



THE BASICS OF DIRECT SELLING

→ [DAVID M. BRUDNEY, ISHC]

A veteran sales and marketing professional, well into his fifth decade of service to the hospitality industry, the author is the principal of David Brudney & Associates of Carlsbad, California, and a charter member of the International Society of Hospitality Consultants. Here he offers invaluable advice to those new to the hospitality sales profession.

If you have already launched a career in hospitality sales, and have every intention of being successful, be prepared to pack your own parachute. How does that adage apply to hospitali-

ty sales professionals? No one attempts skydiving without having complete confidence that his or her parachute will open after deplaning. Those who risk jumping out of a plane three miles up not only inspect their parachutes, they

take the time to master the art of folding and packing it.

The same mindset should apply to anyone starting out fresh in hospitality sales. You should expect, of course, an orientation, basic sales training—and

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good supervision and mentoring. But ask yourself first, “What do I bring with me? What attributes, qualities, and skills do I already possess that will help me to become successful in this new career?”

What You Bring to the Table

To be successful in hospitality sales, you need to possess some of the personal characteristics and experiences listed below:

- Some knowledge of, and a genuine interest in, the hospitality industry
- Simple, natural effective people skills
- The ability of “connecting” easily with other people
- Willingness to be coached, and be receptive to constructive criticism
- Any previous sales experience, e.g., retail, door-to-door, volunteer fund-raising
- Good overall communication skills
- Good computer skills
- Telephone skills (including voice-mail messaging)
- Be a “self-starter,” and have a proven track record of successful completion of tasks and a “deadline” mentality
- Previous employment experience that in some way relates to the skills needed in sales
- Curiosity and the ability to ask intelligent and probing questions
- Developed listening skills and an innate sense of knowing when to stop talking
- Any kind of performing skills: acting, modeling, dancing, public speaking, debating (excellent development of “thinking on your feet” ability)
- A genuine sense of humor
- The ability to not take yourself too seriously
- In addition, you must have talent and traits that can’t be taught, such as:
 - A very strong will to succeed
 - A willingness to persevere
 - A passion for serving others
 - A natural curiosity for why, how, and with whom clients book business
 - A lifetime commitment to excellence and continuing education.

If none of these attributes describe you,

then you might be better off finding another line of work.

A New Generation of Hospitality Sales Professionals

If you are new to hospitality sales, you most likely are a member of a new generation of salespeople. Therefore, you need to understand that in order to be successful—and more importantly, to sustain that success over years and years—you need to balance time spent on the computer against time spent on the tele-

phone and out on personal sales calls.

Your generation of sales professionals is the most tech-savvy of any generation in the history of the hospitality industry. You are masters of the Internet. You fully expect information to come customized and instant. History? That’s all about yesterday. What’s important today is today.

You may expect instant success from your efforts in selling room nights and F&B events, and become impatient when you find that you can’t close a piece of business quickly via e-mail and text messaging.

From day one you will need to begin mastering the “high-touch” aspects of direct selling: selling on the telephone and selling when making outside sales calls, selling at trade shows, on fam trips, and anywhere you find yourself face-to-face with potential clients. Remember always that you live by relationships with support from technology.

There is little doubt that business communication and transactions will become even more main-stream through the Internet, globalization, evolving distribution channels, B-to-B and B-to-C. Your new generation of sales pros must not fail to learn, however, that one-to-one sales, on the telephone and at clients’ places of business, will always be the cornerstone for professional selling.

Hone Your Personal Selling Skills

Master the art of connecting with prospects on the telephone. Take the time to make friends with gatekeepers who will lead you to the decision makers. And once you’ve qualified the piece of business and have identified the key contact, schedule the appointment to make a sales call. Where? On the decision makers’ home turf.

That’s the balance that will help make you be successful and sustain that suc-

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cess throughout your hospitality sales career. You need the computer and you need the telephone and personal sales calls. And, yes, they are complementary skill sets, but you need to work at balancing them.

Making Your Numbers

Keep in mind that hospitality sales pros know the importance of the scoreboard. Each week you spend in sales you will be faced with the challenge of making your numbers. Did you reach or exceed your weekly sales goals? Room nights? Revenue? Definite business converted?

If you find sales success working primarily at your computer, be careful not to become a “one-armed” sales pro. There are far too many potential clients out there who don’t use e-mail and text messaging; some never use a computer at all. If you want to find and sell them on anything, you may have to rely on your own personal selling skills—yes, the old-fashioned way.

Should you spend too much time selling on the computer you will never develop nor maintain your telephone and personal sales calls skills. Seek the right mix for you. Work on finding hours for computer time that will allow you to work the phones and make the personal sales calls during prime selling time. You need to keep both skill sets fresh, but always balanced.

UNDERSTAND YOUR COMPETITORS

You'll work smarter and better when you know the strengths and weaknesses of your competitors. You also need to create mutually beneficial relationships with competitors with whom you can find ways to cooperate.

Every hotel and resort sales department should conduct annual SWOT test on each of its primary competitors, looking closely at:

- Strengths, both real and perceived
- Weakness and vulnerability, both real and perceived
- Opportunities available for your property to penetrate or take market share
- Threats that the competition poses to your hotel

Why are these properties your hotel's primary competition?

- Primary appeal—by market segment
- Business lost in the past—why?
- Sales team rating
- Most loyal clients—and why?
- Location and overall operation comparisons
- Meeting and banquet facilities strengths and weaknesses
- Strategies used to sell against your property
- Rate integrity
- Brand (if applicable) strengths, weaknesses, support

Really good salespeople not only know their competitors well, they also establish beneficial professional relationships with them because there are times when a hotel needs another hotel as a good neighbor. For example:

- For overflow, co-headquartering opportunities
- For joint proposals, promotional costs shared
- When you have need for rooms nearby on sold-out nights
- When you have to “walk” one or more of your guests
- When you need to borrow equipment, supplies, at critical times
- For a shared labor pool, employee housing, transportation

There will be times—after you have established good relationships with your competitors—when one of them cannot accommodate a client's group meeting and will refer the business to you because he/she knows that the client does not want to move to a different location and that you will make the transition to your hotel both smooth and satisfactory.

Remember that building and maintaining solid relationships will support you for the length of your sales career. Be for your clients, your “internal customers,” and certain competitors, what you are for good friends and you will go far.

Learning the Ropes

You can't be proficient at hospitality sales without learning your craft, making mistakes, and learning from them. Gaining experience is the most important part of the process.

During your tenure in sales, you owe it to yourself and to your fellow employees, clients, and the prospects you've engaged, as well as the owners and operators of your current hotel, to learn all you can and master the job you have. Years from now, no matter where your career takes you, you will look back on your time in sales and realize how much you put into it, and what rewards you gained, what great experiences you had, and how much you learned.

Here are the six basic skills that you must master:

MANAGE YOUR TIME. If you're going to commit eight hours a day to your job then you need to make sure you're making the most of all that time. If you want to succeed, then don't cheat yourself. Between the time you need to spend making proactive sales calls, taking a prospect on a tour, sending and responding to prospect e-mails and phone calls, there won't be time left for Internet surfing, I-pods, personal phone calls, twittering, or the #1 “time-eater” of all time—non-business visiting with co-workers.

Working quickly enough, you can load data into your account management software, prepare for next day's telephone calls and outside sales calls before you leave for the day, and you'll still have the time for your softball league, meeting friends at the local watering hole, or heading home for quality family time.

KNOW YOUR PRODUCT. In order to sell more business you need to know your product and know it very well. From your very first day on the job, commit to memory the number of rooms and suites, room sizes, features, and amenities of your property. Spend day two memorizing the number of meeting rooms, ceiling heights, and which rooms work best for smaller meetings and which work best for food

and beverage functions. Memorizing works best after you've walked the property several times.

KNOW YOUR COMPETITION. The better you know your competition, the better you can sell against it. Start by conducting your own personal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) test on a competitor. And if you want to get really good, collaborate with your sales team to produce a "reverse marketing" plan: what strategies and key action steps would "competitor X" use in selling against us? How can we counteract?

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STUDY THE P&L STATEMENT. If that document is not available to you, ask to look at a monthly operating statement. Learn all you can about why room revenue is the "mothers' milk" of the business and why it's so critical for sales pros to optimize room revenue with every group. Understanding more of your hotel's financial aspects helps new salespeople to sell smarter and to appear better informed.

LEARN FROM CLIENTS. Use every opportunity to learn all you can from clients. Best meeting they ever booked. Worst meeting they ever booked. What are the most important factors in selecting a hotel? How is the selection of a hotel made in the clients' companies and/or associations?

NEVER TAKE REJECTION

PERSONALLY. Learn from it. Always ask "why" whenever you lose a good piece of business. You may not get an answer and sometimes you may not like the answer you get, but "asking" is what real pros do; it makes you better and more confident next time around.

Building Relationships

Building and maintaining business relationships is very important for everyone, but for salespeople, it is the cornerstone for successful selling.

Certainly you want to have good relationships with your clients, but you must also build solid relationships with your "internal customers." They are:

- Your own sales department staff members
- The staffs of other departments within your property
- Convention and visitors bureau/DMO staff
- National sales offices staff

- Third party sales representatives
- Key suppliers and vendors who serve your client groups

Quality time spent developing "internal customers" can pay huge dividends down the road in new business, repeat business, and strong referrals.

Tips on Establishing and Maintaining Solid Client Relationships

ONLINE VS. TELEPHONE. Establishing solid relationships in hospitality sales begins with telephone contact, face-to-face sales calls, and meeting customers at trade shows. E-mails and texting are great for information, but the telephone is essential for communication. Once initial contact is made, always ask the client for his/her preferred communication tool: telephone, e-mail, or face-to-face meetings.

UNDERSTANDING NEEDS.

Professional meeting planners say that what they want from hospitality sales pros is an understanding of their

needs—what's really important. This is about focus and being a good listener.

F.Y.I. Another way to maintain a good relationship is to look for information that might be helpful or of interest to the client. Drop off or send articles on trends and information about the client's business, competition, and industry. Clients want information that helps in their jobs, and even if they don't acknowledge what you sent, they will remember your thoughtfulness. This may help separate you from your competitors as the client will think of you as a friend, advisor, and someone who has his/her interest in mind.

AVAILABILITY. Do everything possible to be available, when the client calls and wants your advice, has concerns, or demands, even if it's on very short notice. Remind yourself that the client would not be calling you at all if a relationship had not been established.

RELIABILITY. If the prospective client is expecting a proposal within 48 hours, make certain that it is delivered within that time frame. If you can't produce, you must make contact prior to the deadline, explain why the proposal cannot be delivered on time, and indicate when it will be delivered.

TRUST. Never spread misinformation or tell prospective clients something that may not be true. It's far better to say you don't know, but that you will get back to them shortly with a correct answer. This establishes your credibility.

LOYALTY. Loyalty's a two-way street and key to a solid relationship. Most clients respect your loyalty to them and most will do everything possible to show their loyalty to you.

STAY CONNECTED. Don't allow long periods of time to lapse between in-person visits. Call for an appointment when you are in or near the client's city. Take the client to lunch or stop by his/her office for a visit.

Best advice I can give to the new generation of hospitality sales professionals? It is all about relationships. Build and maintain solid relationships that will support you for the life of your sales career. ■