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Finding "Faith": Your hotel's lost and found process is an essential viral marketing tool | By Doug Kennedy

As a frequent traveler on both business and leisure trips, I have left a long string of various personal articles in hotel rooms over the years. It's not that I'm particularly absent minded, although my family might tell you differently. To me it just seems inevitable; try as we may to double-check our guestrooms before departure, occasionally leaving behind a personal effect is just part of the travel experience.



Fortunately for me the items I leave behind are usually inconsequential and easily replaced—we are normally talking about socks, belts, and cell phone chargers and sunglasses. It's a good thing because I've personally had very little success retrieving such items from lost and found.

If my experiences are indicative of any trends, most hotels invest little effort on organizing an effective lost and found process. The most common experience these days is being transferred to a "lost and found" voice mailbox, in which I'm forced to leave my verbal plea for the return of my cherished item. If I am able to reach a live person, I typically find they offer no empathy for my loss of my personal effect. One even asked me, "Sir, didn't you check the room before you left?"

I'm not sure when the hotel industry collectively lost its focus on lost and found, as it used to be such an important priority. I recall my first front office manager more than 20 years ago telling me, "Douglas, you know a good lost and found department is a hotel's best PR (public relations) tool."

Recently, I received a terrific personal reminder of how the good will generated translates directly into what my old boss called "word-of-mouth advertising," but what marketing gurus now call "viral marketing."

For summer vacation this year my family decided to forego our tradition of waiting in lines at Disney World and instead to head straight to a beach resort to just hang out for the week and enjoy some true R&R with our kids who are now 7 and 8 respectfully. It turned out to be a great choice, as we spent most days building a sand castle version of "Bikini Bottom," complete with Spongebob's Pineapple and Squigward's Tiki. This year our biggest "thrill ride" was taking the gondola out over the old Daytona Beach pier; yet the kids are still talking about it.

And thanks to Karen and her excellent team at the Best Western Aku Tiki, our summer vacation had a happy ending as well, although it looked questionable for a while.

The story goes that as we were packing for check-out, our ever-responsible Julia noticed that her long treasured "special blankie," better known in our family as the FAITH Towel, was no where to be found. After rechecking the entire room several times we soon realized that it must have been inadvertently scooped-up by the housekeepers when they collected the linens. Our little FAITH Towel was really no more than a small, white hand towel, and indistinguishable in color from the rest of the laundry and towels—save for the word "faith" that is embroidered in Red. So, I have to admit I personally had little faith it would show up, especially given my past luck at other hotels.

But this was not to deter our little Julia, who herself being a savvy little traveler already knew about lost and found, as this little FAITH towel had also been rescued before. So, we took Julia to the front desk, where she reported her loss directly to Karen the FOM, who was very empathetic and promised to do her best to find it.

Several days later when Julia asked for an update, I began preparing her for what I thought was the inevitable outcome. But only one day later, and to my pleasant surprise, there came in the mail a little brown envelope containing her treasured possession.

For me, this experience was a great reminder of just how important it is for hotels to have an effective, proactive lost and found department. Not only is there good will generated that translates into repeat business, but the even bigger upside is the number of times stories like these get retold. Granted, not everyone is going to write an article about it like me, but I can tell you we've already retold Julia's FAITH Towel story at least a half dozen times in just over a

month.

So, if your hotel is looking for a way to enhance guest loyalty and further its viral marketing, here are best practices for establishing an efficient lost and found process:

- If you are not sure, save it! Train your housekeepers to differentiate between what is trash and what is treasure. These days it can be difficult to tell the discarded newspaper from the important news clipping to be saved, or the packing material from the packaged item itself.
- Call first when you find it! Perhaps not in every case, but when items have been obviously left behind by departing guests, initiate a phone call or e-mail to let the guest know an item has been found. Traditionally, hoteliers have used a concern over guest privacy as a reason for not initiating notification when items are found. However, considering that a large number of hotel companies now employ both telephone and e-mail surveys of guest satisfaction surveys after departure—apparently without too many complaints about privacy—it might be time to rethink this reasoning. Seems to me there are at least some times when it is obviously appropriate (and low-risk) to be proactive in contacting the guest first, such as when children's toys are left behind or PDA's are left in meeting rooms.
- Express empathy when callers report missing items. Even though we all know it is our own fault that we have left items behind, it is sure nice to hear someone say they feel badly for me or that it could have happened to anyone.
- Promise to check and really do! Ending the call with a firm commitment to recheck the room (if it is recent enough) or the logbook provides the reassurance callers are looking for; they will at least know that everything possible is being done.
- Call back even if you don't find it. Even if the lost item is not found, returning the guest's call and letting them know provides closure and again shows a heartfelt effort.
- Promptly return found items. Unless the item is especially large or if the guest requires overnight mail, just mail it back by inexpensive USPO and don't bill it back. Just consider it the small cost of your viral marketing campaign and know it will pay for itself many times over.

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