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Opinions

Keep your salespeople focused on selling

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Sales managers should examine the daily schedules of their sales team members and find out what tasks and responsibilities can be removed from their schedules so they can spend more time on sales.

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In the previous columns for this series, we have explored how profoundly different the sales environment is in the current era.

The meeting planner is likely a third party, not the originator of the business; most inquiries arrive electronically via Cvent or other third-party platforms such as those used by a convention and visitors bureau; and that simply responding quickly with generic sales messaging is not enough to standout.

We have also looked at the need to revisit the organization of the flow of leads into the sales office and encouraged leaders to look at their processes for sorting and prioritizing the inquiries so that salespeople can provide prompt, personalized responses to the hottest leads, while support staff—who are specially trained for the task—assist with responding to each and every one of the remaining leads.

As a final recommendation, I want to encourage sales leaders to look closely at the day-to-day schedules of today's salespeople and see what can be done to remove some of the distracting tasks and responsibilities that can erode invaluable sales time.

As in the other topics covered in this series, factors such as the classification of hotel (resort, boutique, full service, focused service, etc.), the affiliation (such as independent, branded, brand-managed, third-party-managed) and the size and structure of the sales team will impact the unique distractions any salespeople encounter. Yet while the actual distractions might vary, chances are that if you take a good hard look at how salespeople spend their workdays, there are likely to be some unnecessary tasks eating up their available time.

Unnecessary meetings and conference calls
Yes, interdepartmental communications is important, but is it necessary for all the hotel salespeople to attend all the meetings? Instead, could one representative attend and summarize for the others either verbally or in an email? Salespeople also are often asked to participate in conference calls that may have little relevance and that could instead by summarized for them.

Report overload
This is especially an issue for hotels that have several layers of management, such as on-site, regional, corporate and brand. Leaders should look at the reporting which their salespeople are being asked for and push back on any unnecessary reports. Ask questions such as is this report still needed? Who is looking at it? What value does it bring? Is there a more efficient or automated way to get this information to those who need it? Can someone other than a salesperson put together this report?

Committees and special projects
Based on my observation, hotel salespeople seem to be disproportionately represented on volunteer committees—such as the employee picnic committee or staff awards night—and to be assigned more than their share of special projects.

Now these are the most obvious time-consuming distractions to selling, but probably the biggest opportunity for hotel salespeople to reclaim space on their agenda to refocus on direct sales tasks is to more effectively remove themselves from directly managing business that has already been booked.

Again this subject is difficult to address generally in a column such as this, because the amount of support staff a typical salesperson has varies greatly by hotel size and classification. Larger hotels have conference services or convention services staff whom they can hand off business to. Salespeople handing the business travel market have much less service type work than a wedding salesperson might have, and yes, weddings are a niche market requiring an extraordinary amount of detailing. Yet even those who have lots of supportive staff on their team too often find themselves responding to emails, texts and calls from needy clients, some of whom send an email, text and voicemail about the same question or issue.

So how should you continue to build rapport with clients who have already made a booking?

After the booking goes definite, formally and properly introduce the support team. Rather than just sending an email that says "Chris will handle you from here…" and copying Chris, provide a proper introduction explaining Chris' role. The best way to properly introduce "Chris" is to set-up a "handoff" phone call. If that is not possible, take a fun selfie with the support staff and send over a picture introducing them by name and role, providing their email and phone numbers. In the dialogue or conversation, position them as being the "real experts" in their respective areas.

Even better, introduce the support team early on in the sales process in much the same manner. When responding to a request for proposal, include key players on phone calls or send phone pictures saying, "As part of our hotel's proposal, I would like to introduce some of my wonderful colleagues who stand behind our commitment to making your meeting/event a huge success!"

Oftentimes, even when properly introduced, the clients still come back to the original salesperson with questions, concerns and requests. Rather than handling it themselves, and therefore inadvertently encouraging even more future reach-outs, salespeople should gently hand off the issue to their respective colleagues. Here are some sample statements to use:

> "That's a great question… I'm copying Chris our services manager on this as he is the real expert."
> "I received your note and I'm forwarding it on to Chris in guest services, as he directly oversees that team and can ensure a correct answer."

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