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Miami cab drivers learn customer is king

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A tourist's first cab ride can be an unforgettable experience. Miami officials want to ensure that it's the good kind.

Thirty cab drivers-in-training learned to be friendly, helpful and attentive to passengers' needs at a new customer service workshop by Miami Dade College's Center for Service Excellence.

When visitors come to the city, their first contact is usually with cab drivers, said William Talbert, president of the Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau, which partnered with MDC.

"You know that first impressions can last through the entire visit," Talbert told the class.

The program is part of the "Miami Begins With Me" campaign to make the city more welcoming for tourists. In the past, a mix of public and private employees attended similar sessions, from Miami airport officials to South Beach's Hilton Bentley staff. While cab drivers did have some customer service training in the past, the new workshop is more intensive.

At the session, drivers were asked to think of places where they were treated well and what they liked about the service.

"How can you apply the qualities you like to your profession?" said John Lopategui, the program leader who taught the class.

New cab drivers Rigoberto Fuentes and Luis Figueroa said the class was useful because of high customer complaints.

The class discussed basic courtesies like not taking calls while driving and respecting the importance of a customer.

Better service also comes with a reward. The Taxicab Chauffeur Incentive Program awards annual cash prizes worth \$500 to four customer-nominated drivers. The Chauffeur of the Year receives \$2,500.

If the program is successful, tourists may never have to meet that cab driver from hell.

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