

Next gen hotel sales pros hungry for storytelling

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The recent passing of hospitality coach, consultant and author Neil L. Salerno did not receive the attention one might expect for such a consummate professional who served our industry for more than 35 years.

His sound and timely counsel will be sorely missed by his many clients and students, as well as those colleagues with whom he both collaborated and inspired.

His company names—Hotel Marketing Coach and Website Doctor—described exactly who Neil was. And he was one great storyteller.



**David
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Neil had an innate passion for sharing his acquired knowledge and skills in relationship building, selling and, in the last decade of his life, eMarketing. Neil was all about giving back to the industry, as was evident by his coaching, teaching, speaking and, most of all, his prolific writing.

Not a month would pass—at times, not even a week—without one of Neil's articles being published and read throughout the world. He wrote about developing and enhancing websites,

building traffic, increasing productivity and revenue management.

Ironically, it was through Neil's and my own writings that the two of us met. We began trading comments after each other's articles would appear. Neil recognized the importance of integrating both technology-based sales and marketing with the more traditional relationship-based sales and marketing.

Neil and I complemented each other's expertise—he would write about websites while I would write mainly about direct selling. We eventually collaborated on two webinars.

Although Neil has left us, we are all fortunate that his voluminous writings are archived for future generations to share. (You can access Neil's writings on www.hotelmarketingcoach.com.)

A strong background in hotel operations, F&B and sales

What I admired most about Neil and his eMarketing advice and counsel was that he developed his technology-based expertise long after he had mastered the more traditional relationship-based selling skills. He was no "Johnny-come-lately," to be sure.

Neil had a strong background in hotel operations, food and beverage and sales prior to his launching Hotel Marketing Coach. And he had a good teacher; Neil spoke often about his one and only mentor, hotel sales guru Howard Feiertag of Virginia Tech.

I find far too many examples of today's new generation of sales professionals in search of coaching and mentoring from senior sales and marketing executives whose experience is limited mostly to the Internet age.

Lessons from those who have learned

I think today's new generation of sales professionals respond well to reading and hearing more about selling lessons from professionals like Neil—those who came before; those who succeeded in the pre-Internet age; those who have learned:

- connecting, getting through to the right person;
- we are not selling a hotel or a service; we are in the business of selling a relationship;
- all things being equal, clients will buy from those they know, like,

- and trust;
- all lasting business is built on friendships;
- we live by relationships with support from technology;
- 80% of communication is non-verbal; and
- especially so today, 50% of all prospects prefer a face-to-face relationship—becoming familiar, establishing trust.

The value of lessons passed on became apparent to me during a recent speaking engagement. I was invited to speak to a local chapter of Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International and was somewhat surprised to find a group made up predominantly of younger, less-experienced sales associates. I was told it was one of the largest attended events in recent years, yet there were very few sales and marketing directors or even general managers in the audience.

Storytelling resonates well with new generation

Interestingly, what seemed to resonate best with the group was my storytelling of my early, very humble days in hotel sales; my getting started; the challenges faced, the mistakes made; and most importantly, those invaluable lessons learned. I came away from the speaking engagement reenergized and emboldened to continue speaking, mentoring and writing about anecdotes and lessons learned along the way of a near-lifetime of selling experiences.

I'm reminded of an article I wrote in February 2000 ("[Where have all the mentors gone?](#)"). I had just completed a comprehensive sales and marketing operation assessment for the owners and operators of a suburban, full-service, chain-affiliated hotel and was downloading my findings and recommendations to the property's hotel sales and marketing director.

"(He) leaned back in his chair, let go with a huge exhale, and said to me, 'This is great, really great. I had forgotten how long it's been since I had a mentor. David, there's nobody here to mentor me—not my general manager, not at this hotel, there's no one in the region and there's no one in corporate. I don't have anyone I can turn to and ask about some of the things I never got to learn. I'm expected to know all of this. There's still so much I have to learn about this job, about selling, about technique, relationship building, about strategy.'"

That was more than 11 years ago, yet I find similar examples today as I interact with sales departments nationwide through my consulting practice. My concerns have not changed. Whatever the cause, the great tradition of sales and marketing expertise is not being passed on.

Long before the Internet, smart phones, mobile apps, online travel agencies and social media, hotel sales pros were booking tons of business the old-fashioned way—building strong, long-term relationships through face-to-face meetings via outside sales calls; attending and participating in meetings, events, conventions and trade shows; and attending fam tours and on/off-site entertainment.

Neil's legacy for me is to continue my writing, speaking, mentoring and, in particular, my storytelling. I will be sharing some of Neil whenever I find an opportunity to tell one of his favorite stories—the one about the very finicky meeting planner who demands to conduct the site inspection **anonymously**.

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