

(/)



(<http://www.bestwesterndevelopers.com/portfolio/vib.php>)

Opinions

(/Articles/ByCategory?category=Opinions)

OTA call center outsells, outservices big brands

23 MARCH 2016 8:39 AM

In an experiment comparing how call center staff interact with potential guests, employees at one OTA won out over hotel companies.



By Doug Kennedy (/Author/639/Doug-Kennedy)
 doug@kennedytrainingnetwork.com
 (mailto:doug@kennedytrainingnetwork.com)
 0

As a hotel industry trainer, I have to admit being biased toward booking directly with hotels or hotel brands versus going through third parties such as online travel agencies. However, in my family and social network, I have encountered plenty of raving fans who are more loyal to their preferred OTA than any one hotel brand.

One example is my older brother Dan who, despite being a member of the baby boomer generation, has always been an early adaptor of anything related to Internet technology. We recently had a conversation about his favorite OTA, which has always been and continues to be Expedia. As he touted the advantages, such as an easy-to-navigate website and loyalty points he can use anywhere, I challenged him by saying, "Well at least with a big hotel brand, you can call them if you need to." Sticking up for Expedia, he proceeded to tell me how he has in fact called its call center agents many times over the years and how terrific the service has always been.

I decided to conduct my own little test of the Expedia call center as compared to major hotel brands. First, I put together a call story that I was looking to take my wife away to celebrate our 20th wedding anniversary; I had been online searching but found "so many choices that I decided to call to see what the best options would be."

Next, I placed three calls to the Expedia customer service phone number posted on the website, one each for San Francisco, Miami Beach and Manhattan. Just as my brother had said, the service was absolutely impeccable. What's more, as a hotel sales trainer, I also found that all three Expedia agents also outsold their brand counterparts. Here is a recap.

The findings

The call flow process I experienced at Expedia was consistent without sounding too scripted. Agents were all professional yet also personal and authentic. All three agents started with a positive opening greeting and politely asked for (and later used) my name in a way that was conversational and not forced.

I started by explaining that I had been online and needed help in selecting as I was overwhelmed by the number of choices. All three proceeded to fully "qualify" my call by asking for the dates, number in the party and bedding requests; two of the three continued on to ask what was bringing me to the city in question (I

TRENDING

- 1 The Lodging Conference Day One: Treats, not tricks (/articles/250397/The-Lodging-Conference-Day-One-Treats-not-tricks)
- 2 High occupancy sets tone in corporate rate negotiations (/articles/250634/High-occupancy-sets-tone-in-corporate-rate-negotiations)
- 3 5 things to know: 2 November 2017 (/articles/250685/5-things-to-know-2-November-2017)
- 4 Hampton's new leader on brand pet peeves, future plans (/articles/250383/Hamptons-new-leader-on-brand-pet-peeves-future-plans)
- 5 Hyatt to sell \$1.5b in assets, signaling strategy shift (/articles/250902/Hyatt-to-sell-15b-in-assets-signaling-strategy-shift)

RELATED ARTICLES

Hotels' huge role to avert culture of untrustworthiness (/articles/251576/Hotels-huge-role-to-avert-culture-of-untrustworthiness)

What if hotel companies decided to literally downsize? (/articles/250917/What-if-hotel-companies-decided-to-literally-downsize)

Timeliness is the first rule in crisis communication (/articles/250619/Timeliness-is-the-first-rule-in-crisis-communication)

A design tale: Being the authors of our design story (/articles/250374/A-design-tale-Being-the-authors-of-our-design-story)

Turning lookers into bookers (/articles/250081/Turning-lookers-into-bookers)

voluntarily mentioned my purpose to the third agent who did not ask). All three agents congratulated me on my upcoming wedding anniversary and all sounded like they truly meant it by making personal remarks such as, "Wow, 20 years, that is wonderful!"

As a sales trainer, I was impressed that all three used what we call the "Just For You" sales approach, which is to use phrases such as "You will enjoy" instead of saying "The hotel offers" or "It offers." Two of the three even offered recommendations and endorsements of the options they presented, which is so important to convince channel-surfing callers to commit.

After quoting rates, all three agents offered to secure the booking for me right now. All three used urgency statements such as, "We already have some hotels that are sold out for these dates." One even used a personalized suggestive selling close: "Let's book this right now and make it a perfect anniversary." Honestly, she was so completely awesome that I almost said yes even though this was a test call.

When I resisted, all three continued to press on persistently without being too pushy by using statements such as, "This is a fully refundable rate" and "There are only a few rooms left at this rate" and "Many people have called me back and found out that it is not available, so let's book this for you now, OK?"

Even when I resisted, all three Expedia agents then used a textbook perfect ending to their call by first offering additional assistance—including a pause for me to respond—and then thanking me for calling Expedia.

The hotel call center test

Next, I placed three calls for the same dates and locations to three different brand call centers. The hotel companies I selected were among the largest; all had a family of brands including upscale and luxury, which was the segment I was shopping for.

When I told the first agent I called my story—that I had been online shopping but had seen too many options and was confused—her approach was to notify me that she represented numerous brands, which she then proceeded to list by name. She did not ask what was bringing me in, so I volunteered my story about the big anniversary. No response. Instead she started quoting rates for one of the hotels listed.

I said "OK, thank you," to which she said, "Is there anything else I can assist you with?" thanked me and ended the call. She did not use my name, did not recommend nor suggest any options that would be good for my story and did not make any attempt to close the sale.

I pressed on with the second call to another similar multi-brand company's call center. This call was almost exactly the same in its lack of personalization and sales effort. Again no questions about my "story" and no reaction to it once it was volunteered. She did not ask my name and did not try to close the sale.

When I said "thank you" after hearing the rate, she then said, "(Brand name) has arranged for you to receive \$200 off of your next stay if you remain online to hear about (some offer) and also 100 bonus points." Apparently she was more interested in selling me a timeshare tour than helping me plan my trip.

Finally I called the third company's call center, also a collection of brands. This time I was greeted by a voice recognition system that introduced herself as a talking computer and then proceeded to ask for my city, state and dates.

Right afterward an agent came on and reconfirmed these details and then he said "I'm showing 25 hotels available for (city name) during that time, which one are you interested in?" When I expressed interest in one of the brands in the family he quoted rates and then paused. When I said my "Thank you," he said, "OK, if you would like to book that give us a call back ..." followed by "Thank you, take care." He did not personalize the call, recommend anything, nor try to close the sale. He also did not offer additional assistance nor mention the brand name at the end.

In summary, after my little test I have to say I agree with my older brother Dan that Expedia does offer great service when guests reach out via traditional channels such as voice. As a hotelier, it does make me wonder why major hotel brands pay so little attention to the voice reservations experience these days. Apparently they fail to see the interplay between voice and online channels.

Doug Kennedy is President of the Kennedy Training Network, Inc. a leading provider of customized training programs and telephone mystery shopping services for the lodging and hospitality industry. Doug continues to be a fixture on the industry's conference circuit for hotel companies, brands and associations, as he has been for over two decades. Since 1996, Doug's monthly hotel industry training articles have been published worldwide, making him one of the most widely read hotel industry training writers. Visit KTN at www.kennedytrainingnetwork.com (<http://www.kennedytrainingnetwork.com>) or email him directly.

The opinions expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Hotel News Now or its parent company, STR and its affiliated companies. Columnists published on this site are given the freedom to express views that might be controversial, but our goal is to provoke thought and constructive discussion within our reader community. Please feel free to comment or contact an editor with any questions or concerns.