

LODGING

Selling Service: hihotels President and CEO Chris Guimbellot on the Concept of Personal Attention

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As hoteliers gathered at AAHOACON 2022 in Baltimore, Maryland, to discuss innovations in hospitality, Chris Guimbellot, who is president and CEO at hihotels by Hospitality International, described the franchisor's approach where its Assurance and Marketing Program (AMP) team members are literally "on call." Saying he disagrees with the widely held belief that sales and service are mutually exclusive, Guimbellot shared with *LODGING* that and other ways his company is responding to franchisees in this sector. "Combining sales and service ultimately leads to better, more lasting deals. I've got the people to prove that selling to and servicing clients are actually complementary roles."

How does the combined sales and service role work in practice?

This arrangement means the salesperson continues to be the point person for the franchise buyer after completion of the transaction and is therefore more committed to the sale. The relationship goes both ways. For one thing, the salesperson is not going to sell something they don't want to service, and the franchisee is more willing to engage with a salesperson who isn't a "one-hit wonder."

We believe this works out better in the long run. We don't want to be the brand that takes in just anything and then hits some sort of inflection point that requires us to dump a lot of hotels. We've decided that quality, steady growth is our mantra; even if it slows us down a little bit, that's what we're going to do.

In what way does this arrangement relate to this year's AAHOACON theme: innovation?

It's easy. People in the AMP have their phones on all the time, so they are fully available to their clients who can ring any time—even at 10 o'clock on a Saturday night—and someone will answer every time. That's innovative in that it's difficult for franchisees to get that these days. So, while so many companies have cut back on service, we've scaled it up.

How did these relationships function during COVID?

Because these relationships were supported by technology, our AMP people never dropped the ball. While a lot of people left their people on the road go, we just had them meet virtually or

communicate on the phone. What we found is that this actually worked out better in terms of building relationships more quickly, because franchisees and the AMP person could connect more often. There was no need to take the time to set up a face-to-face meeting. As a result, we found we formed higher-quality relationships with these folks.



Chris Guimbellot, President & CEO

What else has been going on in terms of growth and changes at hihotels?

Considering everything that went down, 2020 was actually a really great year in terms of signings. We trailed off a bit in 2021, when sales were harder to come by. However, the attrition rate of people leaving us to go to other brands was basically nil in 2021, which really speaks volumes about our service and support. Other new developments include launching our new Preferred Guest Program on the consumer side.

How does the Preferred Guest Program work?

Unlike the big guys, we don't have a points-based reward program. This is an expense many of our select-service franchisees didn't want to pay for. Instead, we offer discounts, early check-in, and late checkout based on availability, and have partnered with a company called Access Development, which provides coupons for guests for the meals and cocktails not available at select-service properties like ours. Also, through our Preferred Guest Program, Access offers discounts on attractions in the area as well as restaurants. In these ways, the program provides a value add to the guest without any cost to the franchisee, which is the balance we're trying to strike.

What feedback are you receiving from franchisees?

What is especially interesting is the types of requests coming from long-time franchisees as well as new ones. We figured 20, 30, or more years in, franchisees would just say, "I can handle this. Leave me alone." But what we're finding instead is that they're coming to us more for advice and support. We're hearing things like, "I need help with decorating the rooms, with sourcing these products, with technology, with managing rates, with getting more government business." They're coming to us because they don't see this kind of hands-on service from other franchisors. They need it and we're happy to provide it.