

## Creating compelling customer experiences

In the post-Covid era, ferry operators have recognised that they need to invest in delivering high-quality services that will exceed customers' expectations and win business back. Simon Johnson asks Matteo Della Valle about Grandi Navi Veloci's strategy

**W**hat constitutes an excellent customer experience? It's a question that every ferry operator must ask if they want to remain competitive, differentiate their brand and become the service provider of choice for travellers in an increasingly competitive marketplace. However, finding the right solution can be tricky, particularly in a world shaped by ever-evolving customer expectations and changing socioeconomic, geopolitical, environmental and other factors.

According to Matteo Della Valle, passenger sales and marketing director at Italian brand Grandi Navi Veloci (GNV), the answer lies in going back to basics.

"Ferry operators must provide a seamless experience that makes passengers feel valued and understood," he says. "GNV strives to achieve this goal through clear and transparent customer communication, via everything from targeted advertising to our post-sale actions. We also work hard to efficiently solve all the problems that our customers face and always making them feel comfortable and protected through the friendly and empathetic approach of our staff."

GNV was founded in Genoa, Italy, in 1992 and now operates 25 vessels on routes to Sardinia, Sicily, Spain, Tunisia, Morocco, France and Albania. Each ferry offers comfortable and well-equipped cabins and suites, as well as a range of public spaces including lounges, restaurants, children's play areas and shops. Shoreside employees and onboard crew members play an equally crucial role in delivering a high-quality travel



GNV's friendly staff play a pivotal role in enhancing the passenger experience onboard its ferries

experience, both onboard the ferries and in the ports they sail to.

"Shoreside employees are the first people our customers come into contact with when they enter the ferry terminal, so they're responsible for providing support and assistance at the start of the journey," says Della Valle. "Meanwhile, crew members are responsible for ensuring passengers are comfortable and safe onboard our vessels. Shoreside and shipboard staff must work together in a coordinated way to ensure we offer customers the best experience."

"The distinctive thing about GNV's customer experience is our Mediterranean hospitality and the fact we're creating personalised services for each target audience that needs to take the ferry."

GNV continually measures the quality of its services, adapting them to resolve

any issues and meet the ever-evolving needs and expectations of its customers.

"We ask all travellers to complete an email survey after their trip, which enables us to track net promoter scores and measure customer satisfaction levels," says Della Valle, noting that onboard sales can also provide a good indicator of how content customers are with GNV's services. "In addition, we identify any customer experience issues or areas for improvement by collecting and analysing data that comes from claims, onboard warnings, social media comments and our website."

GNV has noticed several changes in passenger expectations following the Covid-19 pandemic and modified its services accordingly.

"Since the pandemic, passengers have been much more attentive to cleanliness,



Italian firm GNV operates 25 vessels on routes to Sardinia, Sicily, Spain, Tunisia, Morocco, France and Albania

health and safety onboard our ships, so we have stricter protocols to be in place,” says Della Valle. “In addition, we’ve noticed that they expect more flexibility, for example if they need to reschedule their trip, so that has become a key aspect of ticket sales.”

Typically, GNV considers several factors when prioritising future customer experience investments and deciding how best to implement corrective measures to overcome customer service issues.

“We mainly evaluate the likely return on investment, the level of improvement in operational efficiency and the possible impact on the environment,” says Della Valle. “Plus, we’re always focused on following market trends to ensure we bring something innovative to the industry.”

In keeping with its goal to constantly innovate, GNV is currently exploring how it can capitalise on new technologies to deliver better and more efficient customer services at all stages of the ferry journey.

“People now expect to remain connected throughout their trip, so we’re working hard to use technology to enable them to do this and also to make travelling with GNV as effortless

as possible,” says Della Valle. “We’re also improving both our digital and traditional customer service channels. For example, we’re providing more pre-departure information through our website, direct marketing and contact centre, but also through more flexible and digital customer service options such as live chat, email and social media.”



“Ferry operators must provide a seamless experience that makes passengers feel valued and understood”

GNV is also using technology to make operations more efficient. “We are investing in improving the punctuality and efficiency of our ships with the help of our maritime support centre department, which uses advanced technology to monitor and provide constant support to the entire fleet,” says Della Valle. “Another goal is to consolidate our role as a leading service provider for specific target markets that need to travel by ferry, such as families and people journeying with their pets.”

In addition, GNV is preparing to take delivery of four new ro-pax vessels, which will be built by China’s Guangzhou Shipyard International and start service from 2024 onwards. The 1,500-passenger newbuilds will have 3,100 lane metre capacity and will likely be deployed on the routes to the Balearic Islands and either Sardinia or Sicily. GNV aims to deliver an equally compelling customer experience on these ships too.

“The way people view ferry travel has changed, and our understanding of the latest trends and new customer needs will ensure that our new ships offer passengers a better experience,” says Della Valle. **CFR**