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# The mentor to many: Howard Feiertag

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Not only is Howard Feiertag a hotel industry leader and professor, but he's become a dear friend and mentor to many. Here's what I've learned from him over the years.



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When it comes to icons in the hotel industry, fewer stand taller than my dear friend Howard Feiertag, especially in the field of hotel sales.

I am sure a few thousand people know him as a former co-worker from his many years working as a corporate-level hotel sales leader, and I would guess at least 5,000 know him as "Professor Howard," having been a student of his in the 27 years he has been teaching in Virginia Tech's hospitality and tourism management in the Pamplin College of Business.

Probably 10 times that many know him as an engaging and entertaining hospitality industry keynote conference speaker at conferences for associations, brands and management companies. Most of all, he is most legendary for his industry training articles including the Sales Clinic column he wrote for Hotel & Motel Management Magazine from 1980 to 2016, and his many years of writing for Meetings & Conventions Magazine and a few others.

Yet I consider myself among the luckiest group—those who know Howard as a friend and mentor. That is certainly not a short list, as Howard to this very day is a trusted confidant and exemplary mentor to many proteges.

Howard is also one of the most decorated leaders in the history of the hotel industry, having received lifetime achievement awards from Events Industry Leader's Council (1999), the American Hotel & Lodging Association (2002), the Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International (HSMAI) in 2013, and just this month from the Virginia Tech Pamplin College of Business. Since I could not be there at this most recent event due to a prior commitment, I am dedicating this month's column to him.

My earliest memory of Howard was in 1987. My hotel career took a turn towards hotel sales, and I started as an entry level account executive in a large resort sales office. I felt so lost at first! Then one of the older guys in the office handed me my first issue of the magazine we knew as HM&M, opened to Sales Clinic. Like so many others, I gained not only inspiration from Howard's writings, but also a countless list of sales tactics on all subjects from cold calling to sales blitzes to proposal writing to how to network at a meeting or event. Tactics I still use today.

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Just two years later, at the young age of 28, I had a dream to start a hotel industry sales and service training company. My older brother Dan told me at that time, "You should reach out to the top people in the field and ask them for help." And I did just that, I started writing personal letters to champions of the industry. Sure enough, my brother was correct and nearly everyone was willing to take my call when I phoned to follow-up on my letter. However, the vast majority gave me pretty much the same advice: "You are just too young. ... Go back and get a master's degree. ... You need to work as a hotel trainer first." Yet Howard's response stood out from the rest.

(1) Rather than me calling him, he phoned me the very day he received my letter, immediately offering to schedule a meeting. Despite the fact he was a SVP of marketing for Servico Management Company, which was at the time one of the largest hotel management companies, he carved out two hours in the middle of his busy day to provide some excellent advice for this young entrepreneur.

Not only did Howard see value in the training services I was introducing, he gave me great ideas for training exercises, taught me how to use fun activities, how to inject humor and how to encourage participation. He told me to keep in touch and let him know how he could help, which I did. Sure enough, as my ideas progressed Howard began referring some of his own clients to my new company, often having me tag along to conduct my training in conjunction with his.

It was also Howard who, at that very first meeting, had encouraged me to submit articles for publication in Hotel & Motel Management. Although it took seven years, I eventually did write those articles which HM&M began running in 1996, leading to me having my own column in their digital edition from 1999 to 2009, and since then for numerous other publications including here in Hotel News Now from 2014 to now.

In looking back at 21 years of writing, I sometimes wonder if I can ever keep thinking of new ideas to write about in the future. Then I stop to consider that Howard wrote an average of three columns a month—for 34 years.

Although I always knew there must be many others that Howard had helped out, it wasn't until much later in our friendship that I began to fully appreciate just how many there actually were. In 1996, the company I co-founded and co-owned at the time—HSA International—launched a nationwide training seminar series of Howard Feiertag's Hotel Sales Clinic seminars. The turnout was far beyond anything we imagined, as nearly every workshop filled to capacity.

Perhaps my biggest revelation of Howard's iconic stature in our industry came whenever I attended industry trade shows with him. As anyone who has had this experience will attest, it takes an incredibly long time to get through an exhibit hall with him; he doesn't walk 20 yards without someone approaching to thank him for some past favor or inspiration.

Yet what amazes me most after 28-years of friendship, though, is how strong his life, energy and passion for hospitality still flows to this very day. Just last week I traveled to Virginia Tech to be a guest speaker at one of his classes. I hadn't seen him for years, but there he was looking exactly the same as always. Same quick step (he always takes the stairs!), same twinkle in the eye, same warmth of spirit.

I told the students that day they will one day realize just how lucky they were to have had this man as a professor. I know that I am blessed to still call him my mentor to this very day, and I walked away from our visit with even more new ideas and inspirations resulting from our time together.

On that note, I will finish with some of the most important lessons, which we have all learned from Howard Feiertag—the mentor to many:

- Always make others feel good when they see you. Show interest in their story. Ask how their day, career and life is going.
- The key to sales success is, "Stop sellin' and start listening!"
- Give your phone number to everyone and pick up the calls when they ring. Howard never screened his calls. I called him just last week and his voicemail was updated to state his availability for that very day, stating a commitment to a prompt call back. I still remember how he always used to travel with a pocket full of quarters for returning calls from payphones before cell phones came out.
- Return all your written messages. Howard was the only magazine columnist I knew of that posted his mailing address; he returned every letter, usually by jotting down handwritten notes and sending it back. Then came the era of faxing; he would write on the fax message and fax it back promptly. Ever since emails came out, Howard rarely uses an autoresponder, because he always returns his emails promptly.
- Help everyone you can through networking; it just might come back to benefit you. Whether it was a vendor trying to introduce a new product or service, a student working on a term paper, a hotel sales director working on a presentation, or a stressed executive marketer working on budgets, Howard always has time for all.

To this day, I aspire to be the mentor to others that my dear friend Howard has been to me. As I honor Howard yet again this month, I know I speak for many who will attest that not only does he have one of the most brilliant minds in this industry, he also has the biggest heart of any human being you could ever met.

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