy of Glorieta Adventure Camps



Mealtimes

Your camp or conference center may serve meals family style or buffet style, but what are you doing in your dining hall to ensure that guests feel welcome and know where to go and what to do?

Is the dining hall experience clearly laid out for guests? When and how do you let them know how food will be served and what to do with their dishes when they're done eating? Does someone with a food allergy or dietary restriction know how to get food that is safe for them to eat? By communicating with those guests about ingredients and your desire to care for them, they will be put at ease.

Are you offering foods and beverages that meet the needs and expectations of your guests? Do you have healthier options available for meals and snacks? Are you offering drinks other than juice, milk or water? (And can your adult guests access drinks like coffee or tea whenever they want?) Do you have water bottle filling stations around the dining hall and the rest of your property?

Miller reiterated the need for good communication with guest groups so your team can serve them best. For example, at RCP, a weekend of retreats might be comprised of multiple groups from the area representing several different ethnic groups. Some groups eat rice at every meal, so her team makes sure to have that available. One guest group has its own "noodle night," where they request hot water urns in the meeting space so everyone can make their own cup of noodles with what they brought along from home.

Miller talks to guest groups in advance to determine the kinds of foods they like or don't like, and they work to accommodate those needs. Though, sometimes "we may have two to six different groups on property at once, so we try to ensure that everyone can be happy," Miller explained. ►

“The little things make people feel loved, and that’s what we’re here to do.” —Shireen Miller, operations director at Redwood Christian Park (Boulder Creek, California)



Photo courtesy of Calvin Crest



Meeting Spaces

When it comes to making your meeting spaces inviting, “airflow and shade are essential. Even if there is no heat or air conditioning, spaces can be designed for the appropriate climate and conditions so guests can be comfortable in any weather,” Kaminsky explained.

She also recommends flexible furniture and balancing a space with both fixed and non-fixed furniture to adapt to changing needs. And provide finishes and furniture that can handle lots of wear and tear.

Creating good sight lines and visibility of the presenter in your meeting space can make a big difference in a guest’s experience. Take a seat throughout the meeting space. How is the view?

An Inviting Staff

Miller shared that at RCP, the mission is simple, “We want people to come and rest, connect with each other and prepare for what God has for them.” For that reason, they don’t want a lot of distractions, but they do want “a staff that’s friendly, engaging, generous and embraces the hospitality we’re commanded to do,” Miller explained.

They encourage staff to connect with guests, find out what they need or want and try to make the service personal. It’s also important to help staff understand that no matter their role at the camp or conference center, what they do matters.

“Own that you’re making somebody’s life better, even with the small things you don’t want to do like vacuuming,” Miller teaches the RCP team. Aside from the basic training on how to clean and what a space should look like when a guest arrives, Miller added, “The little things make people feel loved, and that’s what we’re here to do.” ■



Jen Howver serves as the editor of CCCA’s flagship publication, InSite magazine. She is also CCCA’s training manager, planning the EIT webinars, RoundTables and seminars offered at the national conference. Jen was a camper and worked on staff at Camp Paradise (Newberry, Michigan), where she met and later married her husband, Jay. They live in Colorado with their daughters, Noelle and Chloe, and way too many pets.