

Is This The Summer Of Our Hospitality Discontent? - By J. Ragsdale Hendrie

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It has been tough, folks, and we do not need to beat the drums about the obvious, particularly in the United States. But, there are always silver linings, admiration for those Hospitality companies which have hunkered down and navigated the economic trough, as well as those who understand the cyclical nature of the business and have planned forward.

Consultants to the Hospitality Industry usually have some down time in the summer - time to work on their tan, their golf handicap, garden weeds, and bikini contests. There is great opportunity to digest all the white papers, opinions and news about the 'devaluation' of our Hospitality brilliance - restaurants going under, development curtailed and spiraling, room rates and occupancy way down, travelers herded into truncated flight patterns - the price of everything just sky rocketing - very tough times for we Hospitality providers. Can we make that silk purse out of this sow's ear? Absolutely!

Keep your Brand in the public eye. We should have learned that absence does not make the heart grow fonder, rather you fall off the radar screen, in this case the Internet. Our content providers have been generating news, but very general in nature. This is the time to tell the marketplace what you have been doing - your promotions, your innovations and your successes. There has been a real void this summer. Fill it with your advertising and press releases. Be judicious with your budget and media buys, but get out there with the Brand message.

Beware discounts. This can be very tricky, for you want to fill some rooms and tables, so 'specials' populate the landscape - free gas, breakfast buffets, dates with Brittany, etc. Once these become expected, they become the norm, and it is very difficult to elevate the business and charge more for what we used to give away.

The usual just does not work anymore. We all know this, yet we retreat to the comfortable, the familiar, the time tested. It certainly has not worked for the Newspaper business or the automotive industry, where innovation was crushed for the immediate gain, which was elusive. You see this approach particularly in the Destination Marketing world, where they throw out clever ideas, invest heavily in promotion, and then the destination community cannot deliver. That is what we are selling - delivery on the expectation, where every player has a role and responsibility to deliver an authentic, honest Experience, differentiated by service. So, do not turn just to Management to drive the innovation process, engage those who do it every day, your employees.

Ah, the warm bodies. Sourcing talent certainly has become no easier. Talent may be the wrong reference here, although that might be the goal. The labor pool has changed dramatically, and we need to look at what we are offering to, in many ways, a disenfranchised level of applicants. There is an active battle going on - living wage, affordable benefits, respect, impacted by language, culture even religion. It is the changing face of Human Capital. Hospitality careers are not at the top of the list. Many of our leaders see this as the number one priority - manpower planning, development, and deployment.

These are not just 'end of summer' musings. The issues are very real. They touch upon sustainability and sensibility. We are living challenges right now, but we know this will not last forever. However, what will we see at the upswing? By all indications, we will face a very different Hospitality marketplace. If we have not done our homework and applied a little introspection, we will enter this new phase unprepared rather than undaunted. We need to get on track! For others of us, our boards are waxed and surf's up. Tally ho!

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