

Hotel Business Review

Best practices, insights & trends

The Top 7 Habits of Highly Effective Sales People

By Brenda Fields, President, Fields and Company

For hotel staff working on Christmas morning, either behind the front desk or in the housekeeping department, a rooms sales position may look like a pretty cushy job! Sales people don't have to work holidays or weekends and have the freedom to come and go as they please. But, in reality, a sales position is (or should be) challenging. They have the primary responsibility to generate room revenues for the property. Sales is responsible for building occupancy in low demand periods and by increasing average rates in peak times.

But, in order to do this successfully, it is important that a sales person is at the top of his/her game. An effective sales person should be able to produce results despite market conditions and product drawbacks and to develop existing business by taking one meeting and turning it into four.

It is also important to understand that "sales" is a skill, not a personality trait. Expert sales skills can produce business despite product deficiencies, rate structure, or market conditions. Since most owners and operators do not have perfect properties and supply/demand dynamics can change, it is even more critical to ensure that each sales person is highly skilled to generate business and to deal with client objections and problems effectively. A dedication to expert sales skills, thru a formal training program, is the best insurance for market share and profitability.

Although formal sales training is necessary, it is not the entire solution to ensure that each sales person is effective. This article will address some important "habits" that are demonstrated by the most effective sales people, to assist owners and managers in developing a highly effective sales department.

Habit #1: Know your product and know your competition.

Unfortunately, it is far too common that an established sales person has never been to a competitive property. Without that first hand knowledge, it is impossible to sell effectively if a customer is shopping your property as well as your competition. The first step in effective selling is to know your property i.e. its strengths and weakness and what it offers to its target audience. The next step is to evaluate the competition's strengths and weakness and compare it to your property. A personal inspection and honest assessment will place the sales person in a position of strength in convincing a customer to book your property over the competition.

Habit #2: Know who your customer is.

There are few products, if any, that are all things to all people. Hotels are designed and built to attract a specific segment of the market and financial projections are based on certain assumptions of rates and occupancy generated from those specific markets. Therefore, it is important for a sales person to understand the positioning of the property and to know its target markets. Without this basic foundation, valuable time is wasted in trying to sell to a customer who will never, never use your property. For example, a budget/limited service property will not appeal to a customer looking for 24-hour room service and Frette linens on the beds. And conversely, a customer looking strictly for the lowest rate, does not care about deluxe amenities and original artwork in the lobby. Kenny Rogers had it right when he sang the song, The Gambler, "Know when to hold 'um. Know when to fold 'um. And know when to walk away.....". If you know who your property was designed for, you won't have to gamble on finding the right fit with every customer.

Habit #3: Listen to your customers. Understand their needs.

Having the first two habits in place will allow a sales person to fully address a customer's needs. Even if your property has the greatest swimming pool in the United States, it is important to let the customer tell you if that is a need of his or hers. Asking questions will help you understand what is important to your potential customers and will help you understand the level of importance. The information collected will once again place the sales person in a position of strength in closing the business. For example, if close proximity to the airport is the most important need for a company bringing in international meeting

attendees and your hotel is the closest, that will help keep negotiations focused if the client comes back to you with lower quotes from the competition which is located much further away. Taking the time to fully uncover needs and to understand the level of their importance will allow the sales person to keep the customer focused on those stated needs. If the property cannot fulfill the customer's primary needs, then the sales person can just gracefully move on.

Habit #4: Balance good customer relations with fiscal responsibility to the owner.

Sales people tend to be attracted to "sales" because of their strong social or interpersonal needs. They like people, enjoy pleasing people and like to be liked. Therefore, sometimes a sales person is more committed to pleasing the customer at the owner's expense. But an effective sales person is able to leverage his/her good customer relations with their financial responsibilities at the property. The customer has respect and confidence in a sales person who understands the customer's needs, along with the property's market position, demand patterns, and is able to negotiate so that both parties are satisfied.

Habit #5: Develop great administration skills.

Sometimes, people with strong people skills are not "detail" people. But attention to detail is tantamount to inspiring the confidence of clients. How can they expect a meeting to go well if the sales person has misspelled their names, given the incorrect title, or didn't include the afternoon coffee break that was requested? Ensure exact details, check work for accuracy (dates, spelling, names, titles, etc.). Be organized. A neat desk delivers the message that the sales person is in control and is organized, which again inspires confidence. And be responsive and consistent. Good administrative skills will always command respect.

Habit #6: Be reliable and consistent.

Do what you say you will do. Or if circumstances prevent you from delivering on a promise, just communicate that to your clients. Reliability and good communication develops trust. It is that trust that will inspire clients to book with a sales person over and over even if the air conditioning breaks down or construction is going on across the street. Trust that the sales person has done his best and will honestly address every situation can inspire loyalty and help overcome any potential hard feelings if problems that the sales person has no control over. Return calls and send out correspondence promptly and follow up. Consistency constitutes reliability.

Habit #7: Continue to grow and develop.

Business is ever changing and ever evolving because of new technology, new markets, and dynamic supply/demand factors. The consistently effective sales person understands that staying current with these issues will foster sound strategic planning. A well-founded plan allows for either new strategies or staying the course. Several suggestions for staying current are to join industry associations such as HSMAI (Hotel Sales and Marketing Association International), which offers invaluable opportunities to stay current with trends and new technologies. Read local and national newspapers. Stay current with local and national trends that impact your business. Join local community organizations. By implementing these steps, not only is the sales person enhancing his/her own effectiveness and marketability, but a by-product is that the property he or she represents is promoted as well.

Therefore, to ensure that an owner or manager is getting the best ROI from their sales staff, formal sales training along with the implementation of these seven habits will assist owners and managers in developing and maintaining a highly effective sales department.

In her more than 20 years as a marketing and sales pro in the hospitality industry, Brenda G. Fields has emerged as the "go to" consultant and seasoned sales trainer 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. 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, Gorham Hotels and Apple Core Hotels, among others. Her growing consulting practice for independent properties includes clients such as The Kitano Hotel, New York; Founders Inn and Conference Center in Virginia Beach, VA; Bel Age Hotel, Los Angeles, CA; Mandarin Hotel, West Hollywood, CA; Woodlands Resort and Inn, Summerset, South Carolina, and many others. A native of Kentucky, Brenda holds a B.S. in Psychology and English from Murray State University. She lives on Manhattan's Upper East Side and enjoys cooking and entertaining in her cottage in upstate New York. Contact Brenda at 518-789-0117 or brenda@fieldsandcompany.net

