

7 Fundamentals to Create a Luxury Culture in Hotel Sales & Marketing By Jo-Anne Hill, Founder, JH Hospitality Consulting, December 2015



Marketing and selling a luxury hotel or resort is more complex than selling a non-luxury product. People who are willing to pay more have higher expectations and the hotel's culture must reflect the importance of supporting the brand essence or brand promise of delivering an extraordinary luxury experience.

Culture is defined by the values and behaviors of the members of the organization (Culture Capital, Richard Barrett) and in order to create a luxury Sales & Marketing culture, there are 7 fundamentals:

1. Leadership must embrace what it means to be luxury and exhibit values and behaviors that support it.

It all starts at the top. Leadership sets the tone for all of the team to see, hear, and emulate. The sales leader and general manager must 'walk the talk' by setting the behavior standards and ensuring they personally practice it, without exception.

Luxury leadership means that the expected behavior towards guests must be consistent with the behavior of leaders towards their staff. For example, in a caring and compassionate environment, leadership takes the time to learn about each member of the team and respond with empathy and appropriate actions; expectations are clearly articulated with regular feedback, both formally and informally; each employee is treated with respect, and lack of respect is not tolerated.

Leadership also has a responsibility to set out a strategic plan to meet financial objectives and communicate these objectives to the team. Understanding their role in

achieving these results will help the sales & marketing team members accept sales fundamentals such as territory goals, revenue management decisions, and targeting the right business for the hotel.

2. Hire the right people.

It is important to have a team with the skills to effectively ask for a higher rate. But it is equally important to hire people that fit into the organization and possess an attitude of graciousness and a willingness to go above and beyond. Team members also need the ability to find an agreeable solution to a client request and avoid saying no, and instead finesse an 'out of the box' response that keeps the customer's needs in mind while ensuring it works for the hotel.

It is also important for the employee to have the deportment that conveys a sense of luxury. This doesn't mean wearing designer clothes or speaking with a British accent; it does mean being well groomed from their hair right down to their shoes.

3. Developing a trusting relationship with the client is a critical step in the sales process.

Recently, at a customer focus group for a luxury hotel brand, meeting planners were adamant they needed a separate contact with the luxury hotel division, despite a great relationship with the global sales person who represented all the other brands. The rationale, they said, was selling a luxury product is a different type of sale, requiring a greater understanding of the property and a greater need for a deeper, trusting relationship.

The greater the value of the business, as in higher guest room rates, the more important the relationship is to the sale.

Trust is the cornerstone of building any relationship and a client ultimately trusts the hotel sales person to deliver a flawless meeting, finesse a demanding CEO's stay, or ensure a vacation of a lifetime. After all, the client is buying an intangible - service during the stay - and the 'winner' of the business will be the sales person whom they trust to be honest in their discussions, dependable with follow-up when there is a problem, and who has the full support of the hotel behind them to follow-through.

It is imperative the relationship between the client and the salesperson be in place before any selling takes place. This means the sales process may take longer; new sales managers or territory redeployment may require a longer ramp-up time to achieve goals, allowing time to develop the trusting relationship with clients. The result will be more business at higher rates and with a greater repeat factor.

4. Develop, encourage, and hone the capacity for empathy.

Many hotels talk about ‘anticipating guest needs’; however, at the luxury level, the bar is higher – ‘exceeding guests expectations’. Before the guest even realizes they have a need, the employee is right there with the perfect solution. It’s almost like mind reading and can best be achieved when an employee possesses the value and skill of empathy.

“Empathy is the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives and using that understanding to guide your actions” (Empathy: Why It Matters and How to Get It, Roman Krznaric).

How does empathy come to play in a sales department? An empathetic approach with a customer during the initial stages of the sales cycle will accelerate a trusting relationship more than any other behavior. Empathy in the negotiation phase will provide a greater probability for a win-win solution. It will mean a happy customer who will return resulting in more revenue for the hotel. Being empathetic when there is a service flaw – which all luxury hotels have from time to time – means that the situation can be easily turned around so that the guest becomes an advocate of the property, rather than an author of negative reviews on TripAdvisor.

Based on Aristotle’s quote, “We are what we repeatedly do,” cultivating empathy is as simple as being aware when there is an opportunity and responding accordingly. Doing this on a regular basis, and especially if it is rewarded by leadership, will ensure it happens naturally when the situation calls for it.

5. Define the property experiences and stories.

Another fundamental difference between selling a budget hotel versus a luxury hotel is focusing on the experience.

What differentiates the property from other hotels or resorts in the marketplace or competitive set? What are some of the unique activities, property physical assets, or geographical advantages? What is the hotel’s story?

Make a list of all experiences and stories and corresponding benefits to the customer and practice them so every customer hears at least three during the sales process. If the hotel has engaged a sales mystery shopper, include points for talking about and sharing unique property experience and stories as part of the ‘shop’. An impassioned and empathetic communicator of the property experience is a key component of luxury selling.

Public relations and members of the marketing team also play a key role in consistently communicating these experiences so they become synonymous with the property.

6. Every touch point and contact supports the positioning of the hotel as luxury.

Just like the operational side of a hotel, sales and marketing needs to incorporate the fundamentals of luxury hospitality service in everything they do:

- Smile, even when on the phone
- Use the guest's name as often as possible
- Handle the problem rather than passing it on to someone else
- Respond quickly and efficiently to a request
- Provide genuine gracious hospitality with a heartfelt welcome and goodbye

But above that, the sales and marketing team, often the first point of contact, has an important role in setting and conveying the luxury standards. All communications, whether it be the website, printed collateral, error free contracts, or hand-written notes, must reflect to the customer that they are dealing with a luxury hotel or resort. Dog-eared business cards, chipped nail polish on a sales person, gum-chewing sales administrators, contracts with typos, or unpreparedness for a meeting or appointment are not luxury and can undermine the luxury moniker.

7. Relentless practice to ensure flawless sales and marketing service delivery.

Commit to regular and ongoing practice to ensure these values and behaviors become habit. Celebrate whenever someone exceeds the expectations; conversely, privately review when a team member is acting in a way that is contrary to the defined standards.

Leadership needs to devote time to sharing luxury best practices for each phase of the sales process as well as devote time to regularly practice for new skills, such as how to quickly develop a relationship during the prospecting phase.

In summary, selling and marketing a luxury hotel is a complex and challenging task. It requires unique skills, behaviors, and values that adhere to the brand promise of luxury. The responsibilities of acting at a luxury level cannot be taken for granted especially for the sales and marketing department. Conscious effort in adopting and enforcing these fundamentals will ensure satisfied and effective employees that translate to happy and satisfied guests who ultimately spend more at the hotel. Not only is the entire team unified under this direction, but the sales and marketing department embodies what it means to be an ambassador for luxury both with customers and within the entire hotel.

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