



MARKETING MATTERS

Despite the rise in online bookings, many guests still want to pick up the phone and speak with front of house staff. Angie Petkovic explores how these employees can make the right impression

I've recently been doing an exercise phoning hotels on behalf of one of my clients and have been amazed just how poor the first customer touchpoints have been. So, this month, we will take time out to look at your front of house delivery to see if the experience for the client coming through your door is good enough and representative of your business as a whole.

Your staff are your customers' first port of call, so do they sound like they have a smile on their face when they answer and are they pleased to hear from that person? Are they clear, concise, thorough and do they take time to listen? Having a training session with a spoof enquiry can reveal what your customers are really hearing. Get your friends to phone up and try and make a reservation, so they can mark just how the call went on a scale of one to 10.

My experiences over the last few days as a mystery customer have included being told to abruptly hold and then no one came back to me. On another occasion, the name of the hotel or the member of staff was left completely unmentioned. I also asked a hotel member of staff if they had a room available, to which they replied "no we're full" and that was the end of our conversation. Dialogues like this are not good for your business or maximising occupancy and are certainly not the way your staff should be portraying your business to the world.

You may have spent a lot of money and effort getting your establishment looking right with the perfect branding but one member of staff can destroy this in a minute! Training is fundamental, as it gets your staff to deliver what you want the world to know about your business.

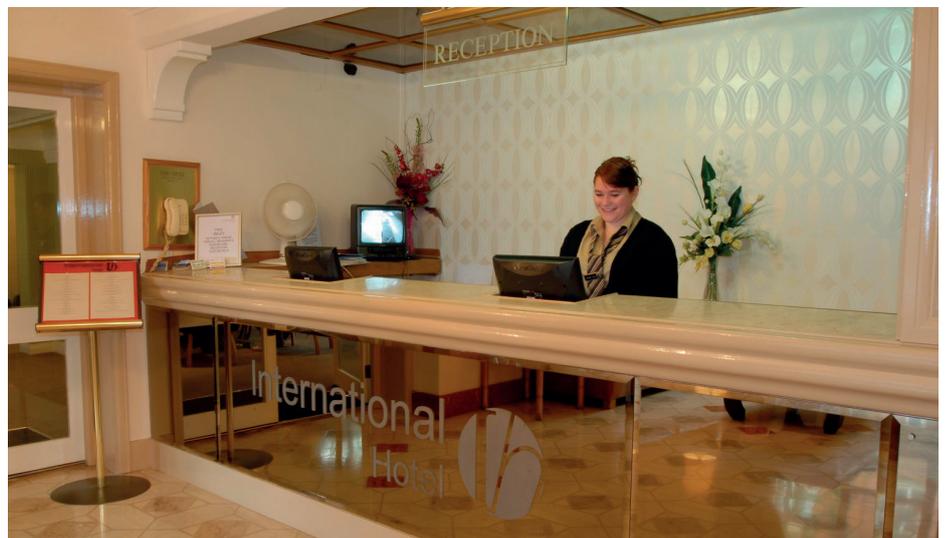
When I had my hotel, the initial phone greeting was the name of the hotel

followed by "...for the best breakfast". It may have been twee and funny but it was memorable and it stimulated more bookings than I care to think about and got us a lot of introductions.

Telephone staff spotting opportunities is also key. If an enquiry for £75 gets rejected, rather than this being the end of the call they could say: "Is that too much for you? What sort of price did you have in mind?" From this knowledge, another hotel recommendation can be made locally or a decision can be made whether to take the booking with the probable loss of only £10 or so. It is vital for your staff to hear what is not being said. If a potential customer comes on the phone and says: "Do you have any ground floor rooms?" it is no good just to say no. It is more important to say "no, but we do have rooms with disabled access," or perhaps recommend a local hotel that does. A good front of house person can convert any enquiry or phone call into a booking. It is vital your staff stop, listen, ask the right questions and display the right attitude.

This should also apply to family-run businesses with no member of staff getting preferential treatment over others. Staff members who are part of the owner's family should adhere to the same procedures and rules as non-family staff. You, your daughter, sister or husband should not go to reception with wet hair or argue in public areas. This is not a professional approach when it would not be tolerated if it were the actions of your other staff. Family discord can have a damaging unprofessional first impression of an operation.

Think back to the window on your business that we have explored before. Is it professional enough? Does everyone answer the phone in the same way? Does your team actively try and convert calls into bookings? Do they sound like they are smiling or do they seem bored and tired? Is everyone in the loop of knowledge? Don't forget that your front of house staff need to know the lowest rate you are willing to go to before refusing a booking. Good luck and enjoy making the right impression!



ANGIE PETKOVIC is the managing director of apt marketing & pr, an integrated full service agency based in Cheltenham. Angie is an ex-hotelier herself and a well-connected tourism ambassador who understands the business. With a long pedigree in hospitality, spa and tourism client campaigns, Angie's team help their clients boost occupancy, maximise their profile and improve their customer offering by formulating a realistic, cohesive and affordable strategy. Ring Angie for a coffee and a chat on 01242 250 692 or email angie@aptmarketing.co.uk to find out how her expertise in effective communication can help you, whatever your current business situation. For further information go to www.aptmarketing.co.uk