



Thanks to Erika at Omni Resort at ChampionsGate for a Perfect Front Desk Welcome!

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By Doug Kennedy

As a hotel industry hospitality trainer, I surely have a more critical eye for detail than the average guest, yet I still try to be patient regardless. As a lodging industry conference keynote speaker, I often stay at large resorts that cater to conventions. So I always remind myself to lower my expectations for hospitality, as they are rarely met.

Typically, I find myself as the only guest in the lobby (checking outside of the mass arrival times), yet still having to wander through rope lines. After navigating the maze, I stand there staring at the top of someone's head as they seem to obsess on the computer screen. Finally, when I am noticed (perhaps only after clearing my throat loudly a few times), I get hear "May I help the next guest in line?" Being the only guest, and trying to stay all positive and optimistic, I usually say "Hello, how are you tonight?" upon which I usually get the raised eyebrow and nod and hear "Check-in' in?" At this point I always try to restrain myself from saying what I want to say, which is "No, not checking in. Just stopped by here with my luggage to look at your lobby."

So last month when I was the guest speaker for a lodging industry conference held at the Omni Orlando Resort at ChamptionsGate, I lowered my expectations as I approached the front desk.

Sure enough the rope lines were still up, despite there being no other guests waiting, but once I walked through them a surprising and delightful interaction with a professional young woman named Erika began.

First, I noticed that she looked at me and not through me, then smiled and said with enthusiasm "Good evening, welcome!" As I walked up to her she continued the appropriate eye contact and – evidently noticing I was holding two pieces of luggage – asked if she could assist me with registration. She spoke slowly, not sounding like she had a mouth full of marbles, and used complete sentences when she asked for my name. It went something like this: "May I have your name please?" Not "Last name?" as I so often hear.

During the remaining exchange I noticed that she spoke very professionally, but not in a scripted way, as she explained that although my room and tax was taken care of, she still needed my credit

card for any incidental expenses. Although I have probably heard this same speech as many times as she has said it in her young career, it felt like a natural conversation.

Rather than saying “How many keys?” she tailored the question to me, asking something like “Mr. Kennedy, I know you are staying by yourself but if you like I can provide you with an extra key.” This reminded me that I actually do prefer two keys, in case one stops working or if I misplace it in the room.

As things were wrapping up she pulled out what I could tell was a resort map, and despite how good she was, I still thought the dreaded “resort overview” speech was coming. As a business traveler staying alone at beautiful resorts, there’s nothing more depressing than to have to hear a long speech about all of the wonderful resort activities that you will NEVER have a chance to enjoy. As an hotelier, I know that most brand standards and rating services really push this, and I figured she would have to cover it.

Surprisingly, Erika tailored her information to my situation, starting with a fun personal remark that went something like “I know you probably won’t have much free time since you are a speaker at the conference...” and she then asked whether I would I like her to go over some of the highlights? I explained that no, I would be working, but I did want to know where the fitness center was. Rather than just pointing it out on the map, Erika pro-actively volunteered additional details such as the hours and that there were towels there and a full locker room in case I wanted to change there.

Since it wasn’t very busy, and since I was truly impressed, I asked a personal question as to whether Erika was studying hospitality at a university, explaining that my son was going to be starting a hospitality program at Valencia College which is nearby. She explained that she was actually studying business administration, since was already working in the field as student, but intended on a career in our industry and then shifted the conversation to be all about me and my son’s plan. It was reinforcing to hear that my son was selecting a great program from someone like Erika who knew the programs.

The time had come to send me on my way and Erika nailed it again. As an ex bellman, and as a fairly physically fit human, I always hate it when the front desk clerks ask “Do you need help with your bags?” Instead, Erika asked “May I have a bellman show you to your room Mr. Kennedy?”

Finally, it was my turn to show my appreciation and I offered up a genuine, sincere and personalized to Erika. Her response was the icing on the cake. All too often, colleagues respond to a guest’s gushy “thank you” by saying, “Sure, no problem.” I know that no ill will is intended, but to me this is just not eloquent. Erika knew better and responded with a sincere smile and a fond farewell message of “You are most welcome, enjoy your stay Mr. Kennedy!”

Kudos to you Erika! I wish you great success in your career and I am sure your managers are noticing what a superstar you are. I can promise you that guests like me notice!