

Ask Not What The Butler Did, But What He Can Do For Your Hotel - By Steven Ferry

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The Hotel Butler - Recognizing the Value Butlers Bring to the Bottom Line

We all know the cliché, but what did the butler do that made him so uncharacteristically the focus of attention? In movies and board games, he generally is the one the police want to question further. In the hotel environment, the butler has turned out to be either a failed and somewhat embarrassing experiment, or the ultimate offering in Guest Services that helps keep high-rack occupancy rates at 100%.

Where the butler concept fails, it is because he (or she) is cast in (frankly) degrading-to-the-profession roles such as 'bath butler,' 'fireplace butler,' 'technology butler,' 'baby butler' (who provides rocking chairs and watches children), 'dog butler,' 'ski butler,' and 'beach butler.' The idea being, apparently, that anything offering superior service in some small area is called 'a butler' in an effort to siphon some of the prestige of the profession. At best, the idea is myopic, at worst, self-defeating.

At least when the term valet was extended to 'dumb valet,' that furniture item upon which one lays out clothing for the following day, there was no pretence that this was the real item. Fortunately for the profession, the public were not fooled or taken in by these 'dumb butlers' and the practice has faded relatively rapidly-hopefully before it soured guests on the value of being serviced by (real) butlers in hotels. And fortunately so for the butlers working in top hotels around the world, who do justice to the profession, and the hotel managements who have recognized the value butlers bring to the bottom line and the repute of word of mouth for their establishments.

In an industry that is completely premised on the idea of service, and in which service is a key differentiator, it's a no-brainer to institute butler service. Butlers have always represented the pinnacle in service quality. After the initial required training, the running of a butler service is not much more expensive to provide than regular service, yet it allows rack rates to be raised and creates a loyal following of repeat visitors, as well as enhancing word of mouth and thus new business that make the investment most sound.

Instituting butler service can be done gradually, perhaps instituting it on one floor, and at not such a great cost, especially when considering the return on investment. Fifteen rooms can be well serviced by four butlers on three shifts, for instance, with one of them assigned as Head butler. If service is to be 24-hour, then a fifth butler would be needed.

Assuming an owner or manager decides to institute butler service, the next question is, 'How?'

The first step is to bring on board the most service-minded of your employees to undergo training. The second: Bring in one of the handful of butler trainers who can train hotel butlers (as distinct from butlers in private residence, as the hotel environment is very different and requires fewer and different skills than the traditional butler).

In putting together a training program, it is important to know the four main elements that hotel butler trainees and hotel butler programs need in order to succeed.

First of all, there are the mechanical actions, the skills that butlers need, such as how to clean shoes, how to greet guests and tour them around their suite, how to arrange events for their stay, how to draw baths, pack suitcases, etc.

Then there is knowing and adopting as second nature the psyche or mindset of the butler. In order to do something effectively and with conviction, one has to be able to be the role that one is playing fully. This is obvious when watching a great actor in a movie. But it is also true in life, too. Unless a trainee butler has the right demeanor, attitude and approach as a starting point, he or she will never be able to carry off the role convincingly or handle guests and even fellow staff with the aplomb that makes butlers such quintessential service professionals.

This is why the training has to include the history, rationale, characteristics and communication skills of the traditional butler, and enough drilling-in of these elements so that when the novice butler is faced with a tricky or embarrassing situation, he or she is not left tongue-tied, upsetting guests, or proving that he is not the smooth, low-key character that guests expect in their butlers. When friendly American hospitality employees chatter endlessly and over-familiarly with guests and follow mantras about always greeting the guest by name at least three times within so many minutes, they are presenting ingrained training patterns that do not add up to the butler experience. This is not to say that the butler is not friendly, but there are other ways of expressing it than by well-worn phrases and compulsive chatter.

Thirdly, having covered the theory and done copious drills on applying the skills in a classroom environment, the trainer needs to move out with the butlers and expose them gradually to guests in the actual areas they will be providing butler service. By this is meant that trainees use each other and then senior staff as guest guinea-pigs, and they then service known-to-be-easy guests, and finally are allowed to service VIPs and known-to-be-difficult guests. The trainer should correct them on an internship or apprenticeship basis until the trainees can confidently do their duties.

Finally, for training to be practical and workable, it needs to tie the general actions of butling into the specific hotel environment in which they are working. This means the trainer has to work with hotel management and butler trainees to adapt existing SOPs (standard operating procedures) and propose new ones that align with existing SOPs.

It is workable to develop such SOPs during the early training steps and then drill them and correct them as needed during the apprenticeship period, fine-tuning against the hotel environment until they are smooth and effective. The result is best compiled into a butler manual that can be referred to as needed by the butlers, and which can also be used to train more butlers. The program will probably expand based on the successes of the initial pilot. That has certainly been the experience to date—one owner even building a whole new hotel at \$1.5 million per-room-cost just to be able to expand on the butler service pilot he had run.

It is also possible that there will be some attrition or turnover, but to date, hotel butlers that have been trained as above have proven happy enough with their situation to politely decline the inevitable offers from guests to return home with them and run their private households or yachts.

The end result of the whole program as outlined above is generally employees with high morale who competently carry out their duties, wowing guests and resulting, as stated before, in higher-than-usual occupancy, a high rate of return visits, and the opportunity to increase rack rates while enjoying stellar word of mouth.

Perhaps it would be better to ask then, not what the butler did, but what he (or she) could do for your hotel.

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About the Author



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