

Want Better Results? Then Expect Better Sales People - By Brenda Fields

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Over the past several years, the hotel industry has greatly benefited from the strong domestic economy which has impacted both the business and leisure segments, and all success indicators (occupancy, average rate, and RevPAR) are at record numbers in most urban markets.

Although there are good sales people in this economy, it seems that a property's success has little to do with the quality and expertise of its sales people, as the 'order-taking' days are back. Hotels are performing well despite service and product issues, and in many cases, despite poor sales department work habits.

So, when we know that the supply/demand dynamics can change and do change, then why be complacent with short term results and accept work habits that would not be acceptable in any other department? It is a great time to leverage the strong economy and build your sales force from the ground up, by developing sales people with excellent sales skills, great responsiveness and follow up, and an organized and proactive sales approach. Why wait and spend valuable resources to turn business around, when you have everything in place now.

A few simple tips can help protect your investment as an owner and insure optimum performance as a manager.

Tip #1: Hire right.

It is unlikely that anyone would deliberately hire a person unqualified for the job or one who would be ineffective. But, by not understanding what makes a sales person effective, we can fall into traps of hiring poorly. Two key concepts are:

1. **Sales is a SKILL**, not a personality trait. How many times have we hired personable and attractive people only to find out that they are not effective in booking business? We discover that tentative bookings rarely become definites and that any client complaint can send the sales person over the moon!

Skills are required in any other profession or in any other department in the hotel in order to perform the job. Many times, we look to hire a sales person with a 'rolodex' without considering his/ability to sell i.e. identifying business for the property and moving that business from another hotel. Client contacts can quickly come and go, resulting in an obsolete rolodex, but sales skills result in constant business and on-going account relationships.

Expert sales skills can produce business despite product deficiencies, rate structure, or market conditions. Since most owners and operators do not have perfect properties, it is even more critical to ensure that each sales person is highly skilled to generate business and to deal with client objections and problems effectively. A dedication to expert sales skills is the best insurance for market share and profitability.

2. **Administrative SKILLS are KEY to performance.** The interview process provides invaluable information. It can indicate how professional, organized, and effective a potential sales person is and will be when working for your property. As well as evaluating the candidate on previous experience, evaluate how they handled the entire interview process. Was the person on time? Did he/she come prepared with a resume and well founded questions on your organization or property? Was there a well written and grammatically correct follow up note with your name spelled correctly?? If these things did not happen with you, you can pretty much assume that they will not happen with clients.

How many times have you bought something just because the sales person followed up? Follow up is not a sales skill. It is just good business practice. So evaluate the entire process and decide if the candidate is the one who will perform at a high level i.e. maintain a well qualified and quantified account base; trace accounts for follow up and maintenance; and communicate to existing and potential accounts/clients in a professional and timely manner.

Tip #2: Set up systems for results and accountability.

Goals and keeping score is important. We all know that a golf game and a tennis match are much more interesting when we keep score; and we all perform better when our competitive juices are challenged. Even the Weight Watchers Program has determined that weight loss is more effective with the weekly 'weigh-in' to measure the results of the individual's efforts.

Plan ahead by creating and implementing a well thought-out marketing plan. That is the basis for establishing sales goals. Sales accountability is important to ensure results, and it is important to establish and maintain systems and procedures to monitor productivity of each sales person on on-going and consistent basis.

Therefore, to maximize the sales person's performance, it is important to establish specific and meaningful goals, broken down on a monthly and weekly basis; and to establish a culture where the actual performance vs. goals is critical for job performance. Set goals which include activities to produce booked and consumed business (such as weekly sales call target, new accounts opened, and client entertainment goals) as well as booking and consumed rooms goals. On-going and consistent monitoring and evaluation will foster performance and will quickly help identify non-performers.

Tip#3: Stay the course!

How often do we hear that the sales person doesn't have time to make sales calls? When pressed to explain why they don't have time, they many times attribute it to dealing with operations/accounting/guest service issues. But, consistent management and consistent expectations will help develop a sales culture, where sales calls is the priority and the achievement of goals is mandatory.

In small hotels, it is very tempting, due to a limited staff, to have sales people handle such issues. More often than not, they are very happy to so do, but again the outcome is that sales calls are not made, and eventually the property finds itself lagging behind its competitors. Without the proactive solicitation of new business, a property will find itself coming up short as supply/demand dynamics shift. And that can only be accomplished with consistency.

Therefore, as an owner and/or manager interested in protecting your investment and ensuring optimum performance, insure that the basics are in place in the hiring process, and that you create a sales culture of work habits and accountability which will produce optimal results for your property(s). With a few simple steps in place, you are well positioned when overall demand softens.

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About Brenda Fields

In her more than 20 years as a marketing and sales pro in the hospitality industry, Brenda G. Fields has emerged as the 'go to' sales and marketing consultant and for independent and/or privately owned hotels and resorts seeking real-world solutions for today's market challenges.

From small boutique hotels to large convention properties, Brenda has created and implemented highly successful marketing and yield management programs that enable owners to achieve target results despite market conditions.

With a 'who's who' roster of clients, Brenda has worked with a number of industry leaders and real estate investment companies including Starwood Lodging Corporation, Vornado Realty Trust and Planet Hollywood, John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company, Olympus Real Estate Corporation, and Apple Core Hotels, among others.

Brenda Fields can be contacted at brenda@fieldsandcompany.net; or call 518 789 0117 or visit www.fieldsandcompany.net.

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