

Hotel Butlers-Lynch or Lynchpin? - By Steven Ferry

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Butlers were first introduced to hotels with great success to the bottom line and guest satisfaction in the 1980s. The last few years have seen a steep increase in hotels offering butler service.

The key driver has been the realization by top-tier hotels that when one had everything marble and gold could offer guests, the arena where the most rapid ROI and increased guest satisfaction could be achieved was improving service, with butlers the quintessential haut-service providers in private service, a metamorphosis into the hotel environment was an obvious move in the dance to win guest loyalty.

Currently, the International Institute of Modern Butlers lists 150 hotels (<http://www.modernbutlers.com/html/butler-rating-system.html>) offering butler service of many stripes. The Institute created the Butler Rating system to help hoteliers move their butler service to the next level, as well as allow potential guests to distinguish between the pretenders, the also-rans, and the serious players.

Enough track record exists now to discern where the pitfalls in establishing butler departments may lie, and what actions or situations may allow butlers more surely to deliver on the promise. For in many a hotel and resort the author has trained, the butler concept has formed the lynchpin in the marketing strategy to differentiate that hotel in the local market. Yet too often, hotels are finding themselves floundering short of this goal with much time and money invested and the time to deliver on the promise well past. Rather than waiting for this dire state of affairs before calling in Butler Busters, a proactive approach as follows might be easier on the blood pressure readings and wallet.

Top Down

Butler programs begin with an owner signing onto the concept and management embracing the mandate. Yet I have seen one hotel manager pay for two rounds of expensive training and the minute it was over, replace the carefully trained head butler with an individual without butler experience who decided that the services being offered by the butlers were not to be continued. Result: half the butlers left almost immediately and the guests complained that the butler service was not up to standard. An alert to the chain's COO was met with, 'Well, the service I received there just now was very good.' Hmm, ever met a corporate exec who was not given the red-carpet treatment?

In another hotel that found itself in a crush to meet the opening date through the construction dust, and so neglected to properly market and sell its services, the newly hired GM decided that the best way to reduce costs was to let go the 'overpaid' butlers. The problem was, however, that the butlers were very popular and the only thing of note about that hotel in a city with plenty of others.

Perhaps the most egregious was the GM who took the owner's bright vision for a butler department that had been ably grown to a department of 45 butlers by a strong head butler and trained by the Institute, and reduced the butlers to glorified bellman while blowing off half the staff. What was driving this glad-handing GM was the knowledge that the high standards of service being demonstrated by the butlers was showing him up in a most embarrassing manner, and as further investigation was to reveal, hiding unethical behavior, such as personally taking over the ordering of coffee for the resort-coffee that caused the owner to bring his own whenever he stayed and the guests to go off resort for a good cup-on the basis that he could bed the rather good-looking coffee vendor.

Where do I Find Butlers?

Some hotels have really struggled to find butlers for their departments. The difficulties tend to start with HR not fully understanding what butlers are and so not clearly communicating to prospective employees what they would be doing and why it is a desirable thing to do.

Calling butlers something else (such as 'personal concierges') is a non-starter, because people go blank and inert when they encounter something they do not understand. There is no precedent or clear definition for 'personal concierge,' so nobody knows what it is. The effort to move away from the more formal and stiff-upper-lipped butler is understandable, but this is achieved in the training process and the resulting attitude of the modern-day hospitality butler: not by denying the name of the relatively recognizable (in many countries) butler moniker.

If HR and management and the head butler do not conduct a PR campaign to gain acceptance of the butler concept, then the butlers will not fit in, will be elbowed out, their income and morale will be low, nobody will want to be 'one of those butlers' and butlers will keep leaving the department, making the butler/guest ratio untenable and the butler department hard to populate.

Butlers should be paid the most of any line staff and be tipped positions. As the hospitality side of the prestigious private service butler, there is a certain cachet/prestige to being a butler, and when taken to heart, the delivery of service to butler standards is extremely satisfying. It should not be difficult, therefore, to hire for the position once it is explained properly to prospective employees. One does need high-caliber staff for intelligent interaction with guests, but there should be enough locals of this caliber interested in the profession without having to go to the lengths and expense of hiring overseas trainees who leave after a couple of years. While it helps to have previously trained butlers, only the head butler really needs to be in this category, and therefore also perhaps non-local. There is no reason why a month of training should not create a very

effective butler staff from scratch (given basic hospitality experience and a service-oriented mindset).

When Unions Run the Show in First Gear

There was a time when unions were a much-needed antidote to employer abuse. The author's experience of them in hospitality in various countries in the 21st Century has unfortunately shown them to be particularly insensitive to the purpose of the activity in which their members are engaged: namely, the protection of member 'face time' with guests/tip revenue being more important than the guests having smiles on their faces. Butlers at one resort instituted 'morning wake-up service,' for which half the resort signed up on the first day, judging by the tips generated, they found it most pleasant. The service was cancelled the same day. Why? Because the unionized IRD staff found out about the tip stream and stated that as a beverage was presented as part of the service, only IRD could present it. However, as there is a lot more to a morning wake-up service than beverages, this was a non-starter. So the union cancelled the service.

In another unionized hotel, butlers were introduced at its reopening. The extent of the butler service had been ironed out with the different departments ahead of time and the butlers began to deliver much-appreciated service. Within three months, the unions had stepped in following specious grievances and basically eviscerated the butler offerings with the result that the butlers had been reduced to 'the guys who get the ice' and were about to quit en masse.

In another hotel on a small island, the staff offered to strike one hour before a large wedding unless the GM gave them a raise. His plaintive, 'But I just gave you one last week' fell on deaf ears.

It is easy to bash unions given such stories, but there is a need for unions in many countries in the world that stand where the US did a century ago. For unions to have a survival role in the Western world, however, it might be more productive for all concerned to come off the entitlement kick and work with management to bring flexibility, reason, and balance to the employee experience: what purpose a union in a bankrupt hotel?

For butler service to be instituted in a union environment, one needs to meet with the unions and handle their concerns. If they are intractable, then skip instituting butler service, because they will undermine it into an unworkability. Otherwise, consider having the butler department unionized so that the union is more inclined to look after the butlers' interests, too.

Turf and Face Time

Unions or no, butlers are a Johnny-come-lately to the hospitality scene. They therefore tend to displace other departments, cutting across their face time with guests and customary duties. Unless this is addressed up front before a butler department is created, other departments will elbow out the butlers, or fail to support them in servicing guests. The result? Inter-departmental strife, poorly serviced guests, and butlers who leave because their job description does not match where the penguin suit hits the corridor.

What to do?

Try hiring the butlers internally, especially from IRD, so there is no issue with the butlers taking over IRD. The same could be done with concierges in hotels with 100% butler service. Conduct PR campaigns with all the staff so they understand what the butlers do and how they will benefit the hotel and themselves. And make sure that SOPs are worked out that take into account the needs of the other departments.

Great I have a Butler-Now What?

One resort had a good butler department that management was about to disband because the guest feedback showed the butlers weren't doing anything for the guests. Why not? They had no idea what a butler could do for them. Solution: put out a CD for guests before they arrive explaining not only the resort but also what the butlers could do for them. This answer was augmented by a pictorial compendium of butler services in each suite. Result? One of the most effective butler departments in the world.

In another hotel where the failure to introduce the butler concept properly had resulted in the butlers literally bringing ice and doing nothing else, we introduced new services for them to offer the guests and created a Butler Services menu card so the guests a) knew what was on offer and b) asked for it so c) they were happy and d) so were the butlers.

Let's Do the Butler Thing

A butler department is not a service that can be instituted by reading a book and implementing it internally (flattering for the author but unfortunately, not proven possible in practice), calling in the cheapest trainer, or simply renaming the pool attendant a 'pool butler.' One would think that managers would be able to see what an oxymoron 'butlers on the cheap' is. Likewise, a glitzy web site does not a good trainer make. It is easy enough to put on a dog-and-pony show of the mechanical skills expected of a butler, but if there is no comprehensive program to inculcate the right mindset and create the necessary communication skills and attitude, then one will end up with a Ford or worse a Trabant when one's sites were set far higher. It is embarrassing for butler trainers to have to retrain a butler department trained poorly by a peer in the profession. Such represent wasted money, time, and service time with guests and just should not be borne by managers working hard to make their hotels achieve stiff targets and quota.

Some hotels approach the Institute wanting their butler department slammed in three days. A refresher course makes sense in three days, but not creating something that essentially requires a lifetime of learning to perfect. One expects such enquiries from a country predicated on cheap imitations and lacking any reference point for what a butler is after decades of communism, but not from Western countries in which managers should have some understanding of what a butler stands for.

There are many ways to fail, but only one basic route to success. It involves the owner making a decision, whether off his own bat or at management suggestion, management adopting the goal as its own and hiring a strong head butler (not two, as one resort is busy doing currently), hiring from within where possible, obtaining agreement with PR campaigns and meetings with any unions and other employees, bringing in competent consultants to advise at the front end (including on space needs for butlers), and trainers capable of creating a well-rounded butler department that really can deliver, and ongoing training and hiring and use of the Institute's Butler Rating System (free download at <http://www.modernbutlers.com/html/butler-rating-system.html>) to guide ongoing improvements.

Having beaten the drum noisily about the value of butlers in high-end hotels, it is incumbent upon the author to do what he can to ensure hotel managers enjoy the promised fruits (with apologies for the mixed metaphors).

Steven Ferry consults and trains butlers in hotels, hotel condominiums, private villas, resorts, and private estates, spa butlers in facilities with spas, and corporation employees on a variety of topics. He is Chairman of the International Institute of Modern Butlers (www.modernbutlers.com) and author of the best-selling industry texts, *Hotel Butlers*, *The Great Service Differentiators* and *Butlers and Household Managers, 21st Century Professionals*. He can be contacted at stevenferry@modernbutlers.com

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