



## Front Office

by Michelle McLaughlin

# Hosting youth sports teams requires communication, planning and teamwork

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Almost every rooms division employee has noted the collective groan from their operational counterparts when the announcement is made that the sales department has booked a piece of weekend business comprised mostly of youth sports teams. Regardless of whether the sport is hockey, softball, volleyball, football, or dance – most rooms division employees will look forward with dread to incoming sports groups. They will be thinking of the disaster management required to successfully maintain a clean, quiet, and presentable hotel for all paying guests, as well as the time consuming cleanup phase after the groups depart.

Although the following are not indicative of all youth sports teams, many hotel employees have likely experienced these operational effects: While young children are running through the hallways, playing stick hockey and having wars with the ice from the vending machines, the parents are having their own gatherings in the lobby or in a guestroom, usually unaware of the disaster that is ensuing with their children in a differing location on the hotel premises. A front desk clerk may become frustrated with the numerous calls and hang-ups from the kids' rooms, and the housekeeping aide will be running around the hotel, desperately trying to satisfy all guest requests in a timely manner, dodging soccer balls and hockey sticks while carrying a huge pile of towels up to room 301. The night auditor may field angry calls from other guests in the house whose good night of rest has been interrupted by noise from neighboring rooms. In the course of one Friday evening, a beautifully maintained hotel can turn into a seemingly disastrous mess, looking as if a small tornado has ripped through hotel rooms and left a wake of hard cleanup work for the housekeepers and managers. By the time Sunday afternoon checkout arrives, employees are exhausted and asking to have all weekends off for the remainder of their employment at the hotel.

While the above example may be a bit of an overstatement, every hotel has encountered some sort of disastrous group experience that left the operational team exhausted. Often times the sales department is blamed for taking a piece of business that stretches the rooms department to its limit, causing potential animosity between the two departments.

As the economists forecast a decrease in demand for room nights, the supply of hotel rooms in most locations continues to increase, creating even more competition for market share. Hotel ownership groups will still expect their hotel to meet their budgeted revenue goals, and as a result the sales department is forced to work even harder to sell their property. While a thriving hotel with high demand and a healthy RevPAR index may be able to pick and choose their business, most hotels in today's economy do not have that luxury. All hotels are competing for the same "slice of the revenue pie" and will be required to fill those empty rooms with guests in order to maximize revenue on all nights.

In light of the fact that no hotel should have to close down a night with empty rooms, it is inevitable that youth sports teams will



continue to be a major source of revenue for weekend business. As such, rooms department employees can work together with the sales department to proactively ensure that the weekends are both profitable and manageable for the associates, yet at the same time enjoyable for the guests.

### **Communication**

The most important key to a successful weekend when youth sports teams are involved is communication – from the sales department to the group contact, to the coaches, to the parents, and to the kids. The best way to prepare for the group is to provide the group contact with a code of conduct to be distributed to the arriving guests prior to their check in. A code of conduct can be extremely beneficial in preparing the guests for the rules of the house, as well as detailing safety and security concerns in advance of the check-in date. When the code of conduct is distributed in advance of arrival, the families and coaches will have the opportunity to clarify any questions they may have about the hotel's policies. This advance notice of rules and regulations can help to dispel miscommunication at check-in, as well as provide a signed document for the front office as proof that the guest has been informed of the rules. A sample code of conduct is enclosed.

### **Preparation**

The hotel can prepare in several ways for the group arrival. The sales department should provide the front desk with a detailed rooming list, including instructions for special billing issues, in order to prevent confusion at check-in. The name of the on-property point of contact should be listed as part of each rooming list so that the staff can reach the group contact in case of an emergency or policy violation.

The front desk can prepare by blocking in advance all group rooms on the same floor of the hotel, ensuring that the team members are in close proximity to their teammates' rooms for the length of their stay. The laundry and housekeeping department should ensure that the PARs are adequate for pool and guestroom towels, as these items will be in higher demand during the visit of a sports team.

In order to avoid disturbances to other guestrooms at night, the hotel can opt to provide a banquet room for team use. Games and TVs can be placed in the banquet rooms in order to provide an outlet for the kids to play without disturbance to guestrooms. Some hotels even provide video games wired through an LCD projector onto a huge video screen as a way of keeping the kids occupied when their parents are in a different area of the hotel. Realize, of course, that if the hotel can't or won't keep the kids entertained inside a function room during evening hours, the kids will create their own entertainment outside of the room. This leads to complaints, problems and frustration.

### **Staffing**

Staffing levels should be appropriate based on the POR model for the hotel, but extra manpower may be necessary for hall monitoring and security purposes. A housekeeper will need more than usual time to clean each room after a group departure, as the linen, terry, and garbage use is heavier than on a normal weekday. Managers should schedule their housekeepers accordingly and realize that normal productivity may slow down on a heavy group check-out day.

### **Teamwork**

Webster defines a "team" as: "a number of persons associated *together* in work or activity" and also as "a group on one side". It is important to remember that any sports team arriving at your hotel is attempting to win together something that they could not do alone. They have spent time and money in practice and travel costs just to visit your town, and specifically your hotel. Their time at your property may be the first dance competition of the year, or it may be the national championship for the Little League World Series. While your staff may dread the arrival of a sports team, please also take the time to remind them that a united team with one goal has arrived at your property to experience a memorable part of their life. Your sales team has worked hard to gain this business so that the hotel may remain profitable. Encourage your staff to work together toward the goal of a perfect hotel stay for any team that arrives, emphasizing that your hotel employees are also a *team*, united with the goal of working together to ensure that every guest at your property has an unforgettably wonderful experience. ✧

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