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Hotel Sales Best Practices For The Era Of Electronic Inquiries | By Doug Kennedy

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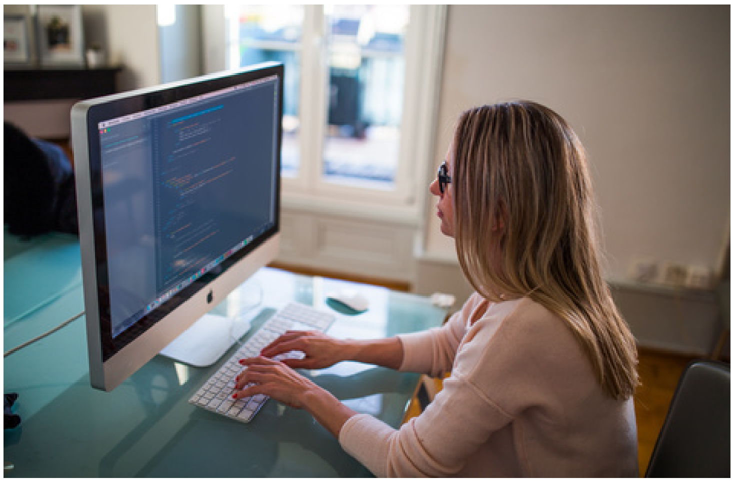

As anyone who has worked in the profession of hotel sales and catering sales for 10 or more years knows, the skill-set required to be a top performer is quite different these days. Today's sales superstars still have to have exceptional "people skills," which today is more formally referred to as emotional intelligence.

Equally as vital, however, is the need for sales colleagues to develop an excellent organizational skillset. These days, one has to be good at both "people" and "process" skills in order to succeed. This is because today's sales teams are dealing with an overwhelming flow of electronic correspondence throughout the sales cycle and it is therefore essential to be highly organized.

First, there is an overwhelming number of leads coming in via electronic channels, as meeting and event planners reach out to a long list of hotels via a few key strokes at CVENT, Starcite, CVB sites, Meeting Broker, or Wedding Wire and The Knot. Thereafter, once a prospect becomes a client, communications regarding key details start flowing in piecemeal in via texts and emails at all hours of the day.

Therefore, it's essential that sales professionals evolve their skill-set tool box to adapt to all of these changes. Following are a few of my recommended best practices from KTN's sales training for today's era of electronic inquiries and messaging.

- Give up the paper and embrace your electronic tool. Whether you are using Delpi, Opera Sales & Catering, Salesforce, or one of the many other lead tracking systems, fully commit to using all if its features. There are just too many leads floating around to track any other way. Searching through a stack of print-outs of leads is way too time consuming when a prospect calls in; as is going through the stack when it's time for follow-up.
- Similarly, stop trying to make Outlook into a lead tracking system. While Outlook can be an excellent email platform, and the calendar features are useful, if you take time to fully embrace your lead tracking platform you will probably find it has far more features and functionalities that will make you a better organized sales person.
- Enter all "right sized" leads as soon as the come in. Print RFP's and inquiries as PDF documents and attach them to the contact. (This will also help your revenue manager better track demand for meeting space and also lost business.) Then – and this may be hard for many of you – toss that paper into the recycle bin!
- Immediately trace the next step. Ideally, it is good to respond right away but of course this is not always possible. Just trace the lead for "today" until you have responded and then re-trace for the actual next step.
- Respond by phone. Unless the sender specifically requested not to be called, find a reason to pick up the phone and engage your prospect with some intelligent investigative questioning. A good way to start the call is by saying "I just have a few questions that will help me better respond in more detail…" If you can't reach them, leave this in a voicemail and you will at least be showing intent to out-service the competition.
- Next, personalize the correspondence sent out. Start the cover email or cover letter by paraphrasing and re-stating a few key details you have learned from the inquiry (or hopefully the phone call if you were able to connect.)
- Customize the proposal templates. Most hotels have several templates already, but by making a few changes to the textual copy and also the images included you can make it real for the recipient. If it is a company or association, drop-in their logo.
- Respond both inside and outside of the platform (where possible.) Ensure that your response does not get lost in the long list by also sending it directly to the planner's email if it was included, or at least shoot over a note saying you have responded in the platform.
- If your sales tracking system is not integrated with your email platform, then copy and paste key email exchanges in the comments or notes field.

- Encourage a phone call. Rather than saying "call me if you have questions" or "I'll reach out to answer questions…" say "I hope to connect with you by phone to review this proposal and to hear more about your unique needs. I'm currently open tomorrow between 3:15pm and 430pm and the following day between 9am and 10:45am, so please click back a time that would be good for us to connect
- Your cover message should also request that the recipient confirms receipt. Do not rely on Outlook's "Return Receipt Requested." Most planners read emails on multiple devices and it's just too easy for them to accidentally delete it. If they do not confirm, then reach ou again.
- Include a headshot and link to your Linkedin profile in your email signature.
- After confirming receipt, trace for a follow-up appropriate to decision making timeline. This is typically three to five business days after they have received the proposal, while they are still early enough in the decision for you to try to influence it.
- Alternate between phone calls and emails for at least two or three follow-ups, typically spread a few days in between.
- Never throw guilt at your prospects with statements such "Since I haven't heard back from you…" or "I've left you several messages now…" Instead just keep reminding them how much you want to host their meeting or event. "Hello, just reaching out to see what else we can do to secure your business."
- Whenever you do connect, enter key details in the "notes" or "comments" section. Then keep referring back to these during subsequent follow-up voicemails, emails and conversations such as "When we last spoke I know you were going to meet with your colleagues at the head office…"

To really stand out from the competitors, try using some "hi tech" tools for "old school" relationship building.

- Give video email a try. The hottest thing I have discovered this year are the new platforms for sending video email correspondence. (Note: For a sample of how to use this contact me personally doug@kennedytrainingnetwork.com)
- Offer to contact the prospect via Skype or Facetime. Especially for social function planners, these are great options to make a persona connection and to stand out.
- - For a personal touch, send camera phone pics of property features, views, meeting set-ups, amenities etc…
- - Use screen sharing tools to walk prospects through the proposal and to offer "virtual FAM tours." It's often hard to get prospects out tc visit the hotel prior to the decision making these days, so use a tool like join.me which is free of charge. They will be seeing whatever you are viewing on your desktop. Then just open and review the proposal, share stock images or floorplans, or walk them through highlights of your website.

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