

Turn Front Desk Clerks Into Front Desk Salespersons - By Doug Kennedy

2007-02-13

Despite the continuous increased focus on improving revenue management processes at most hotels these days, more often than not the job of working the front desk is still viewed as primarily being an operational position.

While many hotels and hotel companies have focused training efforts on hospitality and guest-service efficiency, few have provided the more comprehensive sales training that the position calls for. Whatever sales training that has been presented has typically focused on reservations sales techniques for converting inquiry calls, which is certainly a step in the right direction. However, at most properties the front desk team faces myriad sales opportunities each day. Depending on your property's location, brand, and market segment, here are some opportunities your front desk salespeople might encounter daily, along with corresponding training techniques for your next departmental meeting.

Capturing more walk-in business.

Create a positive first impression by initiating contact and welcoming the guest when they enter the lobby. Rather than quoting only the lowest rate and sending them back out to the car to make an "either-or" decision, instead create a "which should I chose?" decision-making scenario by offering two or three room types and/or rate options. Reiterate benefits. Embellish descriptions of features that are relevant.

Securing "move-overs" from disgruntled guests currently staying at other hotels in the area.

Hotels located in dense markets such as Interstate exit ramps or near metropolitan convention centers might often encounter "move-over" opportunities when guests of nearby properties stop by to check rates and availability. Train your team to present your hotel's unique advantages and to avoid negative remarks about the competition. Rather than saying what the other hotel doesn't have or doesn't do, focus on the advantages your property has to offer with statements such as:

"What's unique about us is..."

Up-selling effectively during registration.

With so many guests booking either online or via third parties, the registration process might represent the best time of all to up-sell to higher-rated accommodations. After reassuring the guest that the option they booked is still a good choice, gauge the guest's interest with questions such as:

"Did your travel agent have a chance to mention our concierge floor?" or "Are you familiar with our suites?" Present the upgraded options as being a unique opportunity: "We've had some of our executive king rooms open up this evening..." Personalize the benefits: "As a guest on level you would receive full access to..."

Securing return reservations at departure.

Although many guests use express check-out, plenty of others still stop by to pick up their zero-balance receipt. Make sure all corporate and business clientele are offered the opportunity to rebook for their next trip upon departure. You'll not only be ensuring that your guests aren't tempted to check out the competition, but you'll also potentially be eliminating distribution costs such as travel agency commissions and CRS fees, while along the way showing guests that you value their future business.

Maintaining rate "fences" and eliminating "rate slippage" from guests who re-negotiate during registration, while in-house, or during check-out.

Many of today's savvy guests make it a standard practice to try to re-negotiate their rates upon arrival and/or during their stay. Make sure your front desk sales team is aware that most are just double-checking to make sure they have the best offer available. It is often helpful to gently remind them of the terms/conditions of their offer versus the lower rate they are seeking:

"The advance purchase rate would have required full payment upon the time of booking, and unlike your reservation would not have been eligible for change or cancellation." It might also be appropriate to mention rate tiers that are even higher than what they have committed to: "Just to let you know the normal (standard) rate on this room is usually \$__X__, so the \$__Y__ rate you have confirmed is still a good value."

Using "Channel Conversion Techniques" to convert calls from "rate double-checkers" who have visited online travel agencies.

Increasingly it seems that hotel prospects calling directly to the front desk to make sure the rates they are seeing online are the best available. With most companies practicing rate parity across all distribution channels, more often than not the rate is in fact the same either way. Make sure your front desk team offers to secure the reservation for the caller right here, right now, versus directing them to book online after they hang up. Not only will you ensure that guests aren't lured away by other online offers, but you'll potentially cutting distribution costs, online agency commissions and even CRS fees.

Capitalizing on "after-hours" leads for corporate/group sales, including walk-ins and telephone inquiries.

With the over-stuffed, over-scheduled lives most people live these days it is not uncommon for prospects for groups, functions, or corporate accounts to place their initial call or walk-in inquiry after business hours or on weekends when the sales department is closed. Train your front desk team to properly field these calls by expressing interest, offering to answer any initial, basic questions and by offering the option of leaving a paper message versus a blind transfer into the sales department's voice-mail.

For walk-in inquires, make sure your front desk team is prepared with sales kits, brochures, and business cards of the sales director. Most importantly, make sure that everyone knows what not to say, which is till the number one response more often than not:

"Since you need more than 10 rooms you'll have to call tomorrow between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. when the sales department is open."

Discovering leads for new local corporate accounts from current in-house guests.

Especially for hotels located in or near corporate office parks, industrial complexes and city center locations, it is not unusual for guests to return monthly or even weekly. Over time the front desk team gets to know and recognize these guests. Train your team to pay close attention to the names of the companies your guests work for and to be on the lookout for those representing new corporations and organizations. By probing to find out more about these guests and their companies, it is often possible to uncover leads for the local/corporate business.

By expanding your front desk training to address these and other sales opportunities unique to your hotel's location, market segment, and brand, you will ensure that your team capitalizes on each and every chance to secure additional business and to maximize the profit margins across all distribution channels.

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Originally published at www.hotelmotel.com

This article comes from Hotel News Resource

<http://www.hotelnewsresource.com>

The URL for this story is:

<http://www.hotelnewsresource.com/article26244.html>

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