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Direct Sales: “Give 'em the old razzle dazzle, Razzle Dazzle 'em” | By Brenda Fields

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What has happened to direct sales in the hospitality industry? Once a discipline of an enviable combination of great social skills, good business judgment, and powers of persuasion, direct sales was many times the starting point for learning the business of hotels. A knowledgeable sales person understood how each piece of business or account had an impact on revenues in all areas not just limited to rooms and not just for the short but the long term as well. In addition, the successful sales person forged relationships with clients based on trust, which was the result of rich personal interactions.



So, how has the proliferation of technology impacted the way of doing business as well as enhancing the learning curve? Does the new generation of hotel sales people offer impersonal and cut and dry customer interactions and rely solely on technology to give a red light or a green light on a piece of business? Or are powers of persuasion and good judgment still critical in generating business? This article will reflect the insights and wisdoms of key industry leaders who were interviewed for this article on how direct sales has been impacted by technology and where they see direct sales going in the future.

Selected for this article were three industry veterans who have a wide range of experience with direct sales:

- [Heather Allison-Smith](#), Director of Sales & Marketing | The Ritz-Carlton, Lake Tahoe, California
- [Rose Genovese](#), Vice President of Sales & Marketing | Affinia Hotels/The Benjamin/The James/The Surrey based in New York, New York
- [John Washko](#), Vice President, Sales & Marketing | THE BROADMOOR in Colorado Springs, Colorado

BF: How has the proliferation of technology impacted the way of doing business for the sales person as well as enhancing the learning curve?

HA-S: Although technology has dramatically improved the way we do business, it has created significant challenges for hospitality sales professionals as it relates to relationship selling. Prior to computers, voice mail and email, a sales manager spent almost all of her time with customers, either on the phone or face to face. Our business was about building personal relationships and leveraging those relationships to win business. In addition, on line RFP systems have allowed meeting planners to explore multiple properties in multiple destinations whereas in the past it was often limited to a select few. As a result, sales managers are spending valuable time researching availability and responding to leads with little to no probability of booking. Despite the fact that some of these channels have pitiful conversion ratios, we can't afford not to do everything we can to win the business on the slight chance that this booking might be the one! And even if you are in a preferred destination, you may have just one shot to put out your best bid with no opportunity to qualify the customer or tell him why you are the best fit for his program. With that being said, technology has provided us with a wealth of knowledge that when used correctly, is an invaluable tool. Drilling down your segmentation by industry, geography, etc. helps draw a map of where you should look for additional business opportunities. Virtually everything you need to know about a potential customer's business can be found online. And relationships can be more easily leveraged within portfolios and brands.

RG: Technology is only as good as it accurately informs us of customer needs or streamlines and simplifies a process. It has sped up some booking processes and helped expedite simple client requests. Identifying targets and new potential customers has also greatly improved with technology and the power of the internet. Independent boutique hotels...gain an advantage as potential clients can easily locate and learn about our portfolio, greatly increasing interest and requests.

JW: Technology, and specifically e-mail, has been a game changer for the hotel sales executive, with both positive and negative consequences. The positive is technology, leveraged correctly, can assist a sales person in breaking down barriers and establishing trust. People buy from people they like and trust.

With access to so much data on the web, a savvy salesperson can connect in both business and personal ways with customers to demonstrate a willingness to partner and establish a "win-win" relationship. The negative, is individuals can rely too heavily on technology, and miss the opportunities for direct contact. In our direct interactions, through

utilizing open ended questions, we can really get to know our customers "hot buttons", and what their passions are outside of work.

BF: Does the new generation of hotel sales people offer impersonal and cut and dry customer interactions and rely solely on technology to give a red light or a green light on a piece of business?

RG: The new generation certainly gravitates to texting, emailing, and what could be considered less personal ways of communicating. However, this group certainly doesn't see these technologies as impersonal; it is simply how they communicate. There are plenty of new generation clients where this works extremely well with both parties satisfied, and the trend is building. Technology will continue to expand, and those who are "techno phobic" will need to embrace technology, while those who rely solely on technology will need to build their interpersonal relationships and learn to talk more. In my view, it's seeing the value in both.

JW: In a word, no. Selling hotel rooms for a group is much different then selling widgets. With widgets, you are only constrained by the ability to manufacture and deliver the product. With group patterns, there are a myriad of factors: arrival departure pattern, total group spend, profile of attendees, other business the organization may represent for the property, etc. Technology can be a tool, but will never be the final answer.

HA-S: Perhaps at times, but the new generation of sales people as well as the new generation of meeting planners have grown up with technology. Friendships can be formed without ever having any type of personal interaction. This generation is comfortable with relationships that exist only through texting, email and Facebook

BF: Or are powers of persuasion and good judgment still critical in generating business?

RG: Sales is and always will be critical to the success of any hotel. Persuasion and good judgment are not dying virtues, however, business generation will continue to evolve and with technology this will happen at a faster pace. These are exciting and at the same time challenging times for sellers and sales leaders as we continue to embrace change and question the status quo.

HA-S: Absolutely! Personal sales calls and interaction with the customer has not gone away entirely. While the RFP process can often be "cut and dry", major pieces of business are typically won or lost in the site inspection phase, and professional meeting planners will still open their doors and welcome personal interaction with hospitality professionals.

JW: There is nothing more valuable in business then common sense. Analyzing business opportunities and making sound decisions will always be critical in hotel sales efforts.

BF: Thank you all for your insights into the evolving platform of direct sales. Based on the above, it appears that there is still great opportunity for good 'ol fashioned sales with direct customer interaction that can be not only informative but also exciting. It appears that the use of technology is generational, but the smart leader will ensure that his/her sales team is fully equipped to deal with customers of all types. And what makes sales interesting and exciting is the ability of the sales person to assess nuances, be knowledgeable, as well as to make the process fun. And in the words of Billy Flynn in the musical, Chicago, they know how to: **"Give 'em the old razzle dazzle, Razzle Dazzle 'em!"**

Brenda Fields is a strategist and sales and marketing expert honed from a successful track record in the hospitality industry. Brenda is a member of the prestigious ISHC, recently served on the Americas Board of Directors for HSMIA, and is Immediate Past President of the Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International. Brenda was honored as one of "The Top 25 Most Extraordinary Minds in Sales and Marketing" by HSMIA as well as the "Leadership Development" award. She is an industry leader and spokesperson; a member of the Editorial Board of HotelExecutive.com; contributes regularly to international publications Hotel News Now; Hotels Online, Hotel Resource Weekly Network News, eHoteliers, and many others. For more information visit www.fieldsandcompany.net Ms. Fields can be contacted at 518-789-0117 or brenda@fieldsandcompany.net

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