

New Generation of Hotel Sales Professionals: Lesson #7: Referrals

By David M. Brudney, ISHC, May 2007

(Seventh in a series)

Show me a successful, highly respected hospitality Sales professional and I'll show you someone who has mastered the art of developing referrals.

No greater compliment can be paid to a hospitality Sales pro than to have a prospect call to book a piece of business because "John Jones (a client of the Sales pro) told me I should call you."

Now keep in mind, referrals don't just "happen". They develop from a process that usually takes time.

Referrals have to be earned

Good hospitality Sales pros develop referrals by taking care of business first:

Exceed Client Expectations. After you've booked a group, do everything possible to see that your client's expectations have been exceeded. How will you know that? The client will tell you. If the client doesn't, you have to ask.

Personal Contact. Never let the client depart from your property without meeting personally, making sure the client has everything needed, and say "thank you" for the business. Post-convention or conference meetings don't count. You must do it in person, one-on-one.

Follow Up. Send a hand-written personal note to the client to be received a day or two after the event. A phone call and/or personal Sales call to the client's office within two weeks at which time you can ask about feedback and any success stories since the event. You can use that valuable time also to reconfirm a repeat booking (if applicable), in case you didn't nail that down at the event's conclusion.

Drilling into the Account. If you have not done so before, this is an excellent opportunity to "drill" into the account - - "up, down, and out". Ask for the names of (and introductions to) other executives and event planners in or connected with that organization.

For example (up), perhaps the CEO or general manager serve as board members or site selection committees of national, regional or state associations and professional societies.

Perhaps (down) a Sales manager lower on the totem pole at that company has a Sales meeting coming up with no property in mind.

And perhaps (out) this particular organization has strategic partners, website linked or not, or preferred vendors, some of whom may have new business to book.

Testimonials. Many clients - - typically upon being asked - - will write testimonial letters after a very successful event and/or when the Sales pro or the property staff exceeded the client's expectations. Testimonials can be extremely useful tools when soliciting similar-type business.

Referrals have to be earned

But the best Sales pros are always on the lookout for those great referrals. Referrals represent instant credibility and value with the potential buyer.

Why are referrals so valuable? Because typically they come so unexpectedly. You didn't have to expend the time, money nor effort to get the booking. No, the referral came because of the work you've done previously and because you earned it.

Timely referrals can lead to bookings when the Sales pro is having a slow (booking) month or quarter and is in need of making his/her numbers.

The very best time to ask

When is the best time to ask a satisfied client for a referral? At the very moment the satisfied client has given his/her thanks for a job well done.

"I can't thank you enough for all you've done"

"I don't know how we would have pulled this off without you"

"This was by far the best meeting overall we've ever had"

Hearing those words - - that's when the very best Sales pros respond with:

"Thank you. You know, the best thanks of all would be to give me the names of 2-3 decision makers/planners so we could do the same good job for them!"

In my four decades of experience in hospitality Sales, I have yet to come across a satisfied client that - - upon being asked to do so - - failed to supply a couple of names and contact info that led me to booking new business.

Never forget that planners talk to each other and they share the good and bad experiences.

Some satisfied clients will take ownership of the whole referral process. I've had satisfied clients make phone calls to prospective clients, give great testimonials, some have even arranged

introductory lunch meetings. And insisted on picking up the tab, to boot!

Be sure and look for referral opportunities everywhere and anytime. I recommend one a month, 12 a year for new hospitality Sales professionals. If you can pick up 12 referrals a year, you are on your way to a long and successful career in hospitality Sales.

And don't be surprised if a referral comes some day from one of your competitors who can't accommodate and who holds you and your property in high regard.

What's next? Sales Lesson #8: Dealing with today's new meeting planner.

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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.

David M. Brudney, ISHC, Principal
David Brudney & Associates
Carlsbad, CA
760-476-0830 Fax 760-476-0860
Cell: 760-994-9266
David@DavidBrudney.com
www.davidbrudney.com
www.ishc.com