

It's All in The Training - Why Independent Call Centers Often Outshine Hotel Brands

Most hotels have suffered a major decline in sales leads from reliable digital channels. Can the voice channel pick up the slack and drive direct bookings?

SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO, UNITED STATES, October 16, 2020 /EINPresswire.com/ -- In the following interview, Kennedy discusses why the voice channel matters more than ever, and how hotels can convert more phone inquiries. He also discusses why well-trained independent call centers often outperform hotel brands.

Interviewer: What are the most interesting and rewarding parts of your job?

Doug: I would say the most interesting part is that I get to work with an incredible mix of lodging companies representing all accommodation types, from ultra-luxury and boutique to selective services, historic inns and vacation home rental agencies. The most rewarding part is seeing our KTN training concepts help increase sales and revenue across all these various business models.

Interviewer: You've often referred to voice as the "forgotten" distribution channel, but now I read where you are saying that especially right now it should be treated as an integral part of a hotel's revenue strategy. Can you explain your thinking?

Doug: Indeed, voice has been a forgotten channel. Most distribution leaders have failed to recognize the interplay of voice and online bookings. What I mean is that many of those website bookings they seem to obsess on have started off with phone conversations. Frankly though, I'm



In addition to the unique use of world-class call center technology, Travel Outlook is the only call center certified by Kennedy Training Network, the hotel industry's best source for sales training and guest service excellence.

shocked that so many are still overlooking voice at a time when group and corporate/BT channels has been devastated. Right now, travelers are calling about what's open or closed in or nearby the hotel, or with questions about cleaning protocols, or just for the reassurance that only a human voice can offer.

Interviewer: How has KTN adapted its training for the current pandemic era?

Doug: Well to pick-up on my response to your previous question, with so many more potential guests calling before booking online, it's a wonderful time to steal-back market share from OTA's as much from the comp-set. For an example specific to Travel Outlook, we put together a customized, live webcam training on how to convert those "I just have a question" and "I'm just checking the rates" calls into

bookings by asking conversation-starting questions. We also trained them to show empathy, as a lot of callers are self-revealing challenging personal circumstances and situations.

Interviewer: Compared to independent call centers such as Travel Outlook, how are hotel brands handling their voice channel?

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This is one in a series of essays by John Smallwood, CEO of Travel Outlook Premium Reservations Call Center about voice reservations, the second most profitable revenue channel.”

*John Smallwood, CEO of
Travel Outlook*



KTN is the lodging industry's best source for hotel training programs and supportive services in topic areas of hotel reservations sales, hospitality and guest service excellence, front desk hospitality certification, and hotel sales department training.

Doug: Frankly, I have to say overall, very poorly. Recently, while doing research for one of my monthly training articles, another KTN executive and I personally conducted a mystery shopping survey of the call centers for top seven hotel brands in North America and tested their agents on six established sales essentials. We were basically replicating a survey we conducted in 2014 at the time when brands were launching their "book direct and save" campaigns. Just like in 2014, the major brands scored poorly in nearly all categories.

Interviewer: Can you give specific examples?

Doug: Sure. One question we asked was, did the voice agent sell some of the hotel's benefits? And to be clear, we were looking for simple stuff — like whether they mentioned that the hotel offered complimentary breakfast or had a convenient location. Only 7% of call agents mentioned this kind of information.

Interviewer: Okay, wow, pretty surprising. So, what other categories did the brands struggle with?

Doug: Another category involved what is generally called asking “discovery” questions. We gave credit to an agent if they asked guests any questions beyond the basics about dates, number of travelers and the like, but the score still came in at only 14%. Obviously, these questions are extremely important because they help an agent learn more about the caller, make personalized recommendations, and ultimately drive the booking.

Interviewer: Based on the survey you conducted with the hotel brands how do independent call centers stack up?

Doug: Independent call centers frequently come out more favorably. As an example, the scores for Travel Outlook are much stronger across the board, which really reflects the specific training their agents receive both from KTN and from their in-house leaders.

Interviewer: So, I have to ask then, how does Travel Outlook score?

Doug: Well first of all, the call scoring criteria we use for Travel Outlook is part of our KTN Call Center Certification requirements, so it sets a much higher bar. For example, the generic version we used for the brands had only 6 criteria, and yet the overall industry score was just 37%. Travel Outlook's most recent YTD score was 89% including these disruptive pandemic era months, and that is based on a criterion with 21 line-items.

Interviewer: Can you tell us more about the KTN Call Center Certification?

Doug: Sure. Over the years we have provided training for most of the independent call centers in North America, and a few years back some of them asked us to come up with a certification process. In fact, Travel Outlook has been KTN Certified since 2013, at this time it is the only KTN Certified call center, although we do have others that have recently engaged in the journey. First, certified call centers have to engage in KTN's QUEST training for existing and new staff, but that's really the easy part. What's far more challenging is having to maintain a 90-day rolling average call assessment score of 85% or higher.

Interviewer: And can you tell us about any specific sales training concepts KTN uses?

Doug: Part of our training involves encouraging the use of more and better investigative

questioning in order to understand a guest's unique "story"; to basically find out why they are calling, where they are in their buying journey, what it is that they did not yet find out online. The other key part is what we call a story-telling approach to narrate the pictures they have already seen and reassure them on their decision.

Interviewer: So, there's a greater feeling of spontaneity to the call?

Doug: Spontaneity, for sure. But also, to create a feeling that like the voice agent really cares. They're trained to think about the call as a real conversation, not just a sales call.

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