

## Don't Let A Culture Of Profitable Mediocrity Infiltrate Your Hotel

As the hotel industry comes roaring back from a devastating economic downturn, I am already amazed at the number of hotels, hotel companies, and even destinations that have returned so quickly to a state of profitable mediocrity.

What is profitable mediocrity? For the lodging industry, it is a term I use to describe the "culture" of a hotel organization that while producing a steady revenue stream for the ownership, consistently provides a level of guest service that is average at best. Usually service providers at these organizations show a thinly disguised contempt for the people they call "guests" that they are processing through their systems just as they might toss around tennis balls in a circle.

The culture of profitable mediocrity can occur at a single hotel, at a hotel brand or management company, or even for an entire travel destination. It is an insidious, viral-like condition that when allowed to continue unchecked, grows like mold in the basement after a flood. Except that this cultural infection usually doesn't start in the "basement" levels of the organizational chart, but rather at the top rafters of the "attic."

When the very highest levels of leadership are happy with the revenue streams they are achieving; when the owners and asset managers are consistently receiving their dividends; when executive managers have eased-up speed on their journey to hospitality excellence, then the conditions are right for profitable mediocrity to set in.

Unlike the root causes of profitable mediocrity, the symptoms of it are most evident at the very front lines of the guest service experience. Symptoms include:

- Front desk associates who instead of welcoming guests say "checking in?" or worse yet, stand in front of the guest and wait for them to speak first.
- Reservations agents who process "callers" all shift vs. having real conversations with real people to help them secure their lodging arrangements.
- Sales department staff that don't promptly return inquiries when they have no availability.
- Rules that are made for the convenience of the management, rather than focusing on what is best for the guest experience.
- A restaurant host or hostess that instead of welcoming guests says "How many?" or worse yet, when a solo diner approaches says "Just one?"
- Telephone operators who speed through their opening greeting and talk like they have marbles in their mouth.
- Hotel staff who use words like "no problem" or "sure" to end phone conversations.
- Administrative assistants who screen calls and treat vendors as enemy spies, rather than politely saying no and remembering that today's vendor might be tomorrow's potential guest.

- Bell services staff who look at a guest's tip when accepting it instead of looking at the guests' eyes and thanking them first.
- Sales staff who instead of describing rooms in an alluring and enticing way, ask prospects if they have been to the website yet.
- Managers who don't know their associate's names.
- HR directors who don't provide closure for candidates they interview but do not select.
- Asset managers that pump-up the profit stream, often to secure their own bonus, at the expense of letting the physical product erode in subtle but important ways.
- Housekeeping staff that think their only job is to clean guest rooms.
- Front desk staff who think their job is to check guests in and out.
- Doormen who think their job is to open doors and hail taxis.
- Managers who think their job is to write reports, make schedules, and mostly check email.

These are just a few of the many symptoms of Profitable Mediocrity. Once the condition starts, it spreads like an invasive species; it grows like the Kudzu vine, slowly, steadily, until it topples the mightiest trees.

Unfortunately once the condition starts to impact the bottom line it is often too late. Just like one Lionfish in the coral reef. Too many guests have already been turned off and will never repeat. Too many TripAdvisor postings about the real-world experiences in the lobby. Too many Facebook pictures posted of the dirty room.

So what can be done to protect your hotel organization from this insidious condition, even in an up market where the risk of invasion is greatest? Just as we can take action to help protect our bodies from illness and disease through healthy habits, so can we protect our hotel organization.

A good starting place is to make sure that your executive leaders never allow any of the above mentioned symptoms to perpetuate; they must lead by example. They must remember that hospitality starts in the "heart of the house," and that if we want our associates to use guests' names and welcome them, then we need to set the tone in the back office by the time clock.

Make sure the executive leaders are managing "the storefront window" by personally monitoring calls, and "owning the lobby" by observing the team in action during the busiest moments. Ensure they are not relying solely on guest service scores or the once a quarter mystery shopping report.

If you are a management company or brand, make sure your general managers are not glued to their email inbox or constantly returning unexpected calls to generate unplanned reports for the corporate office. Encourage them to instead be talking to guests and associates.

Although the condition of Profitable Mediocrity is difficult to cure once they symptoms set-in, can easily be prevented. Just make sure your hospitality culture is one focused

on the ongoing quest for higher levels of guest service excellence, even when profits are on the rise and budgets are being exceeded. Look for leaders that are above all inspired, in touch, and who understand that the road to hospitality excellence has no final mile marker.

- Doug Kennedy
- June 13, 2011