

Marketing Independent Hotels - By Leora Lanz

2008-01-10

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Today's independent hotels, both full- and limited- service, find themselves working much harder to compete with the newer, branded properties that benefit from sales and marketing opportunities offered by their franchises. Ever-diligent sales and marketing professionals continue to reach out to clients, persistently pointing out their product redo's and amenities. So, while the investment has been made in the facility itself, and the marketing outreach is proactive and strong, what's going on with service levels at these hotels? Is service keeping up with the product? Is it delivering on the promises that marketing is making?

When a sales director writes a marketing plan, the focus is on the competitive analysis, the sales action plans and budgets. The plan also includes vision and position statements, identifies new business generators and new markets, and even commits to new services and amenities.

The Director of Sales & Marketing (DOS) is busy enough handling direct responsibilities, and we would never expect him or her to have the time to review the guest service Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to insure we are making promises that are actually being delivered by operational staff. Have we structured these SOPs so that job descriptions, training and even review processes are coordinated? In order to deliver the marketing promises we make and to grow our occupancy, why not consider the development and review of SOPs an important part of the marketing mix?

This is a very different approach. Service is key, but if service is disappointing, marketing has just shot itself in the foot. For independent hotels that may not have the benefit of a 'corporate' or 'brand standard' for service, the time is now to execute this effort and launch 2008 with a focused service and marketing initiative.

How can this be accomplished? HVS Marketing Communications has experience working with hotel executives to serve marketing in this capacity, and guiding professionals in property-level human resources and training to support the marketing vision.

Here are some elements that comprise our Five-Step Program:

I. Meet with hotel ownership and the executive committee

HVS can effectively serve as the facilitator to encourage the conversation, keep the discussion focused, and pull out specific messages to use for the hotel's brand standards.

Brainstorm the emotions and experiences projected by the hotel. Who is the customer? Why do they come here? What do they expect of us? Use these responses and begin composing the hotel's Brand Standards which include service and operational expectations, and expectations for service recovery.>

Brainstorm with this group to understand the hotel's vision. What do we want people to say about us at the end of the year? In five years? In 10 years? >

Have this same group read reviews about the hotel posted on websites. What do these comments say about us? Where do we excel? Where do we disappoint? Understand how easy it is for someone to share his or her experience at our hotel - and with the world! Ask the group to write their own reviews and see how inconsistent or similar they can be.

Now ask this group to begin to write the creed - the pledge they would be willing to make as an employee of the hotel and as management. What does the management of the hotel promise to deliver to its employees? To its guests? What do the employees pledge to deliver to management? And to guests?

II. Meet with hotel department heads and key management

HVS Marketing Communications knows how important all departments are to the sales and marketing effort, and can effectively serve as the mediator and program coordinator for these sessions.

With this group, review the Brand Standards started by the executive committee for input, changes and discussion. The pleasant surprise for all will be the willingness of staff to contribute and share ideas. The key is to facilitate this neutrally and encourage positive input rather than finger pointing.

This group will also review, modify and contribute to the vision and creed. It's important that there is a buy-in at all levels, including line staff, so that everyone will be willing to sign the pledge at the concluding ceremony.

Begin the process of documenting departmental tasks. It's important that each department's task list be shared and read among all. Many, if not most of the hotel tasks involve at least one other department. All departments must understand how other departments regard their input into a particular activity. This vocal and interactive conversation is an opportunity for service and operational efficiencies to result.

III. Meet with the staff of each hotel department

Having extensive on-site and corporate level experience, the HVS Marketing Communications team knows how to respectfully speak with all staff - line and management - to encourage contribution, discussion, resolution and agreement.

Now, each department can begin the process of documenting the policies and procedures for each task. This step can be tedious and tiresome, but it's important to have policies, procedures and service issues spelled out. Remember, we're talking about the service areas that directly touch the guest, as this is what affects the sales and marketing. It's important that meetings and discussions to document policies are facilitated so that they, in fact, do occur, and when necessary, for policies to be translated into languages spoken by the line staff who directly impact the guests. It is also critical that all staff participate so they understand their contribution to the department and can buy-in to the goal: pledging the ultimate in guest service so marketing can deliver on its promise.

This process takes time. Realistically, it can be accomplished in about three months, as long as the facilitator remains on top of the plan. The SOPs can also be used in the future for job descriptions and even performance reviews. Now that they've been shared with every individual working at the hotel for their understanding and commitment, the SOPs should be regarded as the backbone of the service process. And, of course, continued training of the SOPs and the special nuances which make this independent hotel distinct from its competition are necessary to keep brand standards alive and fresh.

HVS Marketing Communications can assist you with researching, writing and organizing a realistic and successful marketing plan. We can also help with the entire process of developing and reviewing your SOPs to insure that the service you offer supports the promises made by your sales and marketing team.

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This article comes from Hotel News Resource

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The URL for this story is:

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