

New Generation of Hospitality Sales Professionals Lesson #6: Relationship Building

By David M. Brudney, ISHC, April 2007

(Sixth in a series)

“We’re in the business of making friends.”

That statement - - made by Keith Fowler of Anheuser-Busch - - resonated with me very early in my hospitality Sales career.

Making friendships and maintaining those relationships is very important for most everyone, but for those of us in Sales it is an absolute cornerstone for successful selling.

Those initial contacts made by today’s new generation of hospitality Sales professionals represent potential clients and referral sources for a career lifetime.

It’s all about relationships

Building relationships with clients, however, is not enough. You must begin with building solid relationships from within, with your “internal customer”:

- Your own Sales department
- Other departments within your property
- Convention & visitors bureaus
- National Sales offices
- Third party Sales representatives
- Key suppliers and vendors that serve your clients’ groups

Quality time spent developing “internal customers” can pay huge dividends down the road in new business, repeat business and strong referrals.

I have experienced first-hand many times the old customer adage, “all things being equal, I prefer to do business with someone I know and like.” Customers may have new layers in their communication tool boxes today (cell phones, e-mail, texting), but they still prefer to deal mainly with those Sales pros where solid relationships are established.

Establishing and maintaining relationship tips

Tips on establishing and maintaining solid relationships:

Online v. Telephone. I have found very few examples of hospitality Sales pros establishing strong customer relationships 100% online. Online dating services might be a good way to find potential significant others, but establishing solid relationships in hospitality Sales begins with telephone contact and personal, face-to-face Sales calls and trade shows. E-mails and texting are great for information, but the telephone is essential for communication. Once initial contact is made, always ask the client for his/her preferred communication tool: telephone, e-mail or face-to-face meetings.

Understanding Needs. Professional meeting planners tell me what they crave the most from hospitality Sales pros is being understood; that the Sales pro understands the planners' needs, what's really important. This is about focus and being a good listener.

F.Y.I. Another good way of maintaining a good relationship is to look for information that might be helpful or of interest to the client. Drop off or send articles on trends and information on the client's business, competition and industry in general. Clients can never get enough information to help them in their jobs and even if they never acknowledge what you sent, they will remember your thoughtfulness. All of this may help to separate you from your competitors as the client will think of you more in terms as a good friend, advisor and someone who always has the client in mind.

Availability. Do everything possible to make yourself available for the client when the client calls with new demands on very short notice. Remind yourself that the client would not be calling on you in the first place if a relationship had not been established.

Reliability. If the prospective client is expecting a proposal within 48 hours, make certain that the proposal is delivered within 48 hours. If you can't produce, you must make contact prior to that deadline, advise the proposal will not be delivered on time and indicate at what time it will be delivered.

Trust. Never spread misinformation or tell a prospective client something you know not to be true. Far better to say you don't know and that you will get back to them with a correct answer shortly. This has to do with your own personal credibility.

Loyalty. Loyalty's a two-way street. Most clients respect your being loyal to them and most will do everything possible to be loyal to you. Loyalty is key to solid relationships.

Stay Connected. Don't allow long periods of time to lapse between visits, especially those done in person. Call or make an appointment when you're in or near the client's city. Take the client to lunch. Stop by the client's office for a visit.

Best advice I can give to the new generation of hospitality Sales professionals? It is all about relationships. Build and maintain solid relationships that will support you for the life of your Sales career. Be for the client what you would be for a good friend.

What's next? Sales Lesson #7: Dealing with today's new meeting planner.

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