
It's The Experience, Stupid!

By David M. Brudney, ISHC, November 2000

Bill Clinton's '92 presidential campaign was going nowhere, remember? The campaign turned when Clinton began to focus on "It's the economy, stupid!" and the rest, as they say, is history.

In the battle over capturing room nights and, in many cases, the battle for survival, owners and operators of limited service hotels across the country are in a quandary today over focus. Just where should the focus be?

Everyone agrees it's important to focus on RevPar growth, penetration and bottom line improvement. "No brainers," of course. But what do we focus on to achieve those improvements? How do we do this? Is re-flagging or going independent the answer? Hire a consultant? New management? Proactive local sales calls? Form new marketing alliances? New guest tracking?

Maybe all we need to focus on is adding new facilities and amenities, e. g., high speed Internet access? fitness rooms? business centers?

Are we missing the boat here?

All of the above, to be sure, are critical focus options to consider. But are we missing the boat here? While looking at trees are we failing to see (and enjoy) the forest? It seems to me the main focus for innkeepers always has been, is now and always will be the enhancement of the guest experience. It's all about the experience, stupid!

We are in the experience-creating business

Today's guests will return only when and if the experience is good.

We are in the experience-creating business. Every hotel has rooms, F&B outlets or vending access, parking, most with swimming pools, Jacuzzis, fitness, business centers, etc. What the guest is seeking is a positive, memorable experience.

Benihana, Papadakis Greek Taverna and Pike Place Fish

My 6-year old grandson “doesn’t do well” in restaurants. That was before he experienced Benihana. He was absolutely captivated by the chef’s knife cutting presentation and juggling act. He’s been bored in other restaurants. Not there. It’s the experience, it’s new.

There’s a famous Greek tavern nearby that recently I visited for the first time. The greeting alone was worth the trip. A Papadakis family member welcomed us with a kiss on the cheek for Karen and a very warm, firm handshake for me. It gets better. Young Papadakis told us right there at the door how honored the family was to have us and how much our business means to them. The food was okay, service good and the dancing waiters were excellent. I’ve made reservations for out of town guests soon and must have recommended the place to 20 people since that night. It was the experience that I will remember.

Pike Place Fish, a stall in Seattle’s famed Pike Place Market where selling salmon is pure theater, attracts locals and tourists by the hundreds daily. Fishermen? Salmon salesmen? How about entertainers? Now they’ve become role models for training of corporate America offices as shining examples of how to bring energy and enthusiasm to the workplace. Clients include Sprint, Southwest Airlines and Saturn. Pike Place Fish sells videos for \$600 to help retailers everywhere on how easy it is to make your job fun.

Hello Hotels???

Have you allowed your guests to become “bored” with your hotel. What innovations have you introduced to create great experiences?

Are you trying to compete today offering little more than the same old standard clean rooms, value-added free continental breakfast, and a small video game arcade for kids? You have to do more or you risk losing that market share you’ve fought so hard to build and protect.

If your guests are not finding that experience at your hotel, you risk

becoming yet another shirt in that sea of gray flannel. Unrecognizable. Forgettable. Boring. It's the experience, stupid! Work on it.

My next column will be devoted to some ideas and innovations to help innkeepers create that experience.

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