

Real Conversations Increase Reservations Conversions - By Doug Kennedy

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There is no doubt that hotels across all market segments have invested heavily in reservations sales development. Besides scheduling outside training, most hotels have a regular telephone mystery shopping program in place, and the majority seem to factor results into frontline staff, management and General Manager incentive programs.

Yet all too often the quest for the 'perfect shop' score turns front desk and reservations agents into robots who routinely spew-out a scripted list of the same features for each and every caller, regardless of their needs or travel plans.

For example, many of these programs require agents to ask certain probing questions, such as 'Are you familiar with the hotel?' and 'May I ask what is bringing you to the area?' which conceptually is a good starting places for investigating the caller's needs. The problem is that most agents you call these days haven't been trained to use the information they find by asking these questions, and they don't follow-up with additional investigative questions to find out what's really important. Instead they proceed directly into listing features that are essentially the same for every caller.

The list of features most agents are mentioning these days tends to be generic, vague, and don't at all differentiate one hotel from its competitors. For example, agents at these hotels laundry-list features of the hotel itself: 'We have a business center, a work-out room, high speed Internet access, a restaurant, room service and a heated indoor pool with Jacuzzi.' Some even make a weak effort to tie-in these features to a benefit by adding 'for your convenience' after each feature listed. Most don't listen interactively, so even when a caller expresses interest in a feature mentioned, such as by responding to a mention of a health club or business center by saying, 'Oh, really?' they respond only with more features by saying something like: 'Yes we do, it's on the 3rd floor and it's open 24 hours with room-key access for your convenience.'

Frankly, I don't care and won't remember what floor the health club is on until I get there, and although some guests might want to know they can work out in the middle of the night, I think most are surely like me and much more interested in hearing about the workout they will experience there, that both free weights and weight machines are available, that Pilates balls/mats can be found there, and other details such as windows with views and individually controlled TV's that might be available.

Similarly, in describing rooms these days, agents are frequently saying something like: 'It has 300 square feet, a king size or two double beds, an iron and ironing board, coffee maker, hairdryer.' I have personally heard these same descriptions used at mid-market hotels through ultra-luxury, regardless of their brand flag and average rates, so what agents are effectively doing is making their hotel sound just exactly like every other one in town.

Besides not accomplishing the goal of differentiating a hotel from its competitors, agents I speak to report that this type of system actually annoys and turns-off many callers, especially when the agent sales training is requiring them to re-list these same features for caller who respond that they have stayed before.

Unfortunately, many of the agents themselves are adverse to having to follow such a scripted process, and yet when there is a \$100 incentive for a 'perfect shop call' riding on it, and 25% of your GM's annual bonus, most simply have no choice but to follow a reservations process their instinct and customer feedback tells them makes no sense.

In today's world of over-informed callers who are one click away from viewing dozens of lodging options, and who are often highly distracted and multi-tasking while on the phone, it takes more than a politely spoken laundry list of features to convince a first time caller to pick your hotel. After surfing through countless hotel reviews at consumer-generated media sites such as TripAdvisor, what today's callers want is personalized reservations experience that is caller-centric, customer focused, versus being built around some antiquated, linear and sequential sales process.

That's why more and more hotels these days are looking for a new paradigm for reservations training and are ready to move beyond rigid scripting and canned reservations pitches.

In presenting reservations training and mystery shopping services personally for top performing hotels across all market segments, it seems to me that the key to a more conversational sales approach starts with training agents to ask more and better questions about the caller's plans in a friendly and interactive way. While it's still good to ask if a caller is familiar with the hotel and what's bringing them to the area, the real key is to use the information provided to focus on relevant benefits versus listing features.

I've also had success in training agents to continue to investigate as the call progresses, not just at the start of the call. For example, before giving the caller details about a health club or fitness center, it's better to first ask them if they are interested in fitness! Before talking about complimentary shuttle service and/or free parking, why not first ask if they have a car? Before describing features such as a full service spa, golf, tennis, skiing, water sports, sightseeing, or other area activities in detail, why not first ask if they are interested in these services?

Good investigative probing questions are great conversation starters and are the key to engaging callers versus having transactions. The majority of callers will appreciate the extra attention and that someone at a hotel actually cares and is interested in their needs. By the end of the phone call, this approach ensures that guests and other third party callers have found out more about your hotel than that it has the same basic features of any mid-market through luxury hotel these days. Instead, your future guests will be allured and enticed with personalized descriptions that paint just the picture they want to

envision and will end the call with a positive first impression that differentiates your hotel experience from being just another clean place to stay.

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