

Opinions

Sales leaders: Go beyond responding quickly to RFPs

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Responding quickly to sales inquiries is not enough to stand out anymore. Sales leaders need to find ways to outsell the competition.



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Seems like every time I read conference rewinds and articles on Hotel News Now, the discussion turns to what is different about hotel sales these days and what leaders should be doing to adapt.

It is good that most executive leaders seem to recognize how profoundly different the sales environment is in the current era. They recognize that the meeting planner is a likely a third party, not the originator of the business, and that most inquiries arrive electronically via CVENT or other third-party platforms such as those used by a convention and visitors bureau, or by paid subscription sites such as WeddingWire and The Knot.

What concerns me is that most leaders seem to think the only key to sales success is to respond quickly. It is absolutely true that responding quickly is important, especially because these platforms measure response times and hotels that fail to respond promptly are pushed down the list.

Yet a fast response time by itself will not help you stand out, especially when the odds are that the rates you are offering are—thanks to advances in revenue management—likely to be right in line with your comp set. Not only will the price be similar, but the chances are that on the surface the overall features of your hotel are probably also comparable with your comp set.

Like I always say in my sales training workshops, “if you want to get the same business that everyone else gets, then do the same things that everyone else does,” and you will win market share. If you’re happy with your slice of the pie then skip the rest of this article. Truth is that many sales leaders are in fact happy with their slice of the pie, since that pie has been growing for years now as the economy continues to be on fire in 2018.

If you want to outsell the competition and grab a bigger slice of the pie than everyone else gets, then respond promptly with a competitive price, but find ways to combine “tech” and “touch” in order to outsell your competition.

Too many of today’s sales leaders are fatalists and accept the philosophies such as these:

“I don’t call because no one wants to talk anymore. I always get voicemail.”

“If they wanted to talk to a salesperson they would have called me. That’s why they sent an email to inquire (or used CVENT).”

“We are already sending a 20-page PDF (or a link to an electronic proposal), so that answers every possible question.”

“I called a planner once and she was not happy.”

Instead, here are some training tips that I share in my workshops and conference presentations:

Respond promptly to acknowledge; but if more time is needed to personalize and customize the response, let them know that is the case. This is much better than replying with a boilerplate proposal.

Reply even if the dates are not available, and even if the request for proposal says the dates are not flexible. (If other hotels are sold out, all the sudden dates might become flexible.)

Pick up the phone. If you get someone, go right into your reason for calling such as: “Hello, this is Doug Kennedy from Brand X Hotel calling in response to your RFP. I just have a few quick questions so that I can provide a proposal specific to what you’re looking for.” This opening greeting will warm up most prospects. If you get voicemail, say the same in a brief but polite voicemail.

Reply “in-app” and then also separately via direct email. Note: If the sender of the RFP specifically says not to call or to respond in-app only then disregard the above suggestions, of course.

For corporate and association groups, search up the logo and include it on sales collateral.

Send a personal video email using the best platform for doing so.

When prospects have specific questions about a location or venue, take and send an “organic” camera phone pic taken “just for you.”

Make it easy to set a time to talk by phone by sending specific blocks of time when you are in-office. (Example: “I would love to have a chance to review this personally and I’m at my desk tomorrow between 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. and the next day from 1 p.m.—3 p.m. Click back a time that works.)

When you get them on the phone and if they are by a computer, use a screen-sharing or online meeting tool to walk them through your website, your proposal or the contract details. (I recommend join.me, which has a free version for up to five viewers at a time.)

If you cannot get them on the phone to review a proposal or contract, use your online meeting tool to record a video message while recording your computer screen, using a highlighter to point out images and/or proposal details. (For this you will probably need a paid subscription, but it’s worth it.)

Embrace your lead tracking tech so that you can efficiently organize active leads for systematic, pro-active follow up, alternating between voice, email and/or video email mediums.

As a final thought, I’m sure many hotel sales managers are reading this and thinking “If only I had time.” For ideas on how to “make” the time, stay tuned for my future sales training articles for HNN addressing topics such as embracing your sales tech to the max, how to properly hand off clients after booking to those who service, and ultimately how hotel leaders should be reorganizing the sales in-take system to free up sales managers and pursue the hottest leads.

Doug Kennedy is president of the Kennedy Training Network, Inc. a leading provider of hotel sales, guest service, reservations and front desk training programs and telephone mystery shopping services for the lodging and hospitality industry. Kennedy has been a fixture on the industry’s conference circuit for hotel companies, brands and associations for more than two decades. Since 1996, Kennedy’s monthly training articles have been published worldwide, making him one of the most widely read hospitality industry authorities. Visit KTN at www.kennedytrainingnetwork.com or email him directly at doug@kennedytrainingnetwork.com. He is the author of “[So You REALLY Like Working With People? - Five Principles for Hospitality Excellence.](#)”

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