
You Cannot Microwave Experience: New Generation of Hotel Sales Professionals Lesson #1

By David M. Brudney, ISHC, August 2006

Some of the best scouting of baseball talent today is being done by guys in their 70s who rely more on what they know and see rather than statistics, radar guns and stop watches.

Ned Colletti, general manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers, was defending his practice of retaining veteran baseball scouts recently and was quoted in the Los Angeles Times:

“You cannot microwave experience. The only way to get it is to live it. I want guys who have lived it.”

Colletti’s quote got me thinking about this new generation of hotel Sales professionals overall lack of experience. So many of the young people I find in hotel Sales today aren’t getting the experience necessary to become really good. Simply put, they just haven’t “lived it.” They’re not staying in Sales long enough. Many seem to be just passing through.

The turnover rate for hotel Sales professionals is 25%, but it seems higher to me, based upon my empirical work.

New Generation Not Interested in Long Term?

My consulting practice takes me into Sales offices all over the country, affording me the opportunity to not only observe and evaluate this new generation of

Sales professionals, but also to interact and, more importantly, listen to what they have to say. Many tell me that, off the record, they do not plan on making a career of hotel Sales, nor do they plan on staying at the hotel and/or brand at which they currently work.

They tell me they don't want nor need the responsibility of becoming Sales and/or marketing directors - - regardless of the increased pay; that they refuse to spend 50 to 70 hours a week compromising their personal lives as have so many who have come before them.

I've listened to them tell me that the formal Sales training they receive is okay, but it's mostly hit-and-miss with fair to poor repetition during the days and weeks that follow the formal training.

And I'm told that most want more from their current Sales directors and immediate supervisors; more time one-on-one, more coaching, more teaching and more mentoring.

A New Generation of Sales "Temps"?

Are we creating a generation of Sales "Temps"? Hotel Sales professionals merely "passing through," spending less than five years before moving on to jobs outside hospitality, jobs and possible new careers that will complement this new generation's work ethic and lifestyle demands?

Sales Professionals Risk Becoming Extinct?

This new generation of Sales pros doesn't have the benefit of corporate Sales & marketing oversight and mentoring as in years past. Unfortunately, all that's history now.

Bob Gilbert, CEO of Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International, tells me that more than half of HSMAI's current membership consists of non-hotel Sales and marketing professionals, that the majority of HSMAI members come from the cruise, airline and car rental industries and other suppliers.

As more clients are moving to the Internet and new electronic sites to search for dates, space and rates, are we heading for a day when the hotel Sales pro will be replaced by Internet shopping and 100% outsourcing to the powerful, successful 3rd party lead suppliers?

Sales pros have limited access to the best clients, thanks to the commanding role now played by 3rd party lead providers. 3rd party providers are so influential that they now inadvertently “block out” less experienced hotel Sales pros. Who wants to deal with inexperienced rookies anymore?

Carpe Diem: seize the moment; do it now

First off, you can't get good at hotel Sales without learning your craft, making mistakes and learning from them. Gaining experience is the most important part of the process.

If your stay in hotel Sales is going to be short, four-to-five years or less, then you owe it yourself and to your fellow employees, clients and prospects you've engaged, and to the owners and operators of your current hotel, to learn all you can and master the job you have before you leave. Years from now, no matter where your career takes you, you will look back on your time in hotel Sales and wish you had put more into it; wish you had experienced and learned more.

Master your time management. If you're going to commit 8 hours a day to your job then you need to make sure you're making the most of all 8. If you want to get good then don't cheat yourself. Between the time you need to spend making proactive Sales calls, taking a prospect on a tour, sending and responding to prospect e-mails and phone calls, there won't be time left for Internet surfing, I-pods, personal phone calls or - - the #1 “time-eater” of all time - - non-business visiting with co-workers.

Working quickly enough, you can load data into your account management software, prepare for next day's telephone and outside Sales calls before you leave for the day and you'll still have the time for your softball league, meeting friends at the local watering hole or heading home for quality family time.

Know your product. In order to sell more business you need to know your product and know it very well. From your very first day on the job, commit to memory the number of rooms and suites, room sizes, features, and amenities. Spend day two memorizing number of meeting rooms, ceiling heights and which rooms work best for smaller meetings, which work best for pure F&B functions. Memorizing works best after you've walked the property.

Know your competition. The better you know your competition, the better you can sell against it. Start by conducting your own personal SWOT test on each hotel. And if you want to get really good, collaborate with your Sales team to produce a "reverse marketing" plan: what strategies and key action steps would "hotel X" use in selling against my hotel? How can your hotel counteract?

Study the hotel's P&L statement. If that document is not available to you, ask to look at a monthly operating statement. Learn all you can about why room revenue is the "mothers' milk" of our business and why it's so critical for Sales pros to optimize room revenue with every group. Understanding more of your hotel's financial aspects helps new Sales pros

to sell smarter and to appear better informed.

Learn from Clients. Use every opportunity to learn all you can from clients. Best meeting they ever booked. Worst meeting they ever booked. What are the most important factors in selecting a hotel? How does the selection of a hotel work in clients' companies and/or associations?

Never take rejection personally. Learn from it. Always ask "why" whenever losing a good piece of business. You may not get an answer and sometimes you may not like the answer you get, but "asking" is what real pros do; it makes you better and more confident next time around.

What can Management do?

Demonstrate Sales is valued. Management needs to show by actions, not just words, that Sales personnel are valued. Managers must show interest in the sales process. Compensation packages must be competitive, inside and outside the industry. Establish healthy bonus plans that reward Sales pros for producing above and beyond.

Limit costly turnover. Keep the most productive, most experienced Sales pros in the system. Put advanced professional Sales training in the budget. Encourage continuing education interest. Acknowledge and reward results. Make the work place environment the best it can be.

Sales team needs role models. The director leading a young Sales team needs to be a cheerleader for the art of

professional Sales; show me a Sales director with passion, one who still loves “the chase”, maintains active accounts and I’ll show you a Sales team that’s more motivated.

Prepare Sales pros for advancement. Dow Hotel Company has an excellent SDID (Sales director in development) and SMID (Sales manager in development) program. An excellent retention program that sends a strong message that management expects Sales pros to advance.

Keep Sales team out of meetings. I find far too many long and often unnecessary meetings typically scheduled during prime selling time where members of the Sales team are obligated to attend. Management needs to be reminded you can’t book any business sitting in an internal meeting.

So, there you have lesson #1: *you can’t microwave experience*. Just like baseball’s Colletti, owners, operators and asset managers want and need Sales professionals who have “lived it?” How can we expect this new generation of Sales pros to “live it” if they are, in fact, not putting in the time and merely passing through?

As always, I welcome your feedback, ideas and opinions. Are today’s Sales pros becoming “Temps”? Is the profession - - as we know it - - at risk in becoming extinct, replaced by Internet shopping agents and 3rd party lead providers?

My personal opinion? I believe there will always be a need for product savvy, service-oriented Sales pros working on property. Answering the prospects’ tough questions confidently from solid, hands on experience. It’s a good, rewarding job for those committed to “living it.” Management, owners, asset

managers, are you listening?

Lesson #2? Self-assessment. Don't leave home without it. That's the topic for my next article.

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