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Insider: Everyone's a Salesperson! Expand Your Hotel Sales Team with Evangelism Marketing

By Andrew Freeman, President, Andrew Freeman & Company

Hallelujah. Feel the love and spread the word. And change your philosophy towards sales.

Your sales team can target an increasing number of potential outlets to book business and fill your hotel nowadays. New sales opportunities, like online advertising and third-party e-channels, are as viable a source of business as traditional targets, like print advertising and corporate travel planners. However, this increasing number of potential outlets also means stretching your sales team's limited resources over a greater area. Trying to develop relationships in all of these target markets can be overwhelming, if not impossible, for any hotel sales effort.

So it's time to take a creative look at how you can extend your sales and marketing team without increasing the number of people with "sales" on their business cards or making your sales budget balloon with added expenses. Sometimes known as "evangelism marketing" or "advocacy marketing," the goal is to turn everyone who comes into contact with your hotel into a salesperson. When you have people excited about their experience or interaction with your hotel and your brand, the power of their endorsement and recommendation is stronger, greater and farther-reaching than if you were to spend your entire marketing budget on paid advertising or any other sales promotion available to you. Remember, "they tell two friends and they tell two friends and so on and so on." This is evangelism marketing and it is the most powerful method of marketing you have.

Before turning guests, employees, vendors and others into evangelists for your hotel, there are two things you must do: The first is that you must be an evangelist yourself and believe your hotel is in fact everything it claims to be. If you're not passionate about your product, why should anyone else be? The second thing to do is to confirm that your foundation is solid and your concept is clear. Make sure the amenities and services of your hotel are up-to-date, relevant to who you are, and firmly in place. Be certain that your programs and other features are interesting enough to appeal to the different groups of people who come in contact with your hotel. Think of the power the buzz factor holds in building your business as you review all these elements.

Evangelism marketing can be applied to everyone because everyone fits. The most immediate opportunity to turn people into evangelists comes from your repeat guests. Since it's also their reputation on the line when making suggestions, people will only freely refer something if they believe it is the best. Those loyal guests who come back time and time again believe your hotel is the best for them, so treating them well and acknowledging their loyalty – which is your typical interaction to begin with – provides them the easy opportunity to willingly offer word-of-mouth recommendations and referrals.

Other possibilities to extend your sales team include everyone else who comes in contact with your hotel:

- **Employees:** Common sense says to keep your staff motivated with incentives and perks as well as a fair and satisfying work environment. If your employees feel happy and are proud of the hotel, their enthusiasm about where they work will positively affect your guests, making them happy, and thus expanding your opportunity to reach more potential guests.
- **Vendors:** In the same way you treat your employees, keep your vendors satisfied by developing fair and mutually beneficial relationships – and giving them your business. They are constantly providing hotel referrals to their friends, family and business associates – you want these referrals to come to you.
- **Competitors:** As you well know, there is often business you can't accommodate and it goes to your competitors. Treat your competitors well and share business with them; on those occasions they cannot accommodate business, you have made it easy for them to send it to you.
- **Local organizations and community businesses:** Participate in and support local like-minded organizations and nearby community businesses. In addition to the many direct benefits you receive from your involvement, the people from these enterprises also provide hotel referrals to those they know.

Evangelism marketing is significant enough that incorporating it into your overall marketing strategy should be as organized and focused as the other components in your marketing plan. (There are entire books, seminars and organizations devoted to evangelism marketing.) Once you determine who can be evangelists for you – this is everyone you meet – the next step is to put a system in place to acknowledge them for their referrals of pre-qualified guests and their contributions to your overall sales success.

- Start with a simple "thank you." Acknowledge how much you appreciate their referral and recommendation, regardless of whether or not the reservation is made.
- Make sure you take care of the guests who are referred, as word will get back to the source (and others) about the experience. Take the time to turn this newly referred guest into your next evangelist.
- Develop some type of rewards program that is focused on what the referrers want:
 - For guest referrals, you can acknowledge them with complimentary nights, special amenities or services during their next visit, a complimentary meal at your partner restaurant, or upgrades.
 - For employees, incentives can include gift certificates, paid time off or cash bonuses. The goal is to make it about what they want, not what's easiest for you.
 - For vendors set up preferred special rate programs. This makes it easier for them to refer business to your hotel, as they believe they have a "connection."
 - For competitors, consider setting up mutual "finders' fees" for any referred business. While this may not seem like true evangelism marketing and recognition for referrals, your competitors still have their own reputations and goals for getting and keeping customers, including the ones they refer to you.
 - For charities with which you're involved, consider donating back a percentage of any referred business.

While some may only need to hear that simple "thank you" to be motivated to continue evangelizing your hotel, creating some type of rewards program to acknowledge what this newfound extended sales force is doing for you will support your efforts.

With all of these advocates spreading the word of your hotel and your brand, how do you engage all these evangelists to give you information about potential business so you can comfortably and tastefully ask for the referrals? One possibility is an e-mail blitz or a direct mail piece that is in the style of a "refer a friend" that fits your concept (not generic). Once you have these referrals, make certain you create some type of tracking system to capture the referrals' information, such as name, address and e-mail. Also be sure to consider the power of media and blogs. When journalists and bloggers write positively about you, they have done the legwork to get potential guests to your hotel.

You may be wondering if this evangelism marketing and turning everyone into a sales person is really worthwhile. Consider this: A recent study by the market research firm Chadwick Martin Bailey (CMB) found that "at the current rate of occurrence, advocacy will directly influence more than \$30 billion in travel and hospitality sales in the United States...by attracting new customers and influencing where dollars are spent."

So say hallelujah. Feel the love. Spread the word – and make everyone a salesperson. Amen.

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