

It's 2007 - Do You Know Where Your Sales People Are? - By Brenda Fields

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This past year proved to be another exceptional year in the hotel industry. The strong domestic economy coupled with record numbers of foreign travelers into the US, have 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. More often than not, phone calls and emails to a property's sales department are not responded to or are responded to a few days later. Contracts and proposals are not sent out on a timely basis, and many times the customer has to place several calls to get a contract. Where are the sales people? What are they doing that takes priority over the very minimal expectations of a sales person? It seems that in many cases, hotels are performing well despite service and product issues, and despite the poor work habits of the sales department.

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? Entering the new year 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 from a prestigious property without considering his/her ability to sell. Does the sales person have the skills and proven track record of identifying new business and moving that business to his/her property? Client contacts can quickly come and go, but great sales skills result in constant business and on-going account relationships.

Expert sales skills can produce business despite product deficiencies, rate structures, 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 and your correct title included? If these things did not happen with you, you can pretty much be assured 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 are important components to success. 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.

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. It is equally 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, or guest service issues. But, consistent management and consistent expectations will help develop a sales culture, where sales calls is the priority; goals and expectations are well thought-out and quantified; 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 the best results for your property(s). So start the new year with the commitment to know how to achieve and maintain a successful sales organization. With a few simple steps in place, you are well positioned for success regardless of market conditions.

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About Fields and Company

Fields and Company, founded by Brenda Fields, provides in-depth analyses and cost effective sales and marketing solutions to help owners and managers achieve their revenue goals. Systems and procedures are devised and implemented to monitor results and to ensure staff accountability, resulting in success despite market conditions. We work on individual projects or provide on-going involvement and expertise on a retained basis.

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