

Making Sense Out of Outsourcing the Central Reservation Office Function

Teamwork between your outsourced CRO and the property(s) will generate higher revenue and improved customer satisfaction.

By Laurie Emery, Client Services & Business Development Manager, Virtual-Agent Services, May 2005

Often times, outsourcing the central reservation office (CRO) function makes sense for hoteliers. Select contact center providers can provide a fully integrated CRO solution providing hoteliers with the time and resources to concentrate on their core competency. In the past, many hoteliers have attempted to do everything in-house and often experience a huge amount of overhead and wasted management time attempting to micro-manage their business. Success driven hoteliers realize that it makes sense financially to outsource their CRO to the experts. Working with a team of professionals that have a proven track record in the hotel industry is a decision that will bring in maximum return.

Hoteliers face a significant challenge that is crucial to their success - maximizing hotel room inventory sales. With increased emphasis on revenue management and sales development, companies recognize the importance of turning “inquiry-only” calls into bookings. Ensure that your provider’s hospitality agents are as equally skilled at converting calls to bookings as they are at customer service. Agents should be taught critical sales techniques in order to make a reservation. But that’s not all - while teaching technique is important, it is essential that agents understand that closing the sale benefits everyone. In today’s competitive marketplace, it is important to have skilled agents who can close business.

Comprehensive training requires a collaborative effort between the service provider and the property. Shared information is the critical component to success – ensuring that central reservations and the property are equipped with the same information at the same time is essential to not only coordinating sales efforts, but also keeping the customer well informed. Customer satisfaction surveys indicate that callers prefer to reach a knowledgeable person who can solve their problem without transferring them or having to get back to them. Providing your partner with up-to-date property policies and procedures as well as property information is fundamental to effective agent training. Agents should be trained according to your specifications by knowledgeable training staff. When training is thorough and complete, agents feel better and are more confident about their job and the contribution they make, resulting in lower turnover. “Employee empowerment” created by preparing agents with the tools they need to be successful, increases reservation conversions and raises customer satisfaction levels.

Today’s hospitality agents must be dedicated, multitalented individuals. Other than just being able to answer a caller’s inquiries while speaking clearly and being polite, representatives are asked to do much more. Skills include being able to coordinate information coming into the organization via the Web, e-mail, e-fax, and fax. Additionally, because of the information that is available to the agent through the booking engine, they are required to quickly locate specific customer fields while staying actively engaged in a conversation with the caller. Ongoing quality monitoring ensures that the exceptional call handling skills are maintained throughout the call process.

Ensure that the central reservations management team is in constant touch with what is happening on the contact center floor. The management team should be prepared to immediately respond directly to the property with feedback received from callers such as frequently requested hotel services, incompatible rates and packages,

non-availability, and other such issues that may impact sales and customer satisfaction. Some providers can also offer a special team of agents that are equipped to handle escalated customer concerns and special functions. This ensures your customers are well taken care of and are not left with unanswered questions as well as making sure that the reservation agents are available to book rooms

The contact center of today is not your mother's call center. More than a name change, a whole evolution is taking place in technology, communication, and the very role and function of a contact center. Realizing the potential of a fully integrated outsourced CRO allows hoteliers to have an advantage over their competitors through maximization of their revenue and enhanced customer service. The right partner is essential in giving you that edge.

Making Your Partnership Work

- Make the outsourced CRO a seamless part of the reservation team by acknowledging that both central reservations and the property are all working towards the same common goal – to ensure the guest has a great experience from the time the agent answers the phone and makes the reservation to the time the guest checks into the hotel.
- Establish an open line of communication between the property and central reservations - the sales staff at the CRO needs to be updated real-time when policies are changing or when specials are offered. Including the contact center in the email blasts or newspaper ads before they are public ensures the agents are well informed in advance of the calls.
- Provide a single point of contact at the property for the CRO – someone that can be reached to clarify issues real-time.
- Have supervisors on the contact center floor that have actually been to each property and are well versed in the culture, local attractions and product knowledge of the property. This results in reduced information calls to the property which ultimately ensures the guest is getting accurate information in a timely manner – an aspect of excellence in customer service.
- Coordinate FAM trips for agents – it is remarkable how much of a property expert someone becomes once they tour the hotel. This information is then brought back to the CRO and shared with the rest of the sales team.
- Host hotel presentations by a property representative. This will be an effective selling tool for the agent. With information from the presentation, agents can further individualize a property which enables them to pull up facts that may clinch the sale. CRO agents need to believe in what they are selling and to be excited about the property.
- Offer incentives that motivate agents to turn shoppers into buyers. This will especially help to sell room nights during slow periods.
- Provide rate parity between the CRO, the property, and the internal and global websites. This ensures that the agent has the ability to overcome the rate objection.
- Ensure that property information in the booking engine is up to date and detailed at all times. This information assists the agent to quickly and accurately inform the guest and then to confidently ask for the sale.
- Provide an adequate number of hotel brochures – websites are wonderful, but brochures are helpful as quick selling tools.
- Offer identical packages through the property and the CRO.

- Provide realistic cancellation policies and deposits for today's travelers.
- Educate the front desk staff at the property on the role of the CRO in order to avoid a guest being automatically transferred to the CRO when the issue may only be resolved by the property.

About the Author

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