

Hotel Vendor Salespeople Could Also Benefit From Sales Training - By Doug Kennedy

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As hotel companies continue to invest heavily in arranging sales training for their outside sales associates, our industry's vendor-partners would do well to provide a little fundamental sales training for their salespeople too, especially if my experiences are indicative of others' experiences.

As the part-time volunteer advisor for an international hotel sales and marketing association, my name frequently is published in its press releases. Consequently, I find myself being frequently cold-called by salespeople from top sales automation, revenue-management and distribution technology companies even though as a one-person company focusing on conference speaking and consulting, I am myself in no way a direct sales prospect.

Despite the fact that every e-mail I send (and article I write) has a link to my Web site explaining what I do, these starry-eyed salespeople do no research before calling and instead launch blindly into their preprogrammed spiel touting how their systems can help me increase my revenue per available room and improve my performance against my 'comp-set.' Jeez, if they could first help me buy a hotel to run I would then have a comp-set and might even be interested!

The sad part is that while I am not a direct sales prospect, I could in fact be a great networking partner. I have always been a 'dot connector' of sorts and am always eager to help anyone who asks how to best reach our association's members.

In talking with my client friends who are actually on the hotel operations side, many share similar stories of how they are hounded and harassed by undertrained cold-callers. Perhaps our vendor-partners could benefit from revisiting some of the sales fundamentals hotel people learn in workshops every year:

œ Practice relationship selling. Remember that relationships are everything in any type of sales, so before you start 'selling,' make sure you first have connected with the customer. For example, when salespeople cold-call me to ask for my assistance in networking versus trying to directly sell me a product I can't use, I am always eager to assist them.

œ Research before you dial. Before picking up the telephone on a cold call, spend a few minutes getting to know more about the hotel or management company that you are calling. A few clicks on its Web site can help you gain insight into what the company's needs are likely to be based on its types of properties, market segments, geographic location and whether it runs franchise, chain or independent hotels.

œ Introduce yourself up front and get to the point quickly. Prospects today are living in the same fast-paced business environment as you are on the supplier side. So make sure you establish early on what's in it for them if they continue the conversation. Avoid engaging in too much small talk before stating your purpose. Just get to the point as to why you are calling and how you think that your product or service might benefit the prospect. Leave it up to them to initiate the small talk later in the call.

'Hello Mr. Kennedy, this is Douglas from Acme Hotel Suppliers. We provide (product or service) for leading hotel companies such as (client names) I had just noticed that your hotel was using (the competition), so the purpose of my call today is just to introduce our company as an alternative and to see if we could be in touch with the right contacts for proper consideration next time.'

œ Ask for permission to ask. Instead of asking closed-ended questions obviously designed to trap a prospect into admitting his or her need for your product or service, (such as 'Do you think your RevPAR is as high as it could be?'), ask for permission to engage them in the discovery process.

'Thanks for being willing to consider us. If I could just ask you a few brief questions about your current RevPAR and comp-set performance, I could then send a detailed proposal specific to your hotel.'

œ Put the next steps on your to-do list. Occasionally, salespeople will get lucky enough to find the cold-call prospect available and interested. But even so, it is unrealistic to think that most people can clear their schedules for a 15-minute impromptu chat. Instead, be realistic about how far along you can get in the sales cycle during the first cold call. Demonstrate that you respect their time constraints by putting the next-steps on your to-do list:

'All right Mr. Kennedy, thanks for that information. If it's OK, I'll send you an e-mail about some of the advantages we can offer your company. Then I'll contact you again next week to walk you through our online demonstration if you would be willing to take a look at it.'

œ Send additional details immediately. Get started with demonstrating how reliable and trustworthy your company is by sending your initial information/proposal on the same day or next. Personally, I always state a timeline that is one day longer than I really need, allowing me to underpromise and overdeliver by sending it a day early. Make sure the sales correspondence is personalized and customized, and not just some boilerplate copy or template of a sales letter.

œ Follow-up relentlessly, gently. Having sent the initial details, put your company's best foot forward by following up relentlessly, but also gently and not annoyingly. Generally, a telephone call is best as a first follow-up, but you usually won't connect these days and will need to leave a succinct, professional voice-mail. Don't automatically expect a call back from a busy hotel executive; it is your job as a salesperson to initiate those gentle reminders. If a call isn't returned after one or two

business days, use a different form of follow-up, such as an e-mail. Then if the e-mail isn't returned, try the good ole' fashioned sure-fire way of getting a response -- send a personal, handwritten note!

By practicing some of the sample sales basics that their counterparts in the hotel business use daily, the hotel industry's vendor-partners and suppliers will find a lot more doors opening when they're out knocking. They'll receive more returned calls, get more introductory meetings and ultimately close more business than their counterparts who keep trying their same old-hat approaches.

By Doug Kennedy

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His articles have also appeared worldwide in more than 17 prominent international publications including the HSMIA Marketing Review, eHotelier, 4hoteliers, Hotel News Resource, Hotel Online, Human Assets - Dubai and Hong Kong, Hsyndicate worldwide, BAHA Times - U.K., Hospitality - Maldives, and the Hotel Expert Magazine Hong Kong.

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