

Utilizing Convention Services Managers During the Sales Process



By [Eric Blanc](#), President, ACOM

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With the meetings marketplace now more competitive than ever, sales teams are feeling the pressure to enhance their knowledge base about their respective venues to help bring in new business. To help with this, more and more convention centers, hotels and convention and visitors bureaus (CVBs) are beginning to utilize their convention services managers (CSMs) during the sales process.

“Let’s face it, if event service managers (ESMs) or CSMs are prepared with the client’s show specifics, and what the client needs to accomplish in our building, then we are uniquely knowledgeable regarding our facility’s capabilities so we can be very effective as the ‘sales closers,’” said Lois McLaughlin, director of event services at the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. “There is a certain amount of creativity and expertise the ESM or CSM provides.”

Venue Buy-in

Recent conversations with members of the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM) revealed that more venues fully support adding CSMs to the sales process.

“I believe more and more venues are realizing the important knowledge a CSM has,” said Jennifer Delgado, CMP, assistant director of conference services at The New York Helmsley. “The CSM of the property knows that space inside and out, has seen almost everything and can talk intelligently on what works in a hotel or venue and what does not.”

According to Rick Nelson, director of sales – worldwide accounts at Hilton Worldwide, service managers can be the differentiator if used properly during the sales process. “Their insight and creativity regarding food and beverage, flow and space placement can put a planner at ease,” he said.

Nelson added this is particularly true when dealing with meeting space heavy groups. “Utilizing the CSM is key with repeat groups,” he said. “The relationships that are built after a successful program can’t compare to what the sales team has established and often lead to rebooking in the future.”

Often times, CSMs accompany sales people on site tours so they can contribute technical expertise about the facility and its capabilities. CSMs provide an operational knowledge to the process that meeting planners often appreciate.

Importance of CSM Involvement

Many planners want in-depth information on how a facility operates and how specific issues related to the event would be handled. That's where CSMs come in—they are the most qualified to answer these types of questions as they are the ones charged with managing the events.

According to Felicia Davis, convention services manager at the Atlantic City CVA, utilizing CSMs in the sales process is a golden opportunity to provide key information to build a positive client experience.

“The CSM will be the person that is in constant contact with the group so it is important to build the relationship from the very start. The meeting planner needs to feel confident about their CSM and they need to trust them,” said Delgado. “Having the CSM available during the sales process to walk through the space, talk about different options and scenarios will help the meeting planner create this relationship and feel that the CSM really has their best interest in mind.”

In some cases, according to McLaughlin, some ESMs have worked in multiple venues and may have relationships with clients from previous facilities. “Therefore, it's valuable to have a resource who is knowledgeable about the event and is familiar with the client's personality,” she said.

“Utilizing a CSM brings confidence to the customer and delivers credibility to the sales process,” said Nelson. “In many respects, they are the subject matter expert regarding all things in the execution process.”

Driving Results

According to Delgado, it's all about team work and constant communication between the sales person and the CSM. “This open dialogue will ensure what the client has been sold or what the client expects will happen and more importantly, it will happen flawlessly. The old saying of ‘sales sells the dream and CS services the nightmare’ should not ever be the case,” she said. “The end result should be a happy planner and this will only happen if the sales team and convention services team work together. If this happens, repeat business will boom.”

Nelson added that, “A CSM's number one priority is to either be on the phone with incoming groups or on the floor with their current clients. Ideally, the sales team needs to protect the CSM's time as it pertains to contributing to the sales process,” he said. “One can do that by knowing in advance exactly where you'll need convention services input. Logistics, catering and meeting space are all the givens, but there may be other hot buttons that have been uncovered in the sales process. Having a one-on-one meeting with the director of convention services and the sales manager will help set the stage for the time needed.”

“A CSM’s involvement during the sales process will also provide more time for the salesperson to focus on additional sales efforts,” said Davis.

As well as assisting to close the deal, according to McLaughlin, ESMs are also tasked with upselling other operational services to help the facility capture additional revenue.

According to Nelson, CSMs have increased revenue in a number of areas. “The most significant would be their creativity and knowledge with food and beverage. Getting the CS team involved early in the process can build clients’ ideas with special catering events that they might not have thought of or budgeted for if CS wouldn’t have been involved,” he said. “Additionally, they are often the professionals that initiate discussions on audio visual, décor, shipping and other ancillary needs allowing us to help create the overall program and delve into the experience the customer wants for their group or event.”

At the end of the day, CSMs are a valued extension of the sales and marketing efforts of an organization.

“The sales and service partnership is beneficial in showcasing a unified organization and instrumental in producing successful events,” said Davis.

By acting as a knowledgeable resource during the sales process, CSMs are viewed as trusted experts which allow them to build trusting relationships with clients from the moment they visit a facility. This position also leads to repeat business and referrals that ultimately help increase business for the property.

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Eric Blanc is the President of the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM) and is a tenured professional with over 18 years of experience in the hospitality industry. He is the Director of Sales and Marketing for the Tampa Convention Center in Tampa, Florida after serving as a National Sales Manager with the Freeman Companies, based in Orlando, Florida. Prior to his time at the Freeman Companies, Eric served as Senior Convention Services Manager at the Tampa Convention Center and Tropicana Field (formerly known as the Florida Suncoast Dome) in St. Petersburg, Florida. Eric is actively involved in the hospitality industry and is a member of NCBMP (National Coalition of Black Meeting Planners) and PCMA (Professional Convention Management Association). For more information on ACOM, call (609) 799-3712, email info@acomonline.org, or visit the ACOM website at www.acomonline.org.

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