

Training to Keep Your Hotel Sales Effort Strong - By Leora Lanz

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With today's economic climate and the surge of new hotels in the last 10 years, basic selling skills - for being an effective sales manager - are more important than ever. We need to revisit them and train to keep our selling ahead of the curve.

As a sales manager, you may sometimes second-guess yourself about how you communicated with a prospective client and what you could have done differently to clinch the sale.

Was there just one more question you should have asked?

Did you hear what your customer was saying and actually listen to what was truly important to him or her?

Did you take notes that you can refer back to catch that little tidbit so you know how to truly please your prospect?

If you were faced with a negative comment or disagreement, did you take time to step back and re-inform your customer?

Could you have turned the situation into an opportunity rather than keep it as a problem?

With today's economic climate and the surge of new hotels that has popped up in the last 10 years, these basic selling skills - the 101 course for being an effective sales manager - are more important than ever. They're so important that we need to periodically revisit them and train to keep our selling strong and ahead of the curve.

HVS Sales & Marketing Services trains sales teams with a 10-point system with qualities or effective selling skills that we role play with sales managers to challenge them to think about how they would handle specific situations in the sales process. Here are a few scenarios:

Face negatives that come up along the way. It is always safest to tell your client 'please let me look into that and get back to you.' Have the client focus on priorities and let them know it's in their best interest for you to investigate appropriate information.

Example: A full service conference center client of ours had a situation where three meeting attendees come down with an upper respiratory infection while in the hotel. The client blamed the hotel and threatened they would never bring return business again. The hotel would risk too much if they lost this one account, so management immediately hired an outside firm to inspect the air quality in the building. The findings were that the building was healthy and that the respiratory infections were not related to the hotel.

A new sales manager was later assigned to this account and naturally, the client recounted the respiratory infection incident during the first meeting with the new sales manager. The client wanted to know what has changed since the last meeting. 'Why should we book with you again?' Rather than slipping back into a defensive position, the sales manager's reply was simply, 'Please let me look into that and get back to you.'

The sales manager left the client's office and researched the situation. The following day, he returned to with documentation confirming that the air quality in the building was excellent. The credentials of the agency were presented as well. The client's concerns were put to rest. Handling this situation appropriately resulted in the hotel booking all of the firm's meetings for the following year.

Know how to 'close' the sales call. It's a special skill to turn your conversation with a prospect into an action that takes the sales process to the next step. Do you end your call with a request for a follow-up meeting, or ask permission to submit a proposal?

Example: An independent, full service hotel client in the Southwest was extremely successful in the group market. But they only enjoyed small transient business - not nearly as much as their competitive set hotels - and didn't have a sales manager to focus on the transient market.

Eventually, the hotel hired someone knowledgeable about the hotel industry and with a 'natural' sales personality. This new salesperson went on sales calls, conducted site inspections and developed warm relationships with her clients. However, very few companies booked with her, and we were very much aware that these same accounts booked at our competitive set hotels.

When HVS began working more closely with this sales manager, it became apparent that she simply did not know how to ask for the business. So HVS joined her on sales calls and took the lead during the appointment to ask for the business. We essentially role played for her in actual situations, and then developed call sheets that she could use during her sales calls. The call sheets prompted her to ask about the number of room nights the company uses on a monthly and annual base, the rates they currently pay, the services and amenities required to win the business, and when they were to make a decision about their hotel selection. Then we worked with her to write a letter confirming the rate and providing the contract. We taught her proper follow-up with correspondence as well. Within six months, the hotel enjoyed an increasing number of signed contracts and a 10% increase in the transient market. This training effort also resulted in a sales manager who was motivated and successful.

Negotiating is simply part of the process. The sales manager needs to insure your client that you have the best product out there in order to begin any negotiation. If the sales manager enters the discussion unwilling to negotiate, chances are the deal will not happen and no one moves forward in a win-win situation.

Example: A full service, strong transient and group hotel that we've worked with enjoyed good Monday through Thursday business. The weekends were a challenge and the hotel was not quick to negotiate rates and conditions since they were strong during the week. At the same time, they needed to build Friday through Sunday occupancy.

The hotel had an opportunity to book a large SMERF group that wanted to arrive on a Wednesday. As with most SMERF business, there was rate sensitivity. Rather than not take the business, the hotel decided to offer the following: lower rates on the weekend and a more competitive rate than normal for Wednesday and Thursday. Breakfast, lunch and breaks were included in all of the rates. When the sales manager did the math for the client, the client realized that the higher rate was indeed a value. The hotel also gave one more comp room over the weekend than usual to compensate for the higher rates on Wednesday and Thursday.

None of this seems so out of the box. However, in order to make it more palatable to the general manager and hotel owners, the sales manager asked the client if their hotel could also host the group for their next meeting. The client was amenable and signed the current year contract as well as a second contract for a regional meeting. This sales manager's ability to negotiate was a win-win for everyone involved.

Sales training needs to be proactive and ongoing. To rejuvenate your team, contact HVS Sales & Marketing Services at llanz@hvs.com.

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