

Saavy Hoteliers Still Make Voice Channels A Priority

Feb 22, 11 | 12:08 am



By Doug Kennedy

It has occurred to me recently how relatively little attention most hotel marketing and operations executives pay to their voice distribution channels, at least when compared to the huge amount of time and effort they invest in managing electronic and online channels. The ironic part is that for many lodging companies, these voice channels are still holding their own against website, OTA and other online channels. Even if your online channels outpace the direct voice bookings, virtually all lodging properties today still receive a significant number of direct inquires for reservations that need to be capitalized on.

If you stop to calculate the potential value of each reservations inquiry, it seems obvious that the potential ROI is worthy of the effort to train, measure, and incentive for hotel reservations sales success.

Take a moment to run the numbers by starting with your transient average rate times the transient average stay. That, plus the average ancillary revenue per transient guest if you are a full service property, tells you the potential of each inquiry received. Then calculate the results if every reservations, front desk, or call center agent could capture even just one more reservation per shift. The truth is the potential increase in call conversion is significantly more than one per day but this number alone will get your management team's attention.

If you listen-in to monitored recordings of live calls these days, today's callers are more often than not asking a specific questions regarding the overload of information available online by just a few clicks at online guest reviews and social media postings. They are also asking questions about the multitude of rates and rate options they have seen online at third party channels. What's more significant is that many of today's callers practically hand-deliver an opportunity to convert them from costly third party channels. For proof, just ask any agent how often they are asked a question such as "Should I book that online or book it with you?"

With today's callers asking more detailed and pointed questions, it's vital to make sure whomever is answering your hotel's reservations inquiries has the proper resources need to succeed. This includes training on not only how to work the reservations system, but also how to execute the rate strategy. It amazes me that there are many reservations and front desk staff even today who do not have web access to verify a rate at a third party website so that they can verify and match it.

It's also amazing how many agents still start off quoting their very lowest rate, as if to do the caller a "favor," while others inadvertently make high demand rates sound undesirable with statements such as "Well it looks like the discounts are all closed out that night" or "The only rate I have for those dates is..." or "The only rooms we have left would be our suites."

Despite all the challenges with training agents on executing the rate and efficiently using the reservations system, I have to say those are the relatively easy parts. The most challenging mission is to help those who field voice inquiries have a caller-focused, personalized conversation and not just another transactional call. Achieving this component of reservations sales excellence is not only training, but also measuring the results and properly incentivizing the frontline staff.

With all the budget cuts the last few years, many hotels and call centers have allowed training to fall by the wayside. So a good starting place is to schedule a sales training meeting for your team. Here are some good themes:

- Product knowledge. Make sure your hotel or call center staff can answer frequently asked questions and can provide local insider's tips. Don't assume just because they live in the area that they are prepared to answer the questions guests frequently ask. Create your own in-house reference systems for guest FAQ's.
- How to respond to questions and concerns regarding comments made in postings on TripAdvisor and other online guest review websites.
- Using caller-focused, investigative questions to find out more about what your caller is looking for that they didn't see online.
- How to paint the picture of a positive experience by being using language that is alluring, enticing, and that appeals to emotions and not just intellect. How to go beyond simply notifying, informing, and listing what is already posted at the website.
- Asking for the reservation, and if pre-empted from doing so or if the offer is declined, creating urgency and/or removing barriers to booking now.

Of course the training itself is only the kick-off and first step in helping your voice agents maximize both conversation and average revenue per booking.

To reinforce the training, be sure to measure the results. One way to measure the results is to use a mystery shopping program. Make sure your mystery shopping provider uses an updated criteria and scoring model that encourages a conversational approach. All too many mystery shopping programs are based on outdated models where callers had little or no information before calling; these programs sometime even require agents to use heavily scripted statements that offer no appeal to most of today's callers. Work with your provider to update your criteria and overall approach to make sure it is reinforcing a conversational, caller-focused sales process.

Besides the mystery shopping, be sure to properly measure the call conversion. With the exciting new technologies that have emerged in recent years, there are more and more ways for hotels and call centers of all size operations to measure call conversion electronically. Besides the equipment-based tracking and recording tools, many 800 long distance providers also offer web-based call tracking features that require no equipment at all and at very affordable rates.

Even if no technology system is available to help you track call conversion, a manual call logging system is better than using no system at all. Be sure that agents are coding all sales opportunities as "qualified calls," so long as it is a reservation inquiry and there are rooms open. Also, do not use call coding categories such call "rate inquiry only" and then deduct these from call count in calculating conversion, as this will only artificially inflate your conversion rate.

It is hard to imagine why anyone would call a hotel just to check rates if they were not at least considering a reservation.

Finally, make sure you have a properly structured incentive plan that rewards voice agents for improving revenues. Avoid having a commission program that pays agents a fixed amount on every sale. Instead, a true incentive program rewards agents for achieving specific, pre-determined goals. Instead, have a few different incentives that run simultaneously and that reinforce your overall reservations sales strategy. Depending on your market segment and operations, goals that can be incentivized include:

- Total monthly revenue sold vs. goal.
- Average revenue per booking.
- Call conversion.
- Mystery shopping.

By focusing your team's attention on maximizing reservations sales effectiveness, you'll also be ensuring that potential guests are able to reach someone who is not only polite but also knowledgeable, efficient, and who presents a positive first impression of the overall hotel experience they will receive.

About the Author



Doug Kennedy, President of the Kennedy Training Network, has been a fixture on the hospitality and tourism industry conference circuit since 1989, having presented over 1,000 conference keynote sessions, educational break-out seminars, or customized, on-premise training workshops for diverse audiences representing every segment of the lodging industry.

His articles have also appeared worldwide in more than 17 prominent international publications including the HSMAI Marketing Review, eHotelier, 4hoteliers, Hotel News Resource, Hotel Online, Human Assets - Dubai and Hong Kong, Hsyndicate worldwide, BAHA Times - U.K., Hospitality - Maldives, and the Hotel Expert Magazine Hong Kong. Since 1996 Doug has been a regular contributor to the lodging industry's number one rated publication, www.hotelmotel.com, where he has been a regular monthly columnist since 2001. Visit

www.kennedytrainingnetwork.com for details or e-mail him at: doug@kennedytrainingnetwork.com.

Related articles

- "Nightmare on Hospitality Street"
- A New Approach to Webinars for Staff Training
- Alluring descriptions are key to converting reservations
- Bringing out the best in others brings out the best in ourselves
- First step in new sales: Believe it is possible!
- Front Desk Drama: It is the D-A-S-H that makes the Difference!
- Front desk hospitality training can generate future business
- Front desk training is the key to capturing more walk-in business
- Generate more revenue by making training everyone's job
- Good news formula for RevPar in 2009

Email this article to a friend ShareThis

<< PreviousNext >>

© 1999–2011 ehotelier.com
Please read our Privacy Statement