



Reservations

by Dustin T. Personius

Understanding leisure guests enables hotels to satisfy their needs

*Another great article from The Rooms Chronicle, the #1 journal for hotel rooms management! ***Important notice: This article may not be reproduced without permission of the publisher or the author.*** College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Niagara University, P.O. Box 2036, Niagara University, NY 14109-2036. Phone: 866-Read TRC. E-mail: editor@roomschronicle.com*

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Daytime temperatures begin to heat up, ice cream parlors open for the season, and the scent of barbecue wafts through neighborhoods everywhere; all unmistakable signs that Summer has arrived. With Summer comes the Summer travel season, when leisure travelers everywhere hit the highways, byways and skyways looking for that perfect Summer vacation.

According to a recent forecast by the Travel Industry Association, Americans will take nearly 330 million person-trips during the summer of 2007; this will be a record-high number and represents a 1.4% increase from 2006. The study defines a person-trip as one person traveling 50+ miles, one-way, away from home.

The increasing number of individuals traveling for pleasure creates opportunities for hotels and resorts to make a positive impression on their guests and inspire positive feedback and loyal patronage. Marketing programs that reward frequent guests for loyal patronage are just one method hoteliers can utilize in order to increase their chances of seeing repeat business. Reward programs, though, are just the beginning and hoteliers can take a few additional steps to ensure their guests have an enjoyable experience and want to return.

Understanding why guests travel

One major step hotel managers should take in creating a positive experience for their leisure travelers is to make an effort to understand the specific needs of this valuable group of guests. This may sound like a simple concept, but consider this, it is not uncommon for hotels to place their guests in one of two categories, either business or leisure.

The problem with this vast characterization is that leisure travelers, while all traveling for pleasure, do not all require the same features, amenities and services. Unlike the business traveler who, for all intents and purposes is satisfied with a comfortable room, Internet access, on-site dining options and a reliable wakeup call, leisure travelers cannot be generalized in the same way.

The needs of leisure guests traveling as a family on vacation or to visit relatives will vary greatly from a couple traveling for a romantic getaway. Understanding and anticipating the needs of each type of leisure guest will help to ensure that each group, while staying at the same property, has a pleasant and fulfilling experience.

The challenge to understanding the leisure consumer is that, unless the reservation is taken directly by a hotel representative trained to qualify the call, the specific reason for the guest's visit will often go unknown. It is always a good practice to ask prospective guests the nature of their visit to your hotel or resort.

In an effort to better assist their guests in planning for their stay, the Resort at Eagle Crest in Redmond, Oregon mails each guest an information packet on the day their reservation is made. The packet includes the guest's confirmation number, room type and a listing of all the resort's features, including dining, children's activities, spa services, golf pricing, etc. This is one way in which, with very little effort, the resort can see to it that each guest is well-informed of their options and can customize their vacation plans according to their specific needs.

Additionally, as a hotel brochure describing each room type is included in the information packet, guests are made aware well in advance of the type of accommodations they can expect as well as their upgrade options. This can alleviate any confusion upon arrival. This is great information for travelers who might not be familiar with the resort and would like to ensure that they have reserved a room type that will fit their specific needs. It may also create upsell and upgrade opportunities.

Add value to the experience

The terms “mass-customization” and “packaging” have become popular industry catch phrases in recent years. Mass-customization refers to providing opportunities for each guest to experience a hotel/resort in his or her own way by custom building their vacation experience from the ground up. By integrating the resort’s features, amenities and local area attractions into a customized guest experience, hotels are able to add significant value to each guest’s stay and provide a unique experience for each family and individual traveler.

Value can also be added to the guest experience through the use of packaging. Hoteliers might sometimes make the mistake of assuming that the development of package pricing means taking a loss either in room rate, food and beverage, or other features in order to remain competitive and appeal to their target market. In fact, leisure travelers, even those on a budget, are often willing to pay a bit more in a nightly rate if they perceive that their stay is packed with added value to help them make the most out of their stay.

Making package offers appealing will involve referring back to understanding why the consumer is visiting. Without this knowledge, hoteliers may find it difficult to attain high conversion on package offers.

For example, if research shows that many couples visit a given property for a romantic getaway and to remove themselves from hectic work schedules and office deadlines, a package that offers free or discounted high-speed Internet access will probably not be very appealing. On the other hand, a package that offers the same guests a complimentary bottle of wine with dinner or daily breakfast in bed service will not only serve to attract more guests but will increase the level of satisfaction these guests receive from their stay.

The same principles apply to family vacationers. Packages geared toward attracting families should take into consideration those things most important to families, especially those on a budget. Packages that offer complimentary meals for children when dining with their parents and free or discounted admission to local theme parks and attractions will add significant value to these guests’ stays and may often yield a consumer’s willingness to pay a higher nightly rate, without the hotel taking too severe a financial hit on the extras. Properties will find that by adding simple extras to package prices, it will go great lengths in making package offers more appealing to consumers.

A final thought

When all is said and done, nothing adds greater value to the guest experience than genuine, quality service. Regardless of how large a property is, how many amenities it offers, or how convenient it is to local attractions, no guest will be completely satisfied if they do not feel that their business is appreciated.

Guests often make their decision as to whether or not to return to a property not so much based on its features, but on its level of service. Hotel managers need to recognize superior guest service, as they would any other hotel amenity, and continue working to improve it through training, recognition and feedback programs. ✧

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