

Hey, General Managers, There is Hope for This New Generation of Hospitality Sales Professionals!

By David M. Brudney, ISHC, April 2008

Anyone who has read my articles over the past few years knows full well the genuine concern I have over the future of hospitality sales professionals.

I've been troubled by what I experience every day in my consulting practice while interacting with hotel and resort sales departments nationwide. Typically, I find new sales professionals - - aged mid-to-late 20s - - with what my generation refers to as questionable work ethics, a demonstrable lack of curiosity, and an over-reliance on technology based selling skills while failing to develop time-honored relationship based selling skills.

Those mid-to-late 20s represent the oldest amongst "Gen Y", "Gen Next" or the "Millennial Generation", 100 million Americans born between 1982 and 2003, a third of the total U.S. population. What's important to note is that Gen Next is the fastest growing segment of the workforce (22% in 2006). Our industry needs them.

Studies of Gen Next document work-related behavioral patterns. According to a report by Bank of America, "*Generational Differences: Managing the 'Gen Y' Associate*," here are some illuminating findings:

They're not hungry. They are not ambitious for advancement if it comes at the expense of their personal lives and goals.

They expect more control. They expect more authority and more discretion about how they spend their time at work.

High self-esteem. They grew up basking in the "decade of the child", with self-esteemed laced parenting and education.

They want everything now: technology, training, feedback and recognition.

Tech-savvy. Gen Next exhibits greater knowledge and skill using computers and digital tools. Because Gen Next was born with technology - - bred on YouTube, Google, Napster, Facebook, MySpace and other innovations - - they assimilate it better.

Variety. Gen Next doesn't like to be on one assignment too long.

Not here for long. They don't expect to stay on a job, or even a career, too long.

My concerns shared by many G.M.s everywhere

I have conversations all the time with G.M.s, owners and asset managers, so I know that my opinions and concerns about this new generation are not alone.

I think many G.M.s - - for sure those aged 45 or older - - will tell you privately that today's Gen Next believes lifestyle is too important, expects to rise quickly in position and income, is not putting in the necessary time and won't be around for long.

After a decade of management efforts to accommodate this group with creative training programs, the latest in technology, and hands on coaching and mentoring attempts, many G.M.s and supervisors have no doubt thrown in the towel, have labeled Gen Next as too difficult to reach and motivate, too hard to retain and develop into highly productive sales professionals.

Small wonder then why many G.M.s everywhere are saying privately, "Gen Next is merely passing through, why bother to invest the time, money, effort and knowledge? They're never going to make it in this business." And some could be saying also, "We're better off outsourcing our direct sales jobs to established professional third parties."

A ray of hope . . . a light at the end of the tunnel

Due to some recent experiences, however, I do see a "light at the end of the tunnel," indeed a ray of hope. I do see a way for G.M.s to turn this perception around and begin to attract and - - best of all - - retain this human capital so critical to our industry.

A few years back I began to notice how the participants at the various sales workshops I conduct were getting younger and younger (a good wake-up call to anyone who stays in this business for four decades plus!). I noticed that I was becoming more and more annoyed at the attendees multi-tasking attempts, the absence of questions, the lack of active participation, lack of staying focused, and voices so soft I no longer could hear.

I decided that if I wanted to continue doing that kind of work, I needed to do some re-engineering on how I conduct sales workshops. And while doing so, I came across the Bank of America report and found some information that I had overlooked before:

Education-minded. Influenced by Baby Boomer parents, Gen Next believes that education is the key to their success, and they're poised to be lifelong learners.

Earned respect. Respect must be earned with Gen Next, never taken for granted.

Training and Development. Yes, Gen Next is attracted to organizations with strong training and development programs.

Values. Finally, I found my "edge": senior generation values have great appeal amongst Gen Next.

I used that information to help me present better, connect better and to deliver messages that would resonate with the attendees and give them so much more in the way of takeaways.

Based on actual experience, it seems to be working. The workshop participants are responding very well. They haven't changed - - it's me that's changed.

Never mind the decades of experience of instructing adult classes at university extension and community colleges. Never mind the speeches delivered or workshops conducted for hundreds of hospitality clients. This is a whole new ballgame for me.

First, I'm using the very best technology tools available and I'm focused on education. I'm making certain that my sessions are 100% interactive keeping everyone engaged. I'm telling them upfront what's in it for them and what they should expect to take away.

The biggest difference in my approach is that I'm sharing more "real world" experiences from my career first in hotel sales and then as hospitality marketing consultant. I'm sharing more of the successes and failures and what I've learned from both. I'm even sharing "senior values" and life lessons from being a husband, father and grandfather!

By doing so I believe I am earning Gen Next's respect. I believe I am being accepted as genuine - - the "real deal." I believe Gen Next is "buying in" to what is being presented because I speak from experience, I know my subject well and I am communicating with more energy, passion and confidence than ever before.

Lessons for those who manage or train Gen Next?

Lessons for those who work with, manage, supervise or train Gen Next? Throw out the old tapes, take a new look at Gen Next. Learn everything you can about who they are and what they bring to the job. Earn their respect - - and their attention - - by demonstrating real-world experiences and knowledge.

Present with passion and conviction, the more anecdotes the better. Make it easier for them to contribute by asking open-ended questions. Break up all-day sessions by integrating situation analysis and problem solving fun exercises individually and in small groups. Emphasize these lessons learned can be applied to work the very next day.

Oh, yes, and don't forget to recognize and reward those valuable contributions. And be sure to give them multiple short, 5-minute breaks so they can do their text messaging return calls and answer e-mails.

I'm really not as concerned about this new generation as I was before. And that's mainly because I was the one who made the adjustment. Gen Next needs more from management, immediate supervisors and trainers. More hands on, more sharing real-life experiences delivered with more passion and energy. And don't forget the tech tools.

To access all previous eleven “Lessons” in the series visit www.DavidBrudney.com

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David M. Brudney, ISHC, is a veteran sales and marketing professional concluding his fourth decade of service to the hospitality industry. Brudney advises lodging owners, lenders, asset managers and operators on sales and marketing “best practices” and conducts reviews of sales and marketing operations throughout the U.S. and overseas. The principal of David Brudney & Associates of Carlsbad, CA, a sales and marketing consulting firm specializing in the hospitality industry since 1979, Brudney is a frequent lecturer, instructor and speaker. He is a charter member of International Society of Hospitality Consultants. Previously, Brudney held sales and marketing positions with Hyatt, Westin and Marriott.

Contact:

David M. Brudney, ISHC, Principal
David Brudney & Associates
Carlsbad, CA USA
Phone: 760-476-0830 Fax: 760-476-0860
David@DavidBrudney.com
www.DavidBrudney.com
www.ishc.com