

## Besides Training: Maximizing Hotel Reservations Sales Success - By Doug Kennedy

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Although having an effective hotel reservations sales training program is one key ingredient of a sales development action plan, other essential components will ensure that your hotel is actualizing the full potential of each and every transient reservations inquiry.

Too often managers only implement the sale training component, and then if they measure the results at all, they do so exclusively through mystery shopping test calls. Other hotels make little or no effort at reservations sales training, mistakenly believe that the hotel reservations function is less important today than in days past, with the proliferation of information, virtual tours, and photo galleries that are available online.

Yet if you listen to real calls from real callers these days, you'll find firsthand that the Internet has only broadened the spectrum of calls that agents receive. Even after viewing the hotel and its rooms directly online, many still want to call and talk to a live person, especially if it is first time visit. Others have read online reviews at places like TripAdvisor, IGOUGO and Travel Post and want to get personal opinions and suggestions from on-site agents.

If you are looking to keep your team on the continuous and ongoing journey to reservations sales excellence once you have exposed them to sales training, here are some other components for maximizing hotel reservations sales success.

**Know when they are calling.** Despite the availability of better technology at lower price points, too many reservations offices still lack proper call tracking systems. Some have no phone activity reports at all, while others manage only from a report showing only a monthly or daily roll-up. Make sure your phone activity reports tell you:

- \* Call activity by hour, day, week and month.
- \* Dropped calls by hour, day, week, and month and percentage of dropped calls.
- \* Average hold time.
- \* Average talk time per agent.

**Right-sized staffing.** Make sure your reservations office has enough agents to realistically field the call activity you are receiving, which is why the starting place is the above reports. Excessive budget cuts in this department only hurt bottom-line profits not help, so instead of looking at reservations with a 'cost control' paradigm, they need to be investing in maximizing sales effectiveness and optimizing revenue opportunities.

**Cross-train other staff to field reservations calls during bottle-neck periods.** Move the reservations function from being just a person or department into being an important function that others can also cover when necessary. (Likewise, cross train reservations staff for dual functions in other related areas such as sales, administration, conference services.)

**Streamline side-work.** Certainly it is a good idea to utilize reservations sales agents for other administrative tasks during periods of slower phone traffic, and this even helps justify and off-set the costs of right-sized staffing. However, during periods of peak activity, make sure agents aren't asked to toggle back and forth between selling on the phone and being a data entry clerk for rooming lists or extranet reservations. Otherwise, agents might rush callers in an attempt to clean-up their stack of side-work, not to mention that it is highly distracting.

**Implement call recording/logging systems.** Not long ago, systems for recording and logging all inbound reservations calls were practical only in mega-call centers for hotel brands, which did in fact implement them despite investments exceeding six figures. Nowadays, call recording systems are available at all price points, making them feasible for virtually any lodging company. Such systems allow for quality assessment and coaching of agents based on real calls from real callers, so agents can't bias the results by detecting the test caller. Agents will also benefit from the opportunity to hear themselves on the phone. (Such systems have an added by-product of allowing for calls to be reviewed to resolve disputes from guests who claim certain things were said - or not said - during the call.)

**Know who's calling.** New emerging technology now not only records and logs calls, but also identifies the name and mailing address of nearly all callers. What's even more exciting, is that some systems, such as the Narrowcast system by Navis ([www.NavisTechnologies.com](http://www.NavisTechnologies.com)), actually tell the agent the economic demographics of the caller's neighborhood according to the Nielsen marketing demographics rating system. So agents can identify right away the more affluent callers.

**Measure, measure, measure!** In the reservations department as in life, you get what you measure. Again too many reservations departments only look at certain key metrics, preventing them to see an overall comprehensive picture of how agents are really doing. For example, some only look at total reservations booked or total revenue sold, thinking that the agent who sells the most is automatically their best producer. While this often proves to be the case, when you start to look at call conversion, you sometimes find that the top agent in terms of revenue/room nights is really just a call-grabber who rushes the indecisive callers or pushes them back to the website, moving on to the next caller who is ready to book. Make sure you are measuring:

- \* Total revenue sold by agent and by department.
- \* Total number of bookings by agent and by department.
- \* Total calls received by agent and by department.
- \* Call conversion ratio (number of calls vs. bookings) on at least a 'raw' basis (looking at all calls and all bookings.)
- \* Average revenue per booking. Over time, this will indicate whether agents are taking the time to upsell to higher rated accommodations and packages.
- \* Monthly monitoring-based assessments or at least mystery shopping test calls. Ideally, make sure your reservations agents are assessed on real calls that are monitored and recorded for training purposes. Or if you don't yet have the necessary monitoring technology, be sure to use a mystery shopping supplier that works proactively to minimize detection during test call inquiries.

Implement proper recognition and incentive plans. Many managers don't want to offer an incentive because they argue 'that's what we pay them to do anyway.' Yet few managers make this same argument for their traditional hotel sales department. Still, it is true that employees should not receive an incentive for doing their job, which is to help the hotel achieve its expected transient revenue goal each month. That's why the best incentive is to set a monthly goal about 10 days out based on the most updated forecast. When the goal is achieved, a celebration (i.e. pizza or ice cream party) can be held. Yet when the goal is exceeded, a percentage of the additional revenue can be shared with the team. The true measuring stick for an effective incentive is how enthusiastic managers are about paying it out. If it is properly structure, you should be emphatic when agents receive large bonuses.

Indeed, implementing contemporary, customer-focused, reservations sales training is a key ingredient of any recipe of reservations sales success, but other essential components such as those listed above will provide your hotel or company on the roadmap to continuous success on the endless journey to reservations sales excellence.

By Doug Kennedy

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### **Doug Kennedy**

Doug Kennedy, President of the Kennedy Training Network, has been a fixture on the hospitality and tourism industry conference circuit since 1989, having presented over 1,000 conference keynote sessions, educational seminars, and on-premise training workshops for diverse audiences representing every segment of the lodging industry.

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