



Guest Services

by Dr. Gabor Forgacs and Dr. William D. Frye

No more rooms, but lots of guests: It is time to walk ... here's how

*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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It is every front office manager's nightmare. The last guestroom has just been assigned to a check-in and there are still many more guests due to arrive. Learning that your nearby competitors are also full would only make matters worse. If there is a big convention, sporting event, or academic graduation in town, chances are that this is the situation that many night managers may find themselves facing in the late evening.

Unfortunately, unlike the airline business, not all hotel guests arrive or depart at the same hour. With guests arriving from various out of town locations at all different hours, those who are most afflicted by a full hotel tend to be those reservation holders that arrive last ... and the hotel employee(s) who must deal with the anger and disappointment that the late arrivals will exhibit.

Start preparing early

As the associated article in the September/October issue of TRC announced, walking a guest is never easy, so prepare early. This means developing positive business relationships with nearby competitors who you may need to call upon to accommodate your overflow.

There is an axiom in the hotel business, "There are no competitors on a sold-out night ... only friends." Many hotel night managers have learned the benefits of getting to know their counterparts at the hotel across the street or down the road. Reciprocal *quid pro quo* is a standard tactic when the house is full. Dialing up the night manager across the street and letting them know you are "in the weeds" can often generate some spare guestroom inventory at a reasonable rate. As mentioned in the last issue of TRC, many hotels in the same city will offer reciprocal walk-rates to their competitors as a courtesy, knowing full well they may need to relocate their own guests to that same hotel on a different evening.

Pictured below: Realizing that her hotel's room inventory has nearly been exhausted, this front desk clerk secures accommodations at a nearby hotel for guests still due to arrive.



Staff appropriately for the situation

A mistake, which is not uncommon, is to schedule inexperienced rookies for the evening or graveyard shift on a sold-out evening; or worse, to leave them on their own without a supervisor or manager. On a night when the hotel is expected to relocate

guests, an experienced staff member, a supervisor or an assistant front office manager should stay back until the last arrival is taken care of. Relocating a guest is a skill that takes much practice; it can only be perfected through experience.

Informing the guest

After nearby guestrooms have been secured, walk-letters have been prepared, and transportation and relocation directions have been readied, the time will come when the front desk will have to face the music. This means looking guests in the eye and informing them that the hotel is unable to accommodate their arrival. Expect shock, expect anger, and expect disappointment from the guest. While most passengers realize and even willfully acknowledge that airlines tend to overbook (sometimes excessively), most travelers are clueless that hotels engage in the same business practice.

Because of the undesirable surprise awaiting guests who hold a guaranteed reservation when they arrive at the hotel, many front desk managers and clerks choose to offer up some excuse other than intentional overbooking to explain why there is “no room in the inn.” Excuses typically range from an overstaying guest who failed to check out to a maintenance failure in a guestroom forcing a diminished inventory situation. Research has shown that only about 10% of overbooked hotels actually tell a guest the true reason that he cannot be accommodated. Whichever path you plan to follow, it is important to know and rehearse in advance what you will tell the guest once they arrive.

Provide a solution

The most important aspect in order to calm an upset or disappointed guest is to immediately tell him or her what steps your hotel has taken to accommodate them. With full-service hotels, this traditionally entails securing and paying for comparable nearby lodging accommodations, providing or paying for transportation to and from the new hotel, forwarding any mail, faxes, messages, or phone calls, and paying for at least one long-distance phone call so the relocated guest may notify family, friends, or associates of his new location. Many limited-service hotels chose to undertake the same service recovery efforts.

Before breaking the news, try to isolate the guest from others who may be standing in line by asking them if you can speak with him off to the side. Be sympathetic, be sincere, and be apologetic. After all, the hotel created this predicament, not the guest. Humility and ingratiation coupled with immediate action to relocate the guest at a nearby hotel at no expense to him can go a long way towards alleviating an undesirable situation. Having all the paperwork prepared and transportation at the ready shows the guest that the hotel has already taken action to immediately accommodate him elsewhere. And often, many guests don't mind a minor delay or inconvenience when it results in a free night's stay across the street or down the road.

Follow-up with the guest

After the hotel has walked a guest, management should follow up with a courtesy call to make sure that the guest is properly situated at the new hotel. If it is not too late, call the guestroom. If there is no answer, leave a message and a call back number. If it is extremely late, call the new hotel's front desk to make sure that the guest was checked-in okay and was not still upset.

Be sure to have the general manager send an apology letter the next day to the guest's home or business. If the guest originally had a multiple night reservation, bring him back to your hotel the very next day and upgrade him to a suite or deluxe accommodations. An in-room amenity basket or complimentary meal voucher will help win the guest's loyalty back. For guests who only held a single-night reservation, offering a future complimentary one-night stay as an invite-back would accompany the general manager's apology letter nicely.

Some final thoughts

Walking is delicate task. Guests may react angry and surprised, and rightly so. We need to listen to their concerns, display empathy, act professionally and work with them until they accept the best alternative we can offer. Some guests can get carried away and become unreasonable. Nevertheless, we have to remember: the guest is not always right, but the guest is always the guest.

There's more to being a hotelier than just putting the heads in the beds and the feet between the sheets. Once we've done a great job selling out our hotel, true professionalism requires us to do a fine job at walking as well. ✧

(Dr. Gabor Forgacs is a former hotel general manager and night manager and an assistant professor in the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada. E-mail: gforgacs@ryerson.ca)

Dr. William D. Frye is a former resort general manager and hotel night manager and an assistant professor in the College of Hospitality and Tourism Management at Niagara University in Lewiston, NY. E-mail: wfrye@niagara.edu)