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Opinions

Is it time to reorganize your hotel’s sales office?

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Here are a few techniques for how sales experts can make responses to RFPs more personal.

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In my column last month, I addressed the fact that responding quickly to request for proposals is simply not enough to stand out anymore. Instead, today’s sales executives need to be using the various techniques listed to personalize the responses, customize the proposals and to make more personalized connections with prospects.

That being said, it’s also important for hotel sales leaders, especially those who control the budgetary purse strings, to truly comprehend just how many more leads flow in to most sales offices these days.

In the past, there was by nature a finite number of hotels which a planner would contact for a proposal, as doing so required time to place phone calls and likely play phone tag with a sales manager. Today, at the touch of a few keystrokes, a planner can search up a long list of prospective hotels, paste in specs and fire off numerous email inquiries.

Despite all these changes on the buyer’s side of the equation, the only major change most sales offices have made is to eliminate the admin “sales lead catcher” role. Now at most medium to small sales offices the leads flow right through to the salesperson covering that market segment. Even at larger operations that still have lead catchers, many of the sales managers receive their leads directly.

It is then up to the sales manager to do an initial assessment as to whether the business is a good fit in terms of rates and availability. Sure, many have an initial revenue chart or table to immediately disqualify leads that are obviously a bad fit, but more time is used to submit seemingly qualified leads to the revenue manager and/or DOS before responding.

All this takes time away from personalized, proactive selling needed to respond to and follow up tenaciously on the hot leads that the comp set also wants to close. As a result, too many sales managers these days only reply to inquiries one time, and if they follow-up at all, it is simply to send a generic email or in-app message back to the prospect.

Meantime, because sales managers are pressed for time, too often other sales opportunities are not replied to and thus slip away like sand through open fingers. These missed opportunities include:

- prospective business indicated as “not flexible” that ends up becoming date flexible once the planner finds the comp set is also sold out;
- planners indicating their budget is well below the hotel’s range, but who might have other meetings or events with larger budgets;
- leads that are relatively small, but are still worthwhile “as is” and might lead to additional, larger business from the same planner; and
- leads that seem like long shots, such as those who are looking for a different classification of hotel or location, some of which can no doubt be closed.

The question is: What can be done about it? The ideal tactical solutions vary according to factors such as the type of hotel or resort operation, the number of sales staff on board, and the availability of regional corporate level support (or lack thereof).

Regardless, the overall strategy is that most hotels need to reorganize how leads are initially sorted, screened and responded to so that sales managers get assistance from a person in a new role who:

- reviews all incoming leads;
- does an initial assessment based on revenue tables, demand forecasts and availability of rooms and meeting/function space;
- hands off those that are obviously a good fit, the right size and worth pursuing immediately to the sales manager for personalized, tenacious follow-up;
- when space is not available, responds to all leads to check for flexibility (even if the sender indicates the dates are not flexible) and expresses interest in hosting future meetings or events;
- makes a connection with the prospect and creates a positive impression;
- responds to all vague or incomplete leads for more information that might be needed to assess the leads; and

responds to all leads that are clearly not a good fit due to the budget indicated, expressing interest in other future meetings or events, again making a personal connection and positive first impression.

This role might be a talented, ambitious sales administrator who has the job of sales manager in mind as a next career step and who can be trained on the basis of revenue analysis. Another option might be someone who is currently a revenue analyst who can be trained on the basic sales fundamentals. A third option might be a career-minded front-desk superstar looking to cross-train.

For hotels with larger sales teams, this might be a new full-time position. Likewise for management companies that have multiple-focused/select-service brands in a region or area.

Yet another solution might be having a sales manager from a less time-consuming market segment take on this role for the whole office.

The staffing solution will be unique for each lodging operation, but chances are that reorganizing the flow of incoming leads in your sales office will free-up sales managers to provide more personalized, timely and relentless follow-up.

Next month, in part three of this series, we will look how to remove some of the distracting tasks and responsibilities that also erode away selling time.

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