



Train Your Hotel Sales Team To Tell Stories Not Just Quote Rates

By Doug Kennedy

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As marketing professionals across all industries know, the concept of storytelling is an integral component for success in today's environment. You can see this approach playing out across all mediums from print to web to radio and television. Car ads are no longer about the features and benefits of the car, but rather about all of the places that car can take you. Soda ads are not so much about the taste, but about how happy you will be by sharing it with friends and family, showing bottles labeled with real names or "dad" and "grad." Maybe the best example is the new Liberty Mutual Insurance advertising campaign where various spokespersons speak to you directly to tell a story about what happens when "you" have your first accident and the rates go up or when your current company says they will only replace $\frac{3}{4}$ of your car. Smart marketers know that storytelling is a great way to grab the attention of multi-tasking viewers, readers or listeners.

Similarly, hotel sales managers should also incorporate storytelling into their toolbox of both written and verbal presentation techniques. As the group and catering inquiry process has become increasingly automated, it is more

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important than ever to connect with the callers, email senders and those who inquire via online platforms when there is an opportunity to do so.

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Being in the telephone mystery shopping business, I often hear recordings of salespeople speaking with our KTN shoppers, many of whom are real-world meeting planners. All too often their dialogue is limited to asking about the number of rooms and meeting specs and then saying they will send over pricing and availability. Years ago we used to complain that hotel salespeople practiced "feature dumping" or "laundry listing," yet what I tend to hear are short conversations centered around availability and rates.

These days most inquiries seem to be coming in via email or via online platforms such as MeetingBroker, CVENT, Starcite, and those sponsored by CVB's. When I conduct sales process assessments, I too often find salespeople who simply respond by sending back standardized documentation listing basic features available at all hotels within the comp-set along with prices and rate plans.

If your hotel sales team responds in the same way as everyone else does, they are ensured only of getting their "fair share" of the business in the market. As I often say in my workshops, "If you want to get the same results as everyone else gets, just do the same things everyone else does."

Providing a laundry list of what is available, sending rates and waiting for the planner to take the next steps will not help you increase market share. Instead, make sure your hotel sales managers are not only responding promptly, but that they are also making an effort to connect with the planners - ideally by phone - or at least via personalized email exchanges.

Thereafter, make sure your agents sell to any comments, remarks and other clues they have discovered during the conversation or by at least paying close attention to the written RFP.

Here are some training tips for using a story telling approach to selling the overall hotel experience and to not just be a "room renter."

- Engage callers (and email senders) by beginning benefit statements with wording such as "Imagine your guests receiving..." Or "Imagine your participants enjoying..." thus grabbing their attention as you take them along for the ride.
- Lead sentences with "you" as in "your attendees will enjoy..." or "your members will experience..." instead of the normal tendency to lead with "we have" or "we offer" or worse yet "it offers."
- Use these techniques to highlight the most relevant benefits offered. Of course it is easier to focus on relevant benefits if you have taken time to connect with the caller or email sender and to investigate and discover their needs and preferences.
- Tell real-world stories about the past experiences of similar groups and functions you have hosted.
- Paraphrase and restate in writing what you have discovered about their needs to lead into the stories of personalized benefits. "Since you had mentioned... your (participants, attendees or members) will find this convenient because..."