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How Employee Training Tools Directly Impact Guest Repeat Bookings

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As the result of dramatically improved business intelligence in the hospitality industry, training has taken on an entirely new meaning. The word itself has been liberated from its old use as a reference to skill-based hand-holding; now, training refers to creating knowledge-based excellence. And, more often than not, hotel staff members regarded as "associates" are strategic members of the organization team. With the right kind of training, employees take ownership, greet guests by name and understand their preferences.

With this evolving approach, brand standards reflect the behavior of the staff and no longer just relate to the physical characteristics of the property. Thus, engaged associates are now profit centers, not just cost centers.

Branding service standards through engaged training

The intrinsic value of any brand in today's hospitality sector is best exemplified by its people. Flying a flag is more than meeting physical standards or having a logo attached to the building front. In order for a brand to promote its real intangible value, it should relate to the personality of the staff and make an emotional connection with the guests. That calls for training that fully engages employees.



None of this comes as any surprise to Linda Lang, vice president of HR for [Millennium Hotels & Resorts](#), the North American arm of London-based Millennium and Copthorne Hotels plc (MLC). The Millennium Hotels & Resorts portfolio includes 15 hotels in the U.S., offering both business and leisure travelers upscale accommodations in premier locations from major cities to resort areas.

"We have 15 hotels in North America, each with a distinctive architecture and style. Our challenge is how to brand through service as opposed to unifying the physical attributes of the properties," says Lang. "Our associates already know how to efficiently execute a transaction with a guest. What we need to focus on is fostering interactions with customers that provide a memorable experience. In our service training we insist that associates learn the correct standard and we encourage them to inject their unique personality into those standards. Marrying precision and personality builds our brand and our culture from the inside out."

In order for training to be truly relevant, hoteliers need access to candid feedback from employees, guests and meeting planners that enable them to identify significant satisfiers or zero in on areas where improvement is needed. Better intelligence also translates into more informed, targeted training programs that fully engage staff. When associates have the knowledge and training that they need, brand standards become personalized so that every aspect of hotel operations is improved.

Better feedback = knowledge training = engaged employees = loyal guests

In today's increasingly competitive environment, understanding the connection between guest feedback, effective training and an engaged workforce culture can make or break an organization. For example, the interrelationship between these areas can help a hotel project an upscale personality and avoid diminishing brand prestige by being overzealous at discounting rates. Many luxury hotels recognize how important it is when associates address guests by name and become familiar with their preferences. The organization can then apply this knowledge in training sessions that consistently involve staff to take ownership and project brand prestige when feedback in this area indicates that there are challenges.

"The most effective training programs establish consistent methods of instruction and measurement to determine if the training is taking hold and has the desired outcome for the guests. In addition, there is the Hawthorn effect: simply increasing attention and attaching importance to the service standards from the top of the organization on down brings about positive behavioral changes," says Lang. "Then it becomes a continuous process to train and re-train our staff, measure the results via feedback and use the feedback to refine the learning process. All of these steps continue to build a hospitality culture and create a common language in our work community."

"When it comes to training, what matters most is to walk the talk and deliver teaching that works," says Lang. "You simply can't settle for a 'drop and run.' For example, if we hire a senior accountant, we expect them to know how to use Excel but we must understand that the same person will experience a learning curve when it comes to understanding company culture. Telling them about our standards or simply showing them once or twice will not make them proficient in delivering the kind of service we want to be recognized for."

"Having a more engaged workforce begins with the hiring process and continues with targeted training," adds Lang. "No one comes back to a hotel because the property has great shampoo; guests come back because of the people they encounter at the property. Rather than trying to fit square pegs into round holes, we look for folks who really believe that service is both an art and well deserved gift that we give to our guests. We hire for service talent, train for specific knowledge and skills and then let our associates take ownership of the guest experience. That's a win/win for us all."

The real key to success in today's environment is to build an engaged workforce that personifies excellence and transforms the guest experience into a competitive differentiator. There's no better method to achieve this than by incorporating survey analytics into a training process that is

designed to engage staff.

A two-pronged strategy for success

The case for more emphasis on guest-centric training is hard to ignore. It is customary in most businesses to modify capacity when market conditions change. So the obvious need is to adopt tactics that keep both occupancy and guest satisfaction rates high. First and foremost, this requires the entire organization to be fully engaged.

This is exactly the challenge that faced [Destination Hotels & Resorts](#), the fourth largest independent hospitality management company in the country. The organization has aggressively marketed its upscale hotels, resorts and golf clubs with attractive packages and has even been recognized by The Washington Post in its weekly online column highlighting the best travel bargains. However, Destination Hotels & Resorts also understands that getting guests there is only half the challenge.

"Training has always been an important part of our culture throughout all of our properties," says Greg Miller, VP & managing director for Destination Hotels & Resorts. "In my role I've been able to see firsthand results in Royal Palms Resort & Spa and how our training program has improved the guest experience at all the critical touch points. We are using [UniFocus](#)' GUESTScope and MEETINGScope to benchmark results on a weekly basis and have seen measurable progress.

"As an example, we have seen increased guest name usage among our associates and better resolution of difficult issues," continues Miller. "And we're getting guest feedback from a service standpoint, enabling us to identify critical issues or specific trends and also target concerns related to the physical property itself. Then we can actually utilize guest feedback analytics to make capital improvement decisions. And as we share this information with our associates, all of these factors combined with training help fuel a continuous improvement process. As a result we are seeing a high intent to return and recommend among our guests, which lowers the cost of customer acquisition."

Improving the work environment for employee retention and guest loyalty

An additional benefit of the training experience that goes beyond guest satisfaction is an improved environment for employee retention that in turn drives guest loyalty. "Our culture at Destination Hotels and Resorts is to empower people and encourage associates to take authority," says Miller. "We have also oriented our training to ensure quicker service recovery time because we recognize everything is not perfect. Ultimately, when a property performs better it becomes a source of great pride, associates are more engaged to take ownership and the work environment is even more positive."

[Royal Palms Resort & Spa](#) is getting more out of its survey analytics for training purposes because the survey questions are scientifically developed to identify key satisfiers, intent to return and/or recommend, and the impact of rate or length of stay on those factors. The data is then correlated with other key performance indicators. Most importantly, the organization can drill down to find out the "why" and then apply that knowledge in their training programs.

"UniFocus did a great job communicating to operations management the full capabilities of the system," continues Miller. "We utilize the Online Analytical Processing (OLAP) cubes to slice and dice the data any way we need and take advantage of robust reporting with extensive drill-down capabilities."

A commitment to training ensures success

An organization's commitment level to ongoing training can have a significant impact on the program's long-term success. At [Quorum Hotel Tampa](#), associates know that management means business. Located in the heart of the Westshore business district, the boutique property designates a different training topic for each month. This kind of commitment makes for more engaged employees.

"Training plays a huge role in what we do," explains Carol Wolff, director of HR for the hotel. "Several years ago we started having a training session every month for all staff positions, from the GM to housecleaning to dishwasher. We developed what we call the 12 Quorum Quality Standards and throughout the year we focus on a different standard each month. There is also the opportunity to create new standards; for example, addressing each guest by name or encouraging their feedback."

"We want to make sure that each associate has the opportunity to participate in our training program and that we commit to a schedule," adds Wolff. "There are four classes in English and two classes in Spanish. Having this level of commitment to training each month for our entire staff keeps our associates more engaged as they look forward to the training."

Fine-tune training through survey analytics

Many hospitality organizations have found that the training process can be improved by utilizing guest and staff survey analytics in tandem. Quorum Hotel Tampa utilizes a system that identifies guests who intend to return and/or recommend and correlates that information to create meaningful business intelligence for training purposes. Better training can then be developed in specific areas to establish an improved environment for employee engagement and guest loyalty.

"Our survey feedback enables us to see areas where we need work in the guest room experience and focus on items where we have scored high or low," says Wolff. "We can then fine-tune training to cover any other areas we choose, from housekeeping to room inspection to F&B. If we know where our scores are dropping then we have the capability of drilling down to find out what the issues are. Our employee opinion/survey also produces the kind of feedback that we can utilize to reward our associates; it's been our experience that any recognition helps us with employee retention."

Quorum Hotel Tampa understands that the value of feedback for better training depends upon statistically valid sample sizes. The property has been able to increase the guest survey response

rate by directly involving their associates in encouraging guest feedback through improved communication. "Our goal is to get 250-300 comment cards back and if we meet this goal we have an employee barbeque," says Wolff. "By challenging ourselves and making it fun, our associates stay engaged in the process to interact with our guests and continuously improve the communication process."

Conclusion

Today it's more critical than ever to engage your employees through the utilization of a dynamic staff training program. The best results are achieved when the training is directly linked to survey analytics that are consistently applied. Finally, it is important to project excellence in your service standards and not rely upon discounted rates to boost occupancy. Satisfied guests are more likely to return or recommend and this helps maintain rate integrity.

As market analysts continue to see occupancy rates trending downward, it is critical for hospitality-related businesses to strategically position their organization for excellence. Historical patterns indicate that those hoteliers that make the critical investments in survey analytics and effective training early on will not only protect profitability now but benefit the most when economic conditions improve.

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