

THE **BASICS** OF DIRECT SELLING

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In his fifth decade of service to the hospitality industry, the author, an expert sales and marketing professional, offers invaluable advice to those new to the hospitality sales profession. Part I of this article appears in the October 2009 issue of the *HSMAI Marketing Review*.

Today's salespeople and managers must deal with meeting planners who are sophisticated, knowledgeable, and demanding. So it has never been more critical for salespeople to know their "stuff," share their

knowledge, master the art of "connecting with people," and respond quickly and accurately at all times.

Meeting planners represent a \$120-plus billion meetings industry—that's larger than the medical manufacturing and pharmaceutical industry. There

are now more than a million off-site meetings a year in the United States; less than ten percent are for groups using 500 rooms or more; 70 percent of those meetings are for groups of 30-35 people or less.

Planners today are multi-taskers.

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Many have come into the meeting planning business due to corporate mergers, acquisitions, downsizing, and outsourcing. For example, some former procurement managers now find themselves booking meetings. Hospitality salespeople should keep in mind that procurement specialists are schooled in booking volume business travel contract rooms, where price is always king. These procurement specialists are making decisions now in a new—for them—paradigm: booking meetings based on value and not necessarily by price.

Time: the planners' new currency

Time is now the meeting planners most critical and most protected possession. Their new currency is no longer dollars and cents, it's hours and minutes.

There is no longer any time to spare in the interaction between meeting planners and hospitality salespeople. No "forgiving" of phones not answered or calls not returned. No patience with rookies that have not done their homework, have no knowledge to share, and do not listen. Meeting planners need to be shown immediately that they are valued by salespeople and managers for who they are and what they do.

Meeting planners' new resource: a social media network

Meeting planners have some exciting new resources. Web 2.0 and what Cindy Estis Green calls the "social media tsunami" enables them to find valuable information, testimonials, and recommendations quickly and easily. Blogs, Wikis, Twitter, and more have created new knowledge sharing opportunities for meeting planners never available before on such a wide, global scale.

A *Meeting News* survey indicates that 6 out of 10 meeting planners' venue decisions are based solely on information, photos, and specs found on the Internet.

One such social media is veteran meeting planner Joan Eisenstodt's MiForum with more than 2,000 participants. When I participated on MiForum I was blown away by the content, the knowledge sharing, and the level of dia-

logue between planners, hospitality sales pros, and convention/conference service managers. Discussions ranged from tips for negotiating total meeting costs to which venue would work best to finding the right speaker.

Blogs such as Eisenstodt's help demonstrate that planners' decisions rely much more today on knowledge shared by peers via social media and less and less on hospitality industry Web sites, PDF files, and advertising/public relations—much the same as today's consumers rely on new user generated content sites such as Trip Advisor (24 million travelers users; 10 million consumer generated reviews monthly) and Facebook.

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Meeting planners using new "meeting success" measurement sticks

Sophisticated planners are using new measurement sticks today. No longer are successful meetings measured merely by attendance, evaluation surveys, and general feedback. Now there's a whole new performance metric of "R's:" R.O.O, return on objective; R.O.C, return on content; R.O.E, return on experience, according to exhibit and event management services consultant Candy Adams, the "Booth Mom."

Tips for interacting with planners

Based on meeting planner interviews I have conducted along with recent surveys produced by *Meeting News* and PKF/Convention South, here are a few tips for salespeople and managers when they interact with meeting planners:

- Planners will continue to work exclusively with third parties, rather than

deal with inexperienced, slow to respond hospitality salespeople and managers. This is all the more reason to establish your credibility.

- Answer your own phone quickly. Return phone calls and e-mails quickly—if not within the hour, forget it. You've probably already lost the business!
- Demonstrate a sincere appreciation of planners' value and time restraints.
- Listen carefully; avoid planners having to repeat information.
- Focus on planners' needs—separate needs from wants.
- Remember, planners seek out decision makers—if you aren't one, assure the planner that you have access to a deci-

sion maker who will get back to them quickly.

Sure, there will be "amateurs" and "first time" meeting planners with whom you interact. They will require more patience, guidance, and good bedside manners on your part. Sharing your knowledge will be even more valued by these inexperienced planners.

But the meetings that are most likely not to cancel, most likely not to be underfunded, most likely to book the most room nights at the highest possible rates, are now being produced by a sophisticated, knowledgeable, and demanding meeting planner.

Hospitality salespeople who recognize and accept this fact, and gear up for it will be the ones that come away with the most quality business booked. If you and your property help make their meetings successful, the meeting planners you serve should become loyal customers and book your hotel time and time again. And they will tell other meeting planners about you and your

property through blogs, phone calls, social media and in person.

Site Inspections

Today's multi-tasking meeting planners don't have the time to spend on long, detailed hotel tours, especially when planners are considering more than one property in the same market. Make no mistake, prospect and client tours of hotels are helpful to the selling process, but they pale in comparison with the importance of the site inspection.

A tour can be arranged for a planner that just happens to drop in, never having experienced your hotel. It could be with a regional or local office manager whose company has an event on the horizon. And sometimes it might involve a local host chapter president asked to check out a hotel under consideration by an association or society.

Site inspections occur mainly at the end of the sales cycle

Tours typically take place at the very beginning of the sales cycle. Site inspections, however, occur mainly at the very end of the sales cycle.

Here are tasks either initiated or already in place prior to the actual site inspection:

- Relationship established between hotel and planner
- Hotel has correct information on subject group's past hotel usage history
- Proposal already issued
- Tentative booking on record, meeting and function space blocked
- Hotel aware planner may be holding tentative space at competitive hotels
- Proposal signed and returned, event considered definite subject to planner satisfaction with final site inspection

Successful site inspection tips

Site inspections for hotels are like making it to "The Final Four" in college

basketball. Much can be at stake. Expectations are high. Pressure can be enormous. Here are a few suggestions for today's hospitality salespeople that might help make the site inspection more successful and a "win-win" situation for hotel and planner alike:

- **DO YOUR HOMEWORK.** Be prepared. Master the group's history. What is it about your hotel that makes it attractive to the planner and the attendees? What venues and activities outside the hotel would be most popular? Would the attendees choose to return? What are the needs and expectations of the group and planner? What can you (and your hotel) do to help make the planner look good (and be praised by her/his management and attendees for selecting your hotel)? Where did the group experience its very best meeting and why? Worst meeting? What worked well, what did not?

Planners may not come alone to a site inspection. Be prepared for surprises. Sometimes, without notice, the planner will arrive with "VIP guests," who may include the organization's CEO, COO, or executive director, or a local chapter potential host, or a manager of a corporate regional or local office. Site selection committee inspections are normally scheduled long in advance and the hotel should be aware of the committee members' names and contact information in advance. Contact personal sales calls with committee members should be the rule of the day prior to the site inspection, with the approval, of course, of the planner and/or subject organization.

- **THINK LIKE A MEETING PLANNER.** It's always a good idea to put yourself in the shoes of the planner (and her/his party). Be sure you have the answers to the following questions. Time of day planner will arrive? How far will planner be traveling that day? If by air, are limo or private automobile airport pickup arrangements confirmed? How many hotels and possible venues will the site inspec-

tion entail? Will your hotel be first on the stop? If not, in what order will you be? What part or event at your hotel will the planner be eager to see and experience most? How can you make certain that planners establish a relationship with convention service personnel? Will the planner be able to manage the entire tour physically without assistance? After you show the property and it's time for a sit-down meeting, should you confer in your office, or confer over a meal, which should come first? Will a translator be needed?

- **CUSTOMIZE.** With so much at stake, it becomes imperative to make the site visit "relevant." If meeting and function space remain an issue in the decision making, be sure to preset the ballroom as close to how the planner envisions it, or preset the conference or breakout rooms to the planner's exact specifications (schoolroom, u-shape, conference, or theater style), and then take the planner directly to the appropriate venue. Perhaps the planner has concerns about the block of guestrooms reserved for his/her staff or about the rooms negotiated at lower rates for some attendees. Take the planner directly to one or two of your lowest rack rated rooms with the least attractive location so you can put that issue behind you (make sure those rooms "shine"!).
- **SHOW TIME.** This is show time for you and your hotel. Site inspections give hotels opportunities to dazzle in the presentation. Send the planner a roundtrip airline ticket. Make a big splash at the airport pickup (general manager opens the vehicle door). Put out a welcome sign at the entrance or in the lobby (hotel policy allowing). Place a special gold star on the planner's lapel or have a photo and short bio of the planner and information about the group distributed to all departments prior to planner's arrival. Literally, roll out the red carpet. Have the bell staff, door persons, and valet parking

team lined up at attention. Should the site schedule include a meal at your hotel, serve it at a table smack in the middle of your ballroom or at the Chef's Table. Select a special entrée that is a favorite of the planner or the group's. Have fun and make it fun!

- **PREPARE THE TEAM.** The salesperson should take task ownership of seeing to it that the entire hotel team is prepared for the important site visit. Executive Committee and department head meetings are the best place to start. Put photos in place for all employees to see. Do whatever necessary to stress the importance of the visiting planner and the site

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inspection itself. And remember, too, everyone needs to put his/her best foot forward here. Nothing turns off a planner faster than observing a real disconnect, or dislike, between departments and individual employees.

- **"ONE LAST THING."** No matter how well prepared you are, there's always going to be that "one last thing" to check. Something overlooked. Be sure and check the preset meeting and banquet rooms personally. Check the planner's guestroom or suite personally. Walk the property one more time. Pick up any last minute litter under the porte cochere. Check the mirror: is your "game face" on?
- **TAKEAWAYS.** Don't forget to record digital camera highlights of the visit delivered to the planner's lap top for downloading on the plane ride home. Most likely the planner will distribute it to the board or CEO -- especially, if you get the business.

Pause for Reaction

Sometimes hospitality sales professionals can become so focused on their "sales pitch" (e.g., FABs: features, advantages, and benefits), that they overlook the importance of pausing in order to seek the prospect's reactions and buy-in, e.g., "How does that sound?" or "What do you think so far?" Keep in mind that with any prospect encounter the goal should be to close the business.

Chances of doing so increase significantly when you can determine as quickly as possible whether the prospect is favorably impressed or if his/her interest level is sustained. Today's decision makers don't have

time for lengthy selling monologues.

The really good salespeople today determine quickly if the prospect is familiar or not with the product; has visited the product's Web site, conferred with a fellow planner on a recently held event, or read a recent user generated property review posted on any one of the new social media networks.

Gauge your prospect's reaction

If you are not asking probing, stimulating, and intelligent questions, the risk of losing the decision maker's interest, receptiveness, and involvement becomes greater.

Therefore, a critical part of any salesperson and prospect encounter is to gauge reaction and buy-in as quickly and as often as necessary. Let's assume that you have just spent 20 seconds extolling one of your hotel's features for a planner in need of booking a meeting for 35 people using 20

guestrooms. Your discussion with the planner should be along these lines.

You: "We can put all of your 20 guestrooms on our club floor levels."

You: "So, what do you think? Sound good?"

You: "Would that help make their meeting experience better?"

If the planner responds positively, now you can continue with the selling process from a position of strength; there's now a real likelihood that the prospect will be receptive to the next feature, advantage, or benefit. You have established a building block now that could lead to successful closure.

Later on, should negotiation become part of the process, you can refer back to the planner's receptiveness to his/her group being roomed on club floor levels.

You: "Yes, there is a \$35 premium charge for the club level guestrooms, but haven't we already agreed that putting your entire group on that level would enhance their overall meeting experience?" And should the club level rooming issue surface again, with the planner struggling to "justify" the \$35 premium charge, you can add quickly that the attendees would likely spend \$35 or more per day on items covered by amenities offered at the club level. Again, the advantage here is you have already determined that the planner prefers to have all attendees placed on club level floors.

Talking points and sound bites

Another good reminder for new salespeople is the importance of creating and then practicing "talking points" and/or "sound bites." Turn your FABs or potential objections to be overcome into brief, 10 to 15 second selling points. For example:

- "We enjoy 50 percent repeat group bookings."
- "Our conference service staff is rated number one in our market."
- "I can put you in touch with three very satisfied planner clients who booked meetings with us with concerns and

needs very similar to yours today.”

These and other talking points or sound bites must be practiced, alone and especially with fellow sales team members on a daily basis until they become second nature. Thought should be given as to when the points should be used, which point will help reinforce a piece of the overall sales presentation, and which would be best used in response to a prospect’s question/objection.

Competing Against Yourself

The very best hospitality sales professionals have always competed with themselves first. They don’t need monthly or quarterly bonus plans to measure personal performance. Nor do they need corporate or general manager oversight. Each has a little voice inside that says, “I know I can do better here” or “I should have done better there” or “Hey, I know I’m better than that.”

For hospitality sales professionals it could be something as simple as booking more group room nights or more revenue per group room night. Maybe it’s just more room nights booked over hard-to-sell periods? How about quicker selling cycles? Improved contracts, faster turnaround time, reducing cancellations or room block erosions?

Just a few tips to get you started

SELLING CYCLE: The “selling cycle” represents a period of time from when you first engage the prospect/client until there is closure on the piece of business (you book it, you lose it, a decision is deferred, or you simply stop pursuing it). The very best salespeople are always looking for those groups they can book in the shortest time period possible. Historically, corporate meetings are usually booked within a shorter cycle than associations or SMERFs. Some of the largest, highest yielding association conventions have a selling

cycle of more than a year or two.

Knowing the difference between the short and long-term booking cycle is very important and should be factored into every decision a new salesperson makes regarding which accounts to pursue.

The very best are always challenging themselves to shorten the cycle, to do whatever they can to close as much business as quickly as possible so they can move on to the next account, the next solicitation. It makes good sense to set up your own timetable for your own selling cycle to revisit on a monthly basis to see how you’ve done, and to learn from that.

SWEET SPOT(S) The term “sweet spot” comes from a sports analogy. For example, a batter in baseball knows there is a spot on the bat that when contact is made with a pitch either a line drive or a ball driven high over the outfield fence typically follows. A sweet spot in selling can be the outside personal sales calls you make. It could be a high-yielding vertical market or even a geographical location. Where is your sweet spot? Maybe you are a “morning” person? Do you find that you have your greatest selling success from making telephone calls first thing in the morning? Maybe you have found your greatest success from personal sales calls made outside your office?

Track your selling activities so you can be aware of what it is you do, where and when, that has provided you with your greatest productivity. Ask yourself, “Am I getting all I can out of my sweet spot?” What can you do to get more and what can you learn from your sweet spots that you may be able to transfer over to areas where you are less productive?

Nothing ever stays the same. You’re either getting better or getting worse

SELF-MONITORING: This is all about taking personal ownership for your own performance measurement.

With telephone calls, personal outside sales calls, appointments made, and site inspections, there is a direct correlation with your production numbers end-of-day. You should begin to monitor those numbers closely and see if by increasing them, your production will improve. Review your performance and ask yourself the following questions.

- Number of telephone calls I made per day, per week—am I making enough calls?
- Number of telephone calls I completed per day, per week—am I completing enough?
- Number of appointments I made—what goals have I set and reached, one a day, three a day?
- Number of site inspections—one a week? Six a month? More?
- Number of (outside) personal sales calls I made—five a week? More? Less?
- Number of proposals delivered—how many of those that are tentative am I converting?
- Number of referrals I received and acted upon quickly?

Track all the selling activities you do to determine which ones need to be increased in order for you to experience greater results. There is a direct correlation between each of those activities (how often, when and where) and increased sales.

In Conclusion

Hospitality sales professionals have to be positive and enthusiastic about what they are doing 24/7. No prospect or client wants to talk with a salesperson with a negative attitude. In a down economy, staying upbeat is more important than ever. Remember always to be positive, whatever the future brings, because negativity is the biggest turnoff in selling and enthusiasm is contagious. Sharing your knowledge with your prospects also is invaluable and can help you book more business. Finally, if you have an opportunity to “suggest” a booking, take it so you won’t miss out. ■