

## Hotel Business Review

### Sales & Marketing

#### Lead Generation: A Principled Approach

By Jim McAvoy, Founder & President, JWMcAvoy & Company Ltd.



Mr. McAvoy

Principles matter! They are a public declaration of a firm's DNA, announcing to the world what an enterprise stands for and how it is wired. They provide much more depth beyond banal platitudes such as "We care about our customers" and "Our employees are our most important asset."

Ideally, a firm's principles are conveyed in myriad of actions and behaviors of the leadership team and employees as well as the quality of the products and/or services provided by the firm.

Stephen R. Covey has thoroughly traversed the importance of principles in his #1 National Bestseller, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, originally published in 1989. I am especially moved by the following two excerpts: "Principles are like lighthouses. They are natural laws that cannot be broken" (page 33) and "Principles are guidelines for human conduct that are proven to have enduring, permanent value. They're fundamental. They're essentially unarguable because they are self-evident" (page 35). Thoughtful principles provide the structures that support successful enterprises and are the manifestation of what is good about free enterprise - and that is the inherent belief that hard work and good values will be rewarded.

The truth is that very few businesses, including those in the hotel and hospitality industry, have defined their principles let alone prominently displayed them to the market place. Yes, a vast majority have checked the "mission, vision, values" boxes and posted those on their websites. Revisiting Covey, we learn that "principles are not values. A gang of thieves can share values, but they are in violation of the fundamental principles we're talking about."

So this dearth of either the existence or the articulation of defined principles presents a wonderful opportunity—a breakaway strategy—to thoughtfully reflect upon, decide, craft, agree upon, and nurture your own firm's principles that will in turn serve as a useful lever to help you stand out from the crowd. Said another way, embracing a firm set of principles that defines your goals provides a very subtle three-dimensional approach to customer service.

Following are my firm's seven principles that have served me well and guided me along my entrepreneurial path. My intention is to demonstrate an example that may encourage you to create a set of guiding truths for your own firm, applying my tenets that may be applicable for the hospitality industry (of course, I encourage you to come up with your own).

#### 1. Serving customers—helping them compete and win—is a privilege.

Being of service is the cornerstone of success that most leaders working within the hospitality sector understand. Yet when that mindset is coupled with the notion of partnering with your clients and helping them prepare, compete, and be victorious in the marketplace, the resulting alliance is both a privilege and a very gratifying experience... and also good business.

The hospitality industry, probably more than any other sector, is built on customer loyalty. This means that getting customers or "Guests" the rooms they want and the service they deserve is not only an honor but also smart business.

#### 2. Offer steadfast support, respect, and appreciation.

Loyalty, along with patience, is vital for enduring success. Too many times we move too quickly and unintentionally damage the bonds that engender mutual respect and a deep appreciation for our colleagues' unique strengths. We must remember to be mindful that great ideas reside in many places throughout a hotel property/enterprise and that they have a higher probability of surfacing in a safe, creative environment.

One way to address this issue is to implement both a Voice-of-Employee and Voice-of-Guest protocol. Business leaders understand the strong correlation that exists between employee satisfaction and guest loyalty. Thus, tapping into the ideas of your on-site employees including bellboys, housekeeping personnel, concierge members and the front desk to surface ideas aimed at improving the Guest's experience is simply good business. Listening to your Guest's voice offers the perfect companion to foster their loyalty and continued business.

#### 3. Work with customers, wherever they are in their growth.

This principle requires a great deal of flexibility. Whether partnering with an early-stage boutique within the hospitality industry, looking to carve out their initial niche, or a recognized brand within a Fortune 500 firm possessing a 35% market share that is challenged to redefine your brand, the challenges vary.

The key is to assess where they are, where they want to go, how they are going to get there and determine how you can best fit into their strategy.

It is clearly a sound business strategy to leverage your "frequent stay" program that encompasses a wide variety of customers that could result in a strategy to cater to young high-potential executives that could frequent your property/chain for decades.

One idea would be for a hospitality company to build a relationship with an early-stage firm that could potentially become a large enterprise in the future. A little friendship and a few discounts now could end up being a brilliant economic decision in future years.

#### 4. Inquire, don't persuade.

This principle may be counter-intuitive to many. So often we find ourselves in the presence of people "selling us" their concept, product, or service. For those "pushing", it's exhausting. For those on the receiving end, it's often annoying.

It's time to stop the madness. Instead, approach the dialogue with a potential customer in the spirit of inquiry. Again, it requires more patience and a paradigm shift of allowing people to buy instead of trying to sell. Focus on adding value and serving your traveler's needs and the business will take care of itself.

This tenet can be demonstrated quite easily during the check-in process with an attentive front desk employee asking a potentially weary Guest if there is anything they need and then gently informing them of the leading amenities that are available during their stay.

#### **5. Build high-trust partnerships by talking openly and listening.**

Again, this sounds easy enough yet requires a tremendous amount of discipline and commitment to your customer's agenda.

Life is short and, although I'm a believer in contracts, I also tend to gravitate toward healthy and open business relationships. Talking openly often requires "calling the question" with potential disagreements.

I much prefer a proactive and potentially awkward 5- to 10-minute conversation to surface assumptions and clarify a situation versus staying mute and allowing potentially false assumptions to fester inside your gut and unnecessarily damage a viable business relationship.

At the core is listening to your client and handling objections using any one of a number of models available to you. Your "Guests" have a lot going on when they are on the road advancing business relationships and away from their families - just a scintilla of genuine listening and compassion can go a long way and engender loyalty and more "heads in your beds."

#### **6. Give a "little extra" to delight customers.**

Now we are really getting down to common sense. Come on. The consultative translation is "exceeding expectations" yet I much prefer to use real words. This connects to the philosophy of being 1,000% better than your competition by doing 1,000 things 1% better. It is an every moment and every day mantra. There are so many touch points within the hotel sector to optimize the customer experience and execute upon this principle. No need to say more to belabor the point.

#### **7. Treat every customer as a reference.**

This principle completes the circle and becomes an end-result product of successfully fulfilling the prior six. One cannot underestimate the power of this notion. Receiving a positive reference and/or testimonial upon the completion of a successful engagement is both rewarding and, again, good business.

Given the assumption that the power resides with the customer, hotel firms are acutely aware that it simply boils down to doing everything possible so that customers choose to visit again and refer their network of colleagues, family, and friends to your firm.

My sense is that you will find that a principle-based approach is liberating. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain. I trust that you will all have the gumption to give it a try.

*Jim McAvoy (Founder and President of JW McAvoy & Company Ltd., a lead generation firm based in Wyomissing, PA) has almost twenty-five years of experience maximizing sales results for clients in a wide range of industries, from boutique firms to Fortune 500 companies. Mr. McAvoy researches, creates, and delivers qualified leads as a consultant to his company clients, in addition to teaching his highly interactive five-stage learning process (L.E.A.D.S.) to sales teams, providing the necessary knowledge and skills that lead to top-level prospecting results. Mr. McAvoy can be contacted at 610-374-2443 or [jim@mcavoyleads.com](mailto:jim@mcavoyleads.com)*



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