

Opinions

Hotel companies should refocus on traditional training

15 MAY 2018 7:52 AM

Much of the attention paid to online learning for staff loses sight of the human experience that hoteliers strive to give their guests.



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In the ever-competitive world of hotel branding, C-suite leaders continue to look for ways to differentiate their brands. Yet as soon as an innovative amenity, new loyal program feature or web widget is launched, other brands catch up.

In recent years, it seems the focus has turned back to personalization of guest experiences as a differentiator. Yet, the focus seems to be mostly on personalization through systems, data-mining, automation and AI. It seems to me that too many hoteliers have lost focus on the fact that we are in the human travel experience business, not the room rental business.

The corporate level obsession with automation over human engagement has spilled over even to the training and development divisions. Based on my observations, most brand-sponsored training is now delivered via online learning. I guess this is partly driven by economics, as the perception is these mediums cut costs and save time. But I suspect another major driver is that leaders believe this is the best way to reach today's hotel workers.

Like their counterparts in marketing, too many corporate training executives are overly obsessed with the completely theoretical, imaginary and over-hyped psychographic of the so-called "millennial generation," [a subject I have addressed in a previous article](#).

More than once, I have personally heard corporate-level learning and development people say: "We need to dummy-down the training into soundbites" or "Those millennials have short attention spans ..." or "We need to do it in a smartphone app so people will actually use it."

Now don't get me wrong, I still am and always have been a huge advocate for eLearning, online and remote training. My previous company (HSA International) launched the hotel industry's first eLearning for sales and guest services in the very early 2000s. I personally presented the very first webinar for HSMIAI University in the early 2000s. At Kennedy Training Network, we continue to embrace online training and will continue to innovate with remote training methodology as emerging technologies enable us to do so.

That being said, I think it is a huge mistake that too many hotel brands have moved almost entirely away from offering any traditional training for the majority of their colleagues. Oh sure, there are still educational break-out sessions at brand conferences, GM and marketing conferences and industry association events. But when it comes down to developing those who have the greatest impact on guest experiences—the frontline staff—and developing those who are the future of the industry—the first level supervisors and assistant managers—most brands and management companies are doing little if any traditional workshop-style training.

From what I see, the only traditional training taking place these days is limited to:

- new-hire orientation training;
- training legally required by regulations (sexual harassment, safe serving of alcohol, food safety); and
- stand-up/pre-shift meetings that are too often poorly led by supervisors who have never been exposed to proper training methodologies.

Yes, you can educate someone online, and it may be the best method of teaching systems and processes (such as how to use a PMS, CRS or RM system), but it is impossible to inspire and to mentor. It is difficult to teach soft-skills such as sales and hospitality excellence.

That being said, I should recognize the wisdom of the many hoteliers who still highly value traditional training, though they are an increasing minority. It is no coincidence that these hotels, more often than not, are at the top of their game.

If you are looking to get your brand, management company or individual hotel back in the game of traditional hotel training, here are some tips:

- Schedule "cluster" training. Most training companies like us charge per day, not per person. You can split costs with sister hotels in an area or region, thus making it a negligible expense.

C-suite level leaders should schedule cluster training on a regular basis, rotating topics and outside trainers to keep it fresh.

Individual hoteliers can reach out on their own to the leaders of sister hotels, or work with your brand's regional franchise groups.

If not part of a brand, work with leaders of local tourism associations (hotel associations, visitors bureaus, destination marketing groups, DMOs, CVBs and chambers of commerce).

Partner with your competitors. During my training career, I have often seen hoteliers coordinate plans for training with their direct competitors, understanding the old adage that "The rising tide raises all boats."

Finally, if you are having a hard time convincing ownership to invest the money, do a simple ROI study. For sales training, calculate the value of just one new sale, and divide the total investment by this number so show how even a small bump in conversions generates an ROI many times over.

Similarly, for hospitality-related training, calculate the average revenue spend per guest, divide the investment by that number, then ask:

What is the cost if we lose a repeat booking when service falls short?

What is the benefit when we gain a new booking from a referral or social media posting?

How many potential guests will read a guest review? How much do we currently pay for "pay-per-click" SEO?

Doug Kennedy is president of the Kennedy Training Network, Inc. a leading provider of hotel sales, guest service, reservations and front desk training programs and telephone mystery shopping services for the lodging and hospitality industry. Kennedy has been a fixture on the industry's conference circuit for hotel companies, brands and associations for more than two decades. Since 1996, Kennedy's monthly training articles have been published worldwide, making him one of the most widely read hospitality industry authorities. Visit KTN at www.kennedytrainingnetwork.com or email him directly doug@kennedytrainingnetwork.com. He is the author of "[So You REALLY Like Working With People? - Five Principles for Hospitality Excellence.](#)"

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