

## Opinions

# Lessons learned from 30 years of hotel sales processes

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Today's sales manager could learn a lot by being transported back in time to when hotel sales were fairly simple and good people skills were all you really needed to be successful.



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As I enter my 30th year of having my own hotel sales and hospitality training companies, I often reflect back on my last job working in the business, which was being a sales account executive at the Doral Golf Resort in Miami. These days I spend much of my time in hotel sales offices of our KTN clients conducting training, in-office coaching and hotel sales process assessments.

For those of us with long-term experience, changes have happened gradually. Yet if we could get one of those “transporters” from Star Trek and bring someone from that era into today's office, they would be amazed at the changes. Contrarily, if we could send today's sales manager back in time there is a lot they could learn too.

Back in the late 1980s, working in hotel sales was a fairly simple job. The main skillsets required were good people skills: a firm handshake, a hearty laugh and a charming personality. Most leads came to my phone; a few even came in by U.S. Mail. As the newest staffer, and lowest in rank, my job was mostly what we today call prospecting but back then it was referred to as cold-calling or telemarketing. Once I worked my way through all of the A-Z listings in the Encyclopedia of Associations directory, I then started working the dead file folders stored in the file library in the basement where my office was.

I recall well how absolutely thrilling it was when our admin (who was called a secretary back then) buzzed in to light up the red intercom button on the push-key telephone to announce there was a callback, or the joy of returning from lunch to find notes on pink message pads stacked on my desk with calls to return. There was nothing better than a call-in lead, and we would jump right on it.

Another major difference was that group and event planners had very little information prior to calling, mostly from hotel brochures and travel directories. So our job was to ask probing questions and then to turn features into benefits in telling them about all of the uniquely compelling and innovative features and amenities we had come up with such as irons, hair dryers and coffee machines in every room. Oh, and we also added this thing called a business center.

Then technology began quickly disrupting the flow. First there were pagers, and those who had booked would call in and say “can you please page Doug – I need him right now,” adding a bit of urgency. Then came fax machines. Now they wanted that contract typed up ASAP and faxed over by tomorrow. In 1989, I moved over to the vendor side of the industry as a hotel sales trainer but I watched as a conga line of technology continued to disrupt starting with desktop email, cellphones and Blackberry devices.

Yet all that was only the start and the pace quickened. In the early 2000s, third-party meeting planning emerged as a cottage industry, and it became more challenging to engage with the actual buyer. Perhaps the biggest disrupter of all was the shift away from voice to electronic inquiries that come in via platforms (CVENT, Lanyon, MeetingsBroker), third party partners (CVBs and other DMOs) and direct emails.

Whereas in the past the planner would reach out to three or maybe five properties, today with a touch of a few keys or taps on an iPhone glass they can send a request for proposal to literally dozens of hotel sales offices. On the receiving end, today's sales managers are experiencing “lead fatigue” and are overwhelmed by what feels like “lead spam.” As a result, planners complain of slow response times and no responses, while salespeople push out generic responses that mirror the competitors.

Since few conversations take place, buying decisions are made largely on price. Revenue managers complain that there is a race to the bottom on price and that sales managers cave too easily and too frequently. Sales managers complain that inserting a revenue manager into the equation slows down response times. Buyers complain that salespeople fail to address their specific needs and concerns in documentation, proposals and contracts.

If you ask me, the hotel sales industry is at a fork in the road. We can follow the path that most are on, which is to move towards self-service automation, in which case meeting and event space will increasingly become commoditized like airline seats already are and that hotel rooms are fast becoming. Or we can take the other path, which is to use high-tech tools as a means to return to high-touch engagement.

Here are some hotel sales training tips circa 2019:

**No one wants to come for a site inspection anymore**

The solution is not to overload them with even more self-service information such as a 25-page e-brochure, 3D floor plan or links to an ever-expanding photo gallery.

Instead, make it easy to set a time for a virtual meeting. “Right now I’m open tomorrow between 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. and the next day between 9 a.m. and 10:30 a.m.; click back a good time for a quick 20-minute chat and I can walk you through the details.” Then while they are online use a screen-sharing app like join.me (which is free) or GoToMeeting. For more involved events such as destination weddings and conferences with multiple social events, use a GoPro webcam or do a Skype or Facetime tour.

**Leads come in electronically and we don’t get to talk to prospects**

If you want to get as much business as everyone else gets, do the same things that everyone else does, which is to respond in-platform.

Instead, pick up the phone (unless the sender expressly says not to). Even if they don’t pick-up, you can leave a short voicemail message sharing your enthusiasm and enticing them into calling you back with a personalized message that includes these lines “...and I just have a few quick questions that will help me provide a more detailed response.”

Even better, send a short video email. Use the app that I recommend which embeds the video directly into the message box showing your smiling face.

**There are too many leads and many are ‘spammy’**

Most sales managers already have access to a cloud-based sales tracking program. However, from what I see in sales assessments there are very few that use it properly. Enter every right size lead into your system even if you immediately decline it for demand-tracking purposes. Immediately trace the next follow-up step on your task list. Block time every day on your agenda for follow-up to make sure it happens. Keep your email inbox clean by moving leads into folders as soon as they are acted on.

**Everyone seems to want a discount**

By engaging your prospects in a sales conversation or at least a meaningful email exchange, you can win back the opportunity to sell value over price. If they insist on a discount rate or concession, ask for an agreement to move forward before you concede. Otherwise, they will keep pushing for yet another concession.

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