



The Art and Science of Killer Sales Prospecting - By Brenda Fields

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Now more than ever, most hoteliers are searching for demand generators and are relying on direct sales to impact revenues to fill the significant void left by the ailing economy. Depending on the type of property i.e. transient vs. group-based, direct sales could be responsible for as much as 50%-90% of the occupancy. But many times, the sales person or sales leader is at a loss as to find new prospects.

The tight security of companies has made it virtually impossible to prospect thru cold calling in person, the previously traditional means of finding leads. And the sales software to maintain account information and history is more often than not, poorly utilized and provides no information for prospecting. Additionally, many of the big companies hire third party meeting planning companies which add an additional layer for the sales person to identify and sell. This article will address some key tactics for uncovering sales prospects and in maintaining consistent systems and procedures to produce quality information for current and future prospecting. Implementing new tactics, combined with a motivated sales department will ensure that the sales organization is fully productive in accomplishing their roles of generating business.

The New Normal:

This one phrase alone captures what is happening in the world now: *Business is down; security is tight; and technology is rampant*. When it is all put together, the hotel sales function and how business is generated has changed dramatically. For the most part, the new generation of hotel sales people has been raised on technology i.e. text messaging, emailing, and social media. Therefore, conducting business using all the latest technology comes naturally to them. But, they have also, in all likelihood, entered hotel sales several years ago when business was strong and the biggest challenge was finding space to book business that came to them. Therefore, unless there has been exceptional sales management, the tools and skills required now either are not used or haven't been developed to generate business in a down economy. The combination of art and science for the sales person is critical for identifying and booking business in a highly competitive marketplace.

Now that it is a buyer's market, most hotel sales people are faced with the challenge of finding customers. The sales department working with a sense of urgency, attention to detail, and expert sales skills will place a property in high rankings against its competitors regardless of its product deficiencies and drawbacks.

According to meeting planner David Ezer, Conference Director, Jewish Funders Network, headquartered in Fairfield, CT, the sales person who takes the time to understand his business and his needs will always get high marks and will certainly get his attention. A generic email or scripted phone call will be ignored. According to David, "I know it's more work for the sales person, but something that recognizes they've spent even five seconds looking at my organization's website will always get a response from me."

To Danielle Cattani-Post, CMP, Conference & Event Manager at McKinsey & Company in NYC, her "pet peeve is when a hotel sales person does not really understand what (her) company does". She states, "When a hotel sales person requests a visit to my office, they should be taking advantage of trying to get as much information beforehand so they are fully prepared. Of course this might be difficult and I understand that they are not always given that opportunity. But when they do come in, I expect them to listen to everything I say. When they follow up, it's nice to hear them reiterate some of the key points I had made. For example, I had a hotel sales person visit my office and I explained how having windows in the meeting space is extremely important to my company. The next time we met, they had created a custom made packet of all of their properties that had windows, listed by city. I was extremely thankful and impressed that they had listened to my needs."

It's that combination of art and science that will propel a sales person to excellence. Technology alone will not compensate for a passionate and skilled sales person who is dedicated to meeting or exceeding the expectations of the owner/manager and to simultaneously meeting or exceeding the expectations of the client.

Below are some tips and tools to evaluate for your sales people, ensuring the best ROI in booking business:

- **Account base:**

- The sales department's own account base is the most cost effective and most logical place to start. According to how it was set up, the account base represents existing customers and/or potential customers. Chances are most accounts have not been thoroughly qualified. For example, does the information in the database detail that the insurance company which booked a nice piece of business last October has other business for your property? If not, this is a good starting place. Contacting past users and qualifying for future business is far more simple than trying to find a new customer and convince him or her to book your property. A simple trace system will allow the sales person to contact the client when it is time to start making the decision on the next meeting.

- Also, in the case of a multi-properties, proper qualification by the sales person can generate leads for sister properties. By just asking one additional question i.e. “Where are other locations that you meet or travel to?” can pay off in dividends you’re your sister properties. Qualifying existing business is THE most cost effective initiative that can be implemented. It costs nothing and the pay-out is high.

- **Prospecting Lists:**

- The best sales people do their homework before approaching a potential client. Otherwise, valuable time is wasted to determine if the client is even possibly a potential client. Market research allows the sales person to approach a potential client with confidence and an understanding of their business allowing a greater basis for connection and communication.

- There are companies that specialize in prospecting lists. Depending on the property’s needs and budgets, there are many options. The first step is for the sales leader to have a set strategy for sales prospecting. Sales can be broken down by industry types, geographical areas, or booking channels, as examples. Several companies provide online lists that can be sorted by industry types, geographical areas, company size, and key executives and contacts. It is important to verify how current the list is and how often it is updated. Once the prospecting starts, it is important to ensure that best practices for qualification are in place that the sales person is educated to know what information is to be obtained.

- It may take a few well crafted emails, including information from the market research, to get a response, but the higher quality of communication to a potential client, results in a response.

- **Reader Board Services:**

- How many times do we hear “There is no business” or “Companies just aren’t meeting or traveling as frequently as before”? We know that the reality is that there IS business and finding and booking the business is the function of the sales department. “Backyard selling” is finding business in your own local community. How many times has a sales person been complacent with a regular client, only to learn that the client is also booking the competitors?

- Just as there are companies providing lists of companies for prospecting, there are companies that specialize in providing properties’ lists of meetings and events that are held at their designated competitors. Depending on the budget, the number of sales people, and the size of the community, this is something that can be accomplished the old fashioned way i.e. having a sales person look at the competition’s reader boards on an ongoing basis. In a small community, it should be fairly straightforward in identifying the company and the meeting contact. In a large city, it may be more difficult. Therefore, it could be more cost effective to subscribe to a service which will provide the quality information for sales follow up.

- **Industry Associations:**

- What better way to stay abreast of industry trends, influence the industry, and to meet decision makers than joining an industry association? Networking with decision makers combined with educational opportunities can pay off in dividends when approaching potential clients. And instead of becoming a passive member, it is important to fully participate by joining committees or taking a leadership role. Two high-profile associations are Hotel Sales & Marketing Association International (HSMAI) and Meeting Planners International (MPI). Both provide educational opportunities and resources to increase job performance. And both provide opportunities to develop relationships with peers and clients alike.

- **Trade Shows:**

- Trade shows can be costly with exhibit fees, travel expenses, other fees. But a trade show that is targeted to your market(s) and has a proven track record of quality results is worth investigating. Corporate transient executives and meeting professionals attend and are accessible at shows such as NBTA (National Business Travel Association) and HSMAI's (Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International) Affordable Meetings. To make these and other shows worthwhile and cost effective, it is important to organize staffing so that the booth is always "manned" as well as have pre-set appointments. The key to success of attending any trade show is to be proactive as opposed to waiting for customers to come to you.

- **Community Involvement:**

- If budgets are an issue, as they many times are with small or independent properties, there is nothing like becoming a part of the local community to generate business. Sometimes, the most obvious ways to get business are overlooked. Being a good neighbor and a good community member is what a property can do most naturally and cost effectively. Developing goodwill in the local community can pay off in dividends. Who is better at recommending where to shop, where to eat, and where to stay than the people who live there?

- Therefore, by integrating itself in all aspects of the community and by being a good neighbor, your property will have a strong competitive advantage, in particular with the types of market segments solicited i.e. weddings, social functions, business meetings, and corporate and leisure business.

Therefore, rethinking the entire sales prospecting process to conform with the times, and ensuring that the sales people are motivated and success-driven, will place a property in the enviable position of consistently achieving top results regardless of market conditions.

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About Brenda Fields

In her more than 27 years as a marketing and sales pro in the hospitality industry, Brenda Fields has emerged as the "go to" consultant for independent and/or privately owned hotels and resorts seeking real-world solutions for today's market challenges.

From small boutique hotels to large convention properties, Brenda has created and implemented highly successful marketing and yield management programs that enable owners to achieve target results despite market conditions. Most notably, she helped a 1,400 mid-town Manhattan hotel realize 86% occupancy two years running in a depressed economy, resulting in the achievement of proforma and first place in market share out of 14 competitors. For a small, four-diamond property on Park Avenue in NYC, she helped turn-around declining sales resulting from increased competition from nearby chain-affiliated hotels through a restructuring of the sales department and effectively increased distribution channels to reach new markets.

With extensive expertise in pre-openings and repositionings, Brenda was responsible for the successful opening and stabilization of the Paramount Hotel in NYC, one of the first boutique hotels, for which she developed and executed a direct sales and yield management program in addition to a national and international marketing campaign.

With a "who's who" roster of clients, Brenda has worked with a number of industry leaders and real estate investment companies including Starwood Lodging Corporation, Vornado Realty Trust and Planet Hollywood, John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company, Olympus Real Estate Corporation, Gotham Hotels and Dolce Hotels and Resorts, among others. Her consulting practice for independent properties includes clients such as The Kitano Hotel, New York; Founders Inn and Conference Center in Virginia Beach, VA; BelAge Hotel, Los Angeles, CA; Mondrian Hotel, West Hollywood, CA; and as well as in international locations, i.e. Costa Rica, Germany, and England.

Brenda is a member of International Society of Hospitality Consultants, serves on the Americas Board of Directors for Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International, is past president of the Greater NY Chapter of HSMAI, was named one of the "Top 25 Most Extraordinary Minds in Sales and Marketing", by HSMAI, serves on the editorial board of HotelExecutive.com, and writes for numerous industry publications.

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