

## **Keeping Positive: New Generation of Hospitality Sales Professionals Lesson #12**

*(Twelfth in a series)*

*By David M. Brudney, ISHC, July 2008*

It's got to be depressing for anyone having to go to work these days what with all of the bad news out there - - soaring fuel costs causing airlines to cut domestic capacity up to 14 percent, higher fares, crowded flights, a 5 percent hike in food cost, the price of gas at the pumps, bank failures, home foreclosures, high unemployment and more corporate layoffs.

Showing up for work is one thing. Bringing a positive attitude with you and maintaining that attitude is something else. With some jobs I guess you can fake enthusiasm and a positive attitude, but selling hotel rooms is not one of them.

Hotel sales professionals have to be positive and enthusiastic about what they are doing almost 24/7. There can be no "down" time or like in football, no taking a "down" off now and then.

***"Nothing great was ever accomplished without enthusiasm"  
- Ralph Waldo Emerson***

One thing you can take to the bank, nobody - - prospect or client - - wants to talk with any sales pro with a bad attitude or little to no enthusiasm. Demonstrating and maintaining a positive attitude and enthusiasm is something even the most experienced and successful sales professionals need to work on every day.

So now with all this uncertainty and negativity it's a very good time to remind today's new generation of hotel sales pros just how important it is in keeping positive and motivated - - and how those characteristics can help book new business. Enthusiasm is contagious - - spread it!

A different kind of selling is the order of the day. Our industry is coming out of an exceptional three years of limited new supply and heavier demand, higher rates and bigger profits. During that period of time hotel sales pros became "comfortable" working in very much of a seller's market where the focus was on driving rate and optimizing all revenue streams.

We're already seeing signs of change in response to the economic crisis. Rate integrity is taking a beating as even upscale resorts are rolling over with renegotiated discounted room rates and significant benefits thrown in. Planners, now working with revised budgets, are curtailing expensive in-house and off-site F&B functions and the use of state-of-the-art audio visual equipment. For every group that has already cancelled or will be cancelling, there will be a dozen groups with high attrition on room nights blocked.

***Timeless tips for this new generation of sales pros***

Young sales pros can be rattled easily when groups begin to cancel or “defer” previously booked or budgeted meetings or events - - or when those all important leads start to dry up or when qualified prospects become difficult to reach and calls are not returned. Some helpful tips:

**Revisit past successes.** Sell prospects on all the success stories in your portfolio. What can you learn from those bookings shortly after 9/11 when hotels experienced hard times for the next two to three years? What worked the last time the U.S. economy went into the dumps? What markets, what industries were you able to penetrate and why? Focus on why they booked with you, why they booked at that time, what was the purpose of that particular booking, and why was it successful? Which of those bookings were “solutions” to the client’s challenges or problems at that time? See what you can learn from this exercise. See what is of value and might be applicable as you go forward with your search for new business.

**Revisit established clients.** Reach out to all those clients - - those still in business! - - who’ve favored you with bookings in the past. Ask about how their industry is dealing with the economy, new competition, barriers to overcome, etc. - - as opposed to simply asking for the business. Here are a few sample questions to engage your clients and prospects:

- “So, how is your company/industry dealing with this economy?”
- “What are you doing to stave off competition?”
- “What is your strategy to compete globally?”

And then later on, if appropriate, ask “how can we play a part in your planning, communication, training and retraining process now?” Another approach might be, “I have some ideas on how my hotel can support and play a role in your planning, communication, training and retraining initiatives.” Don’t be surprised if your line of questioning might trigger a previously unrecognized need by the client to book a new meeting or event with you right then and there.

**Use of business models.** Hotel sales pros need to keep “at the ready” examples of successful business models to share with clients and prospects. If using selected business model success stories are introduced correctly, they can help to create a sense among the prospects that they might be “missing out on something” - - by not holding or deferring that important meeting.

Meeting and event planners respond well typically when learning about comparable or relevant events held off-site that had really good R.O.I. (or return on content, return on goals, return on experience and return on relationships). That type of knowledge sharing can be very helpful in motivating a planner to book with a sense of urgency.

**More collaborative selling.** Knowledge sharing is at the cornerstone of *Collaborative Selling*. We live in an age of incomparable knowledge sharing - - not to be confused with “information sharing” via Blogs and other social media networking. The really good hotel sales pros know when and how to become a valued resource for clients and prospects; when knowledge gained from past experience can become invaluable when shared freely and openly. I’m talking here about using that knowledge, e.g., successful meeting best practices, product delivery capabilities, competition knowledge or recommending effective outside speakers, as prospect advice.

- “let’s see if by working together we can find solutions”
- “I’ve had good experience with this before, how does that play for you?”
- “How about if we tried this?” “Try that?”
- “Here’s what I think you can expect if you go there”

***No finer compliment can be paid to any hotel sales pro***

Becoming good at collaborative selling can set you apart from your competitors. No longer perceived as just another hotel sales guy/gal, you become accepted as a highly-valued resource. You become someone of influence. No finer compliment can be paid to any hotel sales pro.

One of the great lessons learned from my 29 year consulting practice is the power of influence. I can’t count the number of times I have been able to “nudge” a client or prospect into making a decision - - a decision the client was predisposed to make, but needed some “outside” validation.

**Use of testimonials.** Nothing works better for new sales pros than dropping into a prospect conversation the name of a satisfied client who booked a relevant piece of business with great results and R.O.I. Keep those testimonials top of mind, ready to introduce on a moment’s notice. Solid, qualified and relevant testimonials can be an extremely effective tool in influencing a prospect’s decision to extend the dialogue, consider your hotel more seriously or to give you a definite commitment. And don’t hesitate to suggest facilitating a phone call or meeting between the prospect and the testimonial giver.

**Be creative.** Give some thought to who needs to meet during troubled economic times. What industries need to train and retrain their human capital? What new, emerging companies need to bring prospects and the media together to introduce new products and services? And don’t overlook local government now faced with dwindling revenues from local taxes.

Identify and make contact with hot topic authors, consultants and workshop presenters looking for audiences and venues for interested managers and self-employed professionals. Talk with your sales teammates. Share ideas. Find out what hotels in your comp set are outperforming you and why? Ask yourself, “Who is profiting during this current economic downturn, what’s working, who’s buying and why?”

**Strategies.** Corporations are faced with searching for answers and solutions to today’s new business challenges. The future is less predictable than ever before. In order to cope with ever more fluid business conditions, standard “strategic planning” is being replaced now by “strategic conversation,” according to a recent study by Destination Marketing Association International. Strategic conversation must be “virtually continuous” v. annual, hence the highly structured annual marketing plan process has become less and less workable, soon to become obsolete.

A rapidly changing business environment is changing long range planning - - no longer 10 years, being replaced by planning horizons of two years or less. Strategic options opening up - - by the hour or by the minute - - continue to proliferate. Hotels, resorts and conference centers should be playing more of a role with this new business dynamics. More off-site meetings held in surroundings with services American corporations deserve. Offer your product and services.

### *Off-site meetings: investments in human capital*

And never forget - - nor fail to remind prospects - - some of the intrinsic values of off-site meetings. Off-site meetings can help participants feel recognized and more valued. The atmosphere provided by our various lodging products can help foster employee bonding and many HR experts are convinced it can help employee retention. Keep in mind how good it is to get away from the office, the phones and the computers. Off-site meetings that are planned and executed effectively can produce solutions, introduce new strategies and initiatives, educate, train, motivate and produce powerful results. They should also be looked upon as investments - - in the organization and especially in its most important product: its people.

**Research.** Read! Study! Okay, you might have to work at it! I know you can do it. Instead of e-mailing friends & family or looking for friends or love on MySpace, etc., spend one hour a night at home doing any of the following:

- Search the Internet - - Google topical subjects, search for companies, speakers, consultants, articles on emerging or “lead story” industries (products and services), e.g., alternative energy, LEED (the green movement), technology and transportation
- Search Google, Yahoo, MSN and Blogs where discussions on topical issues take place
- Hoovering - - find contact info on companies free on [www.hoovers.com](http://www.hoovers.com).
- Read the articles in the Business Sections of your local newspapers - - a wonderful source for knowledge, ideas, leads and finding new prospects

Whenever I hear talk about the demise of the off-site meetings business - - still more than one million a year with 75 percent for 35 people or less - - I think back on what Alexis de Tocqueville wrote while conducting research here in the U.S. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century French politician and historian commented on the American passion for forming associations. Americans will always have the need to come together, to meet and to form unique “networks.”

No matter what technology comes down the pike, Business America will always need that face-to-face meeting. As business communications become more and more technology-based, off-site meetings will become even more valuable because of the need for relationship-based communications - - and selling skills.

So if you think you have it tough today in hotel sales, just be glad you’re not selling big, gas-guzzling automobiles. Ask your neighborhood SUV or Hummer dealer, “How’s that working out for you?” Just think about real estate brokers and sales associates working extra hard and being more creative than ever just to move properties in today’s market.

*“In times like these it’s good to remember there’ve been times like these”  
- Paul Harvey*

Today’s sales pros need to remind their clients and prospects of why hotels are in business - - to partner with, to collaborate on the scheduling and hosting of those important meetings where strategies are created, campaigns are conceived, and critical decisions are made.

Closing reminders:

- Always be positive - - negativity by the seller is the biggest turnoff in selling
- Enthusiasm is contagious
- Knowledge sharing is timeless and invaluable - - and can help you book more business!
- You have opportunities to “suggest” a booking - - don’t miss out!
- Collaborative sales pros are able to “nudge” prospects into making decisions

To access all previous 11 articles in this series please visit [www.DavidBrudney.com](http://www.DavidBrudney.com)

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