



## Front Office

by Michael J. Jeswald

# There is no second chance to make a first impression

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Although this is an old cliché, it has never been more apparent than in the hotel industry. Every department of a hotel has specific responsibilities to keep the operation running smoothly and effectively. Guest satisfaction depends on it. However, the front office operation can play a key role in affecting customers' attitudes positively or negatively.

The front office staff has the opportunity to provide guests with a "memorable experience" as soon as they walk in the front door; this initial contact can have a direct impact on the rest of the guest's stay. Proper telephone etiquette, a warm greeting, and a casual conversation will make guests feel very welcome, similar to welcoming them into your home. The first few minutes are an opportune time for front office personnel to create a positive image of the hotel and its staff and to begin the guest's experience in a positive manner.

### PBX staff

A good first impression of the hotel often starts with the PBX operator. It is very puzzling to find many new employees in the PBX position. The person in this position should have very good knowledge of the hotel, know the names of key personnel, and maintain general knowledge of the surrounding area; essentially a telephone concierge.

All telephone calls should be answered in three rings or less with a professional and welcoming introduction. Proper telephone etiquette also includes asking for permission to transfer a call and thanking the guest for calling the hotel. A customer who is calling the hotel for the first time could interpret a failure to promptly answer their call as the hotel being understaffed, the staff is incapable of handling multiple tasks effectively, or personnel just do not care.

The tone in the voice is also very important. A level of enthusiasm must be heard in the voice that shows interest and the ability to service the customer. A suggestion would be to speak on the phone as if the person was standing in front of you, because the caller can tell whether or not you are smiling. Any incoming telephone calls might eventually be converted into a future customer and the way they are treated can affect a guest's attitude upon arrival.



### Uniform Services staff

Door personnel, parking valets, and bellmen are the greeters of the hotel and in many cases are the first face-to-face contacts guests have with hotel staff. All employees should be properly uniformed and have general knowledge of the property and the surrounding area. They can also serve the role of hotel concierge by providing phone numbers, answering specific questions on the area, and informing guests of any special events.

Many door staff will welcome guests to the hotel and escort them to the check-in area. Offering assistance with baggage will give guests a welcome feeling and will also help develop the guest's attitude toward the property and staff. In many instances, bell staff have the opportunity to help sell the hotel by providing detailed information of the property to guests as they arrive.

It is a known fact that people will remember the first person and the last person they interact with during a hotel stay; therefore, it is critical to have your best front line personnel in these positions.

### **Front Desk staff**

Front desk clerks or guest service agents must be well organized and able to multi-task on a regular basis. Daily reports are to be completed efficiently and accurately; however, a quality desk clerk also needs to have effective communication skills when dealing with guests.

Effective communication starts with the right attitude. The proper attitude conveys courtesy, respect and concern. Information is interpreted by not only what is said, but also how it is said. This can be further analyzed by the tone of the voice and the non-verbal image that is being observed by the listener. How guests perceive the front desk clerk sets the tone for the remainder of their stay.

A warm greeting can be very easily accomplished by a simple smile and good posture. Greeting guests first before they greet you should also be a priority. Each person that comes to the front desk should be greeted within 10 seconds. If already engaged in serving another guest, acknowledging the presence of a new guest by making eye contact, a nod, or a smile could be accepted as a proper greeting.

Guests can understand when you are busy and will, in most cases, wait their turn. Ignoring a person until you get off the phone may initiate a defensive attitude from guests because they could interpret this action as "I don't care about you!" This improper greeting will most definitely affect peoples' attitudes toward the hotel and influence their perception of the staff. What do guests want? They want to be treated special and they also want to feel as if they were invited into someone else's home.

The check-in procedure is a great opportunity for the hotel to show guests that they made the right choice. The focus of this process should be on exceeding customers' expectations. Every potential customer has many options to choose from and each front desk clerk has the ability to prove that the arriving guests made the right choice when booking hotel accommodations. At this point of the guest cycle, desk clerks not only become part of the process, but also part of the sales team. A good first impression includes providing guests with detailed information on the various hotel services and amenities. Clerks should also have the ability to sell these features and benefits of the hotel. Front desk personnel should take a proactive approach and anticipate the needs of guests. In many instances, anticipating customers' needs could result in an increase of revenue by upselling the hotel's amenities.

Another way to provide a good first impression is by calling guests by name or starting a brief conversation. Check-in procedures are very similar, regardless of the hotel; but what will make one property stand out from others is the personal touch from the staff. Each employee at check-in time has the opportunity to exceed customer expectations and make them feel that they have made the right choice. Frequently, the little things make all the difference in the world. And remember, there is no second chance to make a first impression! ✧

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