



Front Office

by William D. Frye, Ph.D., CHE

Prioritizing responses at the front desk during busy times

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Put yourself in this scenario: You are working the front desk alone at a select-service hotel and as fate would have it everything explodes all at once. There are two guests waiting to be checked in, a third guest is seeking directions to a nearby restaurant, the phone is ringing off the hook, you can hear an incoming fax arriving, and yet another guest wants to pay for their purchase from the hotel convenience store. Who do you help first? And in what order do you assist each guest or complete each task?

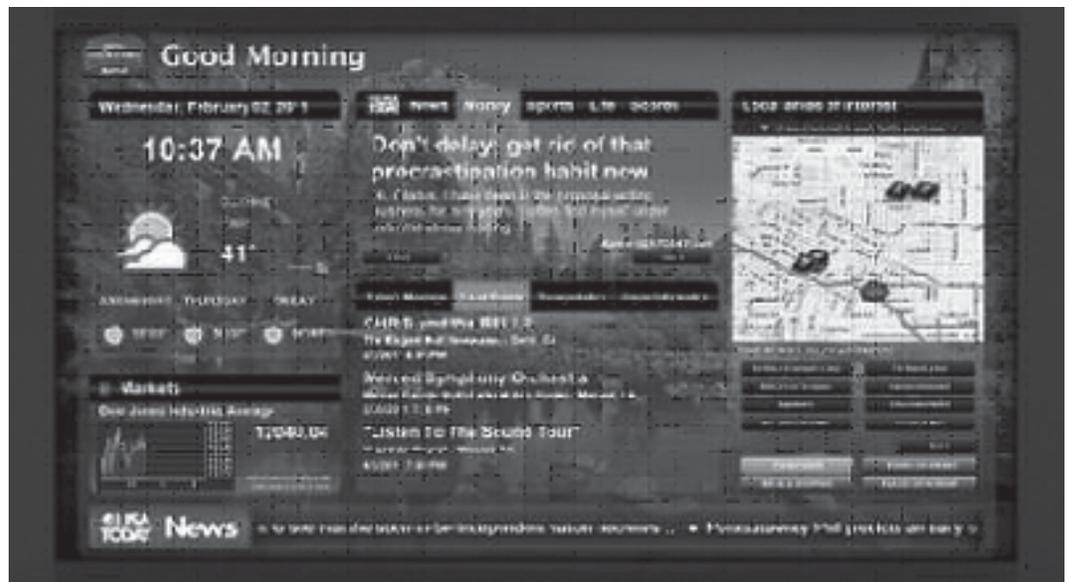
In today's world of austere hotel budgets, front desk employees are increasingly being asked to perform more functions and serve more guests with fewer associates to help them shoulder this burden. And while I have always advocated that no employee should ever have the responsibility to work alone in a hotel, there will be occasions at the front desk when there may only be one associate or manager to serve

the needs of the hotel's guests. While this can be a stressful situation, surviving it will require good organization, the ability to multitask, communicating positively with guests, and most significantly, prioritizing each service request. Let's examine each of these aspects in more detail.

Organize the front desk

A well-organized front office enables front desk agents to perform more than one task at a time and in a more streamlined and efficient manner. As a rule of thumb, anything that detracts from efficiency is a "time waster". Anything that requires additional work to locate or bring about order is also an unnecessary time waster. Time that is wasted is less productive, ultimately more costly, and is less time available to serve the guest. And no one likes to be kept waiting because of inefficient practices.

Pictured below: New and redesigned Courtyard by Marriott hotels display this interactive GoBoard™ near the welcome podiums in the lobby. The 57" LCD touch screen serves as a virtual concierge and allows guests to access driving directions, view local weather, find a local restaurant, and catch up on all the latest news, sports scores, live stock market quotes and even airport delays. This is an ideal tool for any traveler who is not familiar with the local surroundings or who needs an information update.



Realize that the front desk will not always be busy; there will be periods of minimal activity. This is when associates should rotate out for their employee breaks, not during the height of expected activity. Use slack periods to reorganize the desk, refill office supplies, perform bucket checks and credit limit checks, review city ledger accounts and profit and loss statements, pre-print registration cards (if still used), organize group check-in packets, update budgets, restock the hotel's convenience store or gift shop, gas up the shuttle vans, or restock collateral materials and brochures. Any tool, inventory item, or supply that a front desk clerk might need to do their job must be restocked, maintained or checked now, not later. There is no legitimate excuse to run out of registration cards, folio paper, key cards, staples, pens, or etcetera when things get busy at the desk. Hold all front desk associates accountable for restocking supplies at the beginning and end of each shift unless busy times prevent this from being accomplished. Do not allow associates to pass the responsibility on to the next shift.

The ability to multitask

If you want your employees to perform more than one task at a time when business gets busy it is imperative that you only hire individuals who demonstrate the ability to complete more than one task simultaneously and with an adequate degree of accuracy. Applicants who can only focus on one task at a time or who become distracted to the point of inefficiency are not good hires for the front desk.

Yes, in an ideal situation each front desk clerk would focus exclusively on the task at hand or serve only the guest presented in front of them before engaging in any other activity. Unfortunately, sometimes other aspects can cause disruptions to quality guest service or might be perceived negatively by guests who are present. Think about the phone that will not stop ringing. After a period of time just about everyone wants to pull the phone out of the wall because the noise becomes too distracting. Others might assume that, "That could be me at the other end of the line and no one is willing to answer the phone!" So, while we want to provide our complete and undivided attention to each guest or task, there will be times when, out of need or convenience, performing multiple tasks is appropriate, especially if the other task can be performed quickly or with minimal interaction.

Communicating positively with guests

Most guests will understand the circumstances when an employee is by themselves and attempting to serve many people. But this period of empathy will only last for so long before guests become upset and frustrated. The most effective way to keep guests happy and empathetic is to acknowledge them when they arrive and to thank them for waiting. Making eye contact and smiling at waiting guests is the first step to maintaining their empathy. Once you are able to serve them directly don't forget to thank them for their patience. Never make excuses why the desk is understaffed, just be gracious and calm and make it seem as if this guest is your first priority. Your calmness under pressure will reassure guests and keep them calm and happy.

Prioritize each service request

No one likes to be kept waiting but the reality is that someone will have to wait; somebody has to be served first and some will be served afterwards. Prioritizing who you will serve first is critical to maintaining harmony. Removing annoying distractions by answering phones, responding to discourteous guests, or just completing a very brief task that is keeping someone waiting can help preserve the tranquility. When guests realize that what they want from you may take longer than just a brief interaction most will wait patiently in order for you to address the distraction and thereby secure your focused attention on their need.

Maintaining preprinted materials at the front desk such as area maps, lists of local restaurants, driving directions to restaurants and nearby attractions, fax cover sheets, hotel brochures, and job applications can help minimize these distractions because they can be quickly handed to guests as needed and usually do not require extensive conversation. For this very reason, many hotels, including various Marriott brands, have started installing interactive information boards in their lobby where guests can view maps, check the local weather, learn about nearby attractions, and more.

It seems logical to serve guests in the order which they arrive at the front desk, especially for check-in and check-out situations. But what happens when the phone rings while you are serving another guest? Should you answer it or just let it keep ringing? It is best to answer the phone but ask the guest if they can hold or if you may call them back. Always advise the caller that you are assisting another guest but that you will assist them as soon as you are available. Never place a call on hold without a guest's consent because, unlike a face to face encounter, it is impossible to ascertain if a guest may be in distress and need immediate assistance. If you know that the caller will have to hold for more than one or two minutes always advise them of this in advance and offer to call them back. And don't forget to write down their name and room number or telephone number.

As a general rule, always attend to guests that are present at the front desk first, then answer telephone calls that are holding or place call backs. Deal with faxes, package deliveries and other paperwork next. And don't forget to restock the front desk and keep it clean and organized. ✧

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