

Hotel Business Review

Best practices, insights & trends

Selling Your Venue's Uniqueness

By Lynn McCullough, Executive Director, Association for Convention Operations Management



Ms. Lynn McCullough

No matter what your guests are in town for -- whether it is a convention, an educational workshop or an awards event -- professionals in the hospitality industry have a chance to make a lasting impression on a large group of people all at once. Regardless of the program or career-related benefits of these events, planners know that attendance is at its highest when professionals have the opportunity to travel to an interesting destination offering a truly unique experience. And, while actual location plays a role, planners value even the little things like one-of-a-kind hotel giveaways or room amenities that will make their attendees' visit memorable. Guests and meeting planners respond well when the venue's staff pays extra attention to detail and goes above and beyond the call of duty to ensure repeat business.

What's Your Pickle?

The idea of going beyond the average level of customer service is nothing new. Members from the Association for Conventions Operations Management (ACOM) shared with us some ways that they have experienced great customer service when facilitating conventions and meetings over the years. Bob Berry, ACOM member and a Customer Service Manager at the Irving Convention and Visitors Bureau in Irving, Texas, credits motivational speaker and restaurateur Bob Farrell with inspiring him to provide service that goes above and beyond the call of duty. Farrell, founder of his own chain of ice cream parlor restaurants, inspired many professionals in the service industry with a quirky motto "What's your pickle?" after receiving a letter from a disappointed customer. After he opened the first Farrell's Ice Cream Parlor in Portland, Oregon in 1963, the restaurant quickly became the place to be for a fun meal. But then a faithful customer one day requested extra pickles with his meal, just as he had for years. A new employee

informed him that he would be charged for any extra food. The customer left the restaurant and promptly wrote a letter to Mr. Farrell stating that he would never eat at Farrell's again if that was the way he planned to do business.

Since that day, Farrell credits this customer with giving him the wake-up call of a lifetime. Now he advocates for "Giving 'em the pickle!" meaning employees should go the extra mile to make customers happy or put their own personal stamp on service that sets them apart from the competition.

Hospitable Giveaways

There are many ways that professionals in the hospitality industry can give their customers "the pickle." A great way to add a special touch to make the venue stand out is to provide complimentary food or amenities that incorporate the regional flavor and culture. ACOM's affiliates have shared with us their favorite giveaways and most popular hotel destinations. One example is the chocolate theme featured at the Hotel Hershey in Hershey, Pennsylvania. Each of their 232 guest rooms provides a sweet taste of the area, featuring cocoa scented soap and lotion and Hershey kisses placed throughout the hotel and even on the guests' pillows. The Hershey Spa is also an example of a way to immerse the guests in a local theme, literally. Guests can enjoy a whipped cocoa bath, a chocolate bean polish, or a chocolate fondue wrap.

"Our members rave about the surroundings and personal touches that the hotel provides," said Lori Nasatka, meeting planner for the Northeast Window and Door Association. "They request that we plan their annual meetings in Hershey every year. The members always have fun and it's because of the unique services that the hotel provides."

The same type of local theme is displayed at the Cliff House Resort in Ogunquit, Maine. The state of Maine is known for its renowned wild blueberries, and the Cliff House incorporates its signature wilderness by offering a wild Maine blueberry facial in its new spa. While guests are at the resort for business, most are drawn to unique relaxation experiences to help them unwind from a long day on the road.

Similarly, Doubletree, part of the Hilton Hotel chain, might want to change Mr. Farrell's motto from "Give 'em the pickle" to "Give 'em the cookie." As a partnership with The Christie Cookie, Doubletree's policy is to provide a free warm chocolate chip cookie to each guest upon check-in. This personal touch helps bring the guest a little taste of home while away on business.

The Eden Roc Resort in Miami, Florida is an interesting example of uniqueness. It gains much of its popularity from its reminiscent décor depicting the decade of the 50's, when it was a landmark celebrity hotel. In the Golden Era, Eden Roc was the classic epitome of Miami style. Today, the Resort and its staff tap into that nostalgia and historical presence by providing well-known candies from that era to guests with turndown service.

When it comes to providing comfort, maybe one can conclude that the best way to a guest's heart is through their stomachs. However, what matters most is the way the hotel staff shows pride in their regional culture and conveys the spirit of the city to their guests.

Bringing the Local Flavor On-site

When out-of-towners make up the majority of attendees at meetings and events, it is essential to showcase the area in the best way possible. Most often, meeting planners will go back to towns that do an exceptional job of displaying what the town has to offer. Just as the Hotel Hershey shows its local "flavor", hotel executives can take this idea one step further by partnering with local entertainment sources to give the guests a memorable experience. Although this idea is

nothing new, guests will notice when the staff has executed an entertainment event that leaves them feeling like they've experienced something special. In an effort to sell the uniqueness of the city, hotels should take advantage of this opportunity and partner with their local CVB's in order to brainstorm unique local experiences to prospective planner clients. Together, they can find budgeted ways to deliver entertainment both on-site and off-site.

A great way to creatively provide a cost-cutting way to keep your guests entertained is to consider bringing the local flavor to you. Philadelphia CVB's Assistant Director of Convention Services, Janice Telstar, recently invited a Ben Franklin character to welcome attendees at ACOM's past conference in the historic city. Since the local history is such a big part of Philadelphia's identity, this was a truly unique and inexpensive way to make the trip memorable right from the very beginning.

There are also several opportunities during the actual conference or convention where hotels have chance to display their local culture. Coffee breaks are a perfect time to get the guests' attention with local themed treats to help draw them into their surroundings. Perhaps consider offering a themed décor package for dinner events that is unique to your area as an incentive to groups. Your guests will truly be in awe of the effort and creativity that you have offered in order to make their event extra special.

Whether an event is an annual meeting that guests have been coming to for years, or if it is a brand new start to a company's future, guests will respond to a unique flair that only your hotel can offer. Once you figure out what your "pickle" is, customer satisfaction is guaranteed to soar to an all-time high.

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