

25

Extraordinary Minds
in Hospitality
and Travel Sales
and Marketing



[BY TARYN SCHNEIDER]

Praised for their ideas, innovation, leadership and enviable results, 25 individuals were named the “Most Extraordinary Minds in Hospitality and Travel Sales and Marketing” by HSMIA. For the fifth consecutive year, outstanding sales and marketing executives were chosen by their peers for how they impacted the industry and inspired their profession. To learn what makes this talent pool tick, they were asked for their thoughts about what matters most, from customer relationships to the online space, branding, and the power of partnerships. Here is what a dozen of those “extraordinary minds” had to say.

Courting the Customer

In an age of consumer savvy and sophistication, the rules of engagement have considerably changed. It is an era to be personal, relevant, deliver value, and pursue that emotional connection.

“2008 is the year of the customer relationship,” says Dr. Lalia Rach, divisional dean and HVS International chair, Preston Robert Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism and Sports Management, New York University. She believes it’s not about customer satisfaction but about loyalty, something that is not easily won and a challenge to keep. “It’s not about points, but knowing what the customer wants on an emotional level. That requires a culture that is steeped in the meaning of a multi-varied relationship that consistently tells the client they are valued. The hospitality industry falls in love with a new client but then forgets to nurture that love. Those companies with deep, abiding connections to their most valuable clients will win,” explains Rach.

“Our core tenet to building campaigns is to start with the ‘zealots,’” offers Michael Tyre, managing partner, Guest Relations Marketing. “Who loves you, why, and what can we do to build more business through these guests and others of similar mindset. This inside-out approach can be played out nicely in directed means and reduce the traditional dependency on paid advertising and price-driven promotions.”

He adds that building and nurturing relationships are paramount, as is having respect for guests, knowing what is valuable to them and personalizing in new ways. “Data is available now on virtually all aspects of a guest’s behavior, which should be aggregated into more personal services and not merely as a revenue/transaction model.

Imagine a personal Web site for guests that completely customizes their experience?”

“The cornerstone of maintaining strong relationships with customers is offering them relevant products and services,” states Randy Garfield, president, The Walt Disney Travel Company. “At Disney, our ability to stay connected with guests is the direct result of asking them about their experiences and acting on their feedback to improve our overall operation.”

Brenda Fields, founder, Fields and Company points out, “In many ways, technology has created an impersonal way of doing business. But it is wise for owners and operators to evaluate the areas of guest interaction and measure the impact of technology. The personal touch of interacting with guests is a powerful tool that fosters goodwill and guest loyalty, which translates to market share and revenues.”

Karmela Gaffney, managing director, eCommerce & advertising, Best Western International, says you need to find the right balance between the offline and online world, and then find the perfect integration between the mediums to speak to the customer with a consistent message, voice, and experience.

“The differences in buyer profiles can be both dramatic and subtle when considering the generational layers that are prevalent in today’s marketplace,” says Mike Hampton, Ed. D., dean, Lynn University, College of Hospitality Management. “As life spans become extended, and seniors remain more mobile, the millennials and subsequent youth markets will pose unprecedented challenges for providing products and services that yield the desired experiences of a spectrum of age groups. Product segmentation only begins to scratch the surface in appealing to the demands of these varied

groups, so marketers must identify the most appropriate ways in which to create the blend of offerings that will satisfy the array of needs, wants, and expectations that are posed by multigenerational audiences.”

He sees one of the most significant phenomena impacting the industry in the coming decade will be the proliferation of inexperienced global travelers entering the marketplace. From more mainstream Chinese travelers to the U.S. to an increasingly mobile middle-class Indian population, there will be new opportunities for reaching out to audiences that have never been exposed to consuming the hospitality products and services available in the U.S. “It will require a much different approach to marketing... simply translating messages into different languages won’t work as marketers will need to gain a unique understanding of each audience and the motivators that stimulate them to action.”

Joel Carver, senior vice president-sales and marketing, VIZERGY, predicts more of the generational shift as baby boomers retire with greater wealth and better health, allowing them to reclaim a new travel dynamic. “This generational shift will lead to new management techniques, marketing strategies, and ultimately corporate philosophies than have been experienced in earlier generations.”

All About the Brand

With branding being a major focus of most hospitality and travel operators, the spotlight is on individualism and differentiation, promise, and delivery.

A high-voltage current that connects a customer’s emotions to your products and your company is how Garfield defines ones brand. “Branding and ‘reputation management’ are critical elements of your prod-

Selected by Their Peers as Extraordinary Minds in Hospitality Sales & Marketing



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President & CEO

LAKE COUNTY CONVENTION
AND VISITORS BUREAU
Hammond, IN



ROBERT BOULOGNE
Chief Operating Officer

ROSEWOOD HOTELS & RESORTS
Dallas, Texas



JOEL CARVER
Senior Vice President of Sales

VIZERGY (FORMERLY SECURE-RES)
Jacksonville, Florida

uct's appeal and the way your distribution clients feel about doing business with you," Carver explains.

"A brand isn't merely an icon or image, but rather the entire thinking and feeling that an existing or potential customer associates with that business," says Hampton.

"Brands should incorporate the sensations that someone associates with the product or service: visuals, sounds, smells, and tastes."

"Ah, brands make the world go round," exclaims Rach. "But those brands that gain mythic status, that have instant recognition, that allow the company to charge a premium—those few and far between companies—their brand is etched into the very fabric of their being. The values, philosophy, the very essence of the brand lives in the employees not on letterhead or in a logo."

Caryn Kboudi, vice president, corporate communications, Omni Hotels states, "It always comes back to meaningful brand differentiation. If your brand does not offer a unique and compelling product or service to its customers, then a great marketing campaign will only have a short term impact with no real sustainability. The authentic core promise of the brand must be about how we engage and interact with our various customers. Marketing is really just the invitation to try something out. The experience brings them back."

Speros A. Batistatos, FCDME, president and chief executive officer, Lake County (IN) Convention and Visitors Bureau, believes that visitors will seek out destinations and brands that respond to their highly individualized needs.

Brands will do well because independents need affiliation, offers David Green, chairman of the board, David Green Organization. "In the luxury market, it is about getting the services elements right, delivering unforgettable experiences, being very niche driven, and answering who you are in the world."

Tyre warns that, "The enemy of building successful programs is departmentalization. Great brands operate like great teams. The strategies are simple and everyone both understands they have an impact on their success and have a role in where they best play."

The Online Space

With the Web consuming the most carefully considered and most lucrative place in the marketing plan, the online space is critical to success. Those who wholeheartedly embrace it will find unprecedented acts of engagement

and interaction. Therein lies exiting opportunities to target, personalize, and communicate with consumers as never before.

Hampton notes: "Internet service providers, search engines, and others have been profiling users for an extended period, and can distinctly characterize each individual's interests, preferences, and behaviors online so that messages can be directed to those identified with the greatest propensity to buy a particular product or service. Embracing these new resources will dramatically enhance a marketer's power in generating desired responses."

"Every day since the advent of the Internet, we as a society have moved closer to individualized marketing," explains Carver. "Niche Web sites, social media sites, and targeted, customized marketing solutions allow us to bring our product or service not only to the marketplace, but to the individual. For reviews and publication, the exact opposite is true, the customers now have the ability to publish, review, and rate our products and services from the comfort of their hotel room, while they are still in the middle of the experience."

Providing significant benefits to both organizations and customers, Garfield says the Internet gives companies a cost effective tool for marketing through CMR initiatives, and offers customers the ultimate flexibility to research, shop, and buy on their own terms, 24-7.

Gaffney states: "Our overall strategy is to continue to identify and prioritize research-driven online enhancements for all of our consumer-facing websites that will increase customer loyalty, their experience, and ultimately revenue. From an online media perspective, our goal is to continue to optimize on our learnings, from market specific creative to frequency capping to behavior targeted messaging and overall publisher placements, to ultimately increase our return on spend."

Addressing the exciting social media piece of the online space, Gaffney says: "It's the opportunity for us to have a conversation with our customers and build that experience for them and with them. The challenge is finding the right balance for both the customer experience and the brand...it's knowing which enhancements will ultimately give us the highest return and give the customer the best experience."

"The Internet and social marketing has evolved into a 'global conversation' between like-minded people and customers," offers

Green. He says the dynamics of communities are key, and by figuring out what makes them work you can develop a business model to deliver back to the world. By looking for the “community who talks to the same people you do,” you can tap into resources and leverage relationships”, as he’s done by establishing a lead generating partnership with a promotional products company with over 700 sales reps and sales of \$25 billion.

Tyre predicts that as the star and diamond system becomes outmoded, viral marketing will supersede the professional ratings as the consumer vanguard. He says the experience of fellow travelers, not the measures of a dated checklist by a professional reviewer, is going to continue to drive guest perceptions.

“To go forward with a plan and spend wisely, it’s necessary to understand all the options and choose the best ones to meet both short term and long term goals,” suggests Fields. “Distinguishing between the artistry of the design and the technology, and how to integrate the two is important.” She notes that often Web sites are created by technology pros who don’t understand the nuance of marketing, and many times marketing professionals design from a visual perspective without considering how key technical components can drive demand.”

Rach sees the mobile online environment as the distribution channel. “Just when the hospitality and tourism industry gained a comfort level with the traditional online channel, ‘tech-mobility’ takes center stage. Consumers are on the move and they demand that technology, information, connections come with and to them, hence techmobility. For any tourism business, flexibility and adaptability are critical to future success.”

Sales and Marketing Strategies

Pursuing the latest and greatest innovations and initiatives makes smart marketing sense. However, it’s often the basic principles and practices that are overlooked.

As Hampton notes: “The foundation for success continues to be maintaining a focus on the basics: offering a quality product, establishing a good price/value relationship, fostering solid customer relationships, communicating through targeted media, and maintaining consistent delivery on promises made to customers.”

“We depend too much on hi-tech communication,” offers Christopher R. Perry, vice president, hotel sales and marketing, Mohegan Sun. “All customers want is someone who takes the time to know who they are



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and what they represent, and gets back to them quickly and simply says ‘I want your business’—pretty much the basics of selling.”

“Plan your work and work your plan,” suggests Garfield. “Develop contingency or ‘shelf promotion’ concepts that you may need if your primary initiatives don’t work as planned. Always embrace a continuous improvement mindset by constantly monitoring the marketplace both within and outside your primary industries to adapt to a rapidly-changing environment.”

Tracy Fairman, chief operating officer of E-proDirect/MeetingMart, says urgency and flexibility are critical. In the meeting planning world, “The greatest concern with planners is response time. We also need to take the time to listen to our clients needs and have the flexibility to adjust and individualize our customer service to their needs.

“In every industry, customers will pay for value or distinction,” explains Tyre. “Where it is not perceived to be present, consumers are ruthless at negotiating and driving price down. Owners and general managers need to allocate as much time and budgets in creating value distinctions as in executing short-term sales and marketing programs. We are exploring a model that combines revenue management, technology, and branding in an integrated process. Ever think you’d hear of a revenue manager, brand strategist, and Web programmer collaborate together? The combination is essential to building a more competitive and sustainable sales and marketing program, particularly for smaller chains that must compete against the efficiencies of the mega-operators.”

Partnering Up

“No provider can work at optimum levels in isolation,” offers Hampton. “Today’s customers demand an experience that extends beyond what has been traditionally offered. Hotels partner with spa operators, restaurants with theaters, destinations with airlines, and so on because the power of appeal to customers is raised exponentially. This allows each party to focus on doing the very best job in their area of business focus, while capitalizing on the increased value of the paired offering.”

Garfield agrees that you can’t go it alone even when you have the blessing of size and scope. “Your marketing and sales resources should be effectively complemented by partners who can help you expand your reach and often get your message in front of prospects who aren’t being influenced by your conventional efforts.”

Green is big on managing relationships and says the way to go is outsourcing: “stay with what you do well and give the rest away.” He

cites that when Marriott decided to move into the boutique world they tapped Ian Schragger in a venture that would use the “boutique icon” as the brains and Marriott as the development and management engine.

“Because there are so many choices for the customer today, the ability to differentiate yourself is becoming more challenging,” states Perry. “The traditional approach of print advertising is becoming less effective and ROI is diminishing. We are constantly looking for strategic partnerships and alliances which allow us to be right in front of the customer versus hoping they saw our ad.”

Boulogne says exclusive partnerships add huge value to guests, citing their “Hot Type” program—a partnership with the top publishing houses to get advanced copies of novels, before they hit bookstores, creating the ultimate bragging right for their guests.

What it Takes for Success

“Success is almost always the result of embracing a team focus, surrounding yourself with great people who like to work together, and buy into a common mission,” states Garfield.

“It’s knowing which strategic directions to take that will deliver the highest impact to the bottom line as well as deliver a satisfying experience to the customer,” suggests Gaffney.

“In the global business environment, the most important tool is now open mindedness,” states Carver. “With every challenge, idea, or concept, we must approach that with a ‘how do I embrace this’ attitude. From managing a new generation, which has a greater sense of entitlement than any previous generation, to marketing in a virtual environment, every decision, position, and tactic must be faced with an open and welcoming attitude.”

“Being able to offer our guests one-of-a-kind experiences that they cannot find anywhere else is what it takes to succeed,” says Boulogne.

For Batistatos, it’s the fundamentals: a corporate culture that respects, values, motivates, and listens to its people. “That philosophy will in turn cause our partners and customers to be valued, respected, and listened to as well.”

Mohegan Sun’s Perry says we are surrounded by mediocrity, which is why he looks for character and maturity when hiring a sales professional. The ability to sell can be taught, but with those attributes, not only will they work hard but they will have an open mind to the development of being the best they can be, he believes. ■



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