



MARKETING MATTERS

This month Angie Petkovic shares her experience of the first ever independent hotel show, where she was invited to be a guest speaker, and highlights the issue of star ratings raised by an accommodation owner who attended her business session

Last month in London I was lucky enough to be invited to speak at the inaugural Independent Hotel Show – a much-awaited annual exhibition and the first of its kind in the UK.

Invited as a guest panellist for one of the business sessions, my topic was ‘How to beat the downtimes and build customer loyalty’, with the aim of answering owners’ burning topical questions to help them achieve more business. I shared the sofa with Martin Evans, another like-minded hospitality tourism specialist, and the accomplished Louise Oldfield, owner of the Reading Rooms in Margate, who offered a very interesting insight into her unusual and personal approach to B&B. During the Q&A session with the audience many interesting questions surfaced and I will touch upon these in future articles.

One question that particularly grabbed my attention was from a hotel owner with a gorgeous Victorian building, which was limited to a 3-star rating due to planning limitations. Her question was whether she should be a 5-star B&B or a 3-star hotel, and this scenario highlighted the grading debate that has been going on for what seems like decades!

Years ago when I had my hotel, I was very familiar with these grading applications and what fascinated me then – and continues to fascinate me now – is that all of these grading systems (and rules that go with them) actually overlook two key areas – one being what the consumer wants, and two, how people actually select where to book.

Having talked to the hotelier at the show, I established that 80 per cent of her business came from companies, and given that this is usually booked by secretaries, booking agents or somebody other than the person staying, downgrading to B&B status was not a commercial option. The audience is searching for hotels and

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not B&Bs, which appeals more to the domestic, holiday market.

My advice is, don't lose too much sleep over a grading. Be the best you can be in the category you are in, rather than chasing some elusive butterfly! For some of you it will be impossible to obtain certain gradings from these quality assessors because your physical building may not be able to accommodate certain requirements. Not having a night porter, customised lift or some required facility on the grading checklist may not apply to your hotel setup.

Here we are in 2012, with a huge diversity in the different grading schemes out there, so how do you choose? There is still no standardised system and most customers will not generally be aware of the specifics of various gradings. Many see a confusing array of symbols and are frankly baffled! Some 12 years on from having my hotel, the gradings still don't mean an awful lot to the customers.

Similarly, the grading system can work against you in some very common scenarios. Imagine you are offering an enviable hotel standard with room service, porter, 24-hour reception and amazing facilities, but because you might be on a road with lots of restaurants, you naturally decide not to have one on-site due to the immense competition. The reality is that you automatically get downgraded, as you are not seen as a full service hotel. The area you are in does not demand you need to offer a restaurant, so it seems very rigid

for these grading criteria to discriminate on those grounds. A hotel in that scenario would normally have arrangements in place with those local restaurants anyway, so it all seems rather unfair that some establishments can earn more grades than others, due to some very simple commercial factors, when quality of service may actually be identical.

Go back to what is right for your building, business and offering when choosing which scheme to join – if you are a hotel offering hotel facilities, you need to be advertising as a hotel. No one will look for you as a 5-star B&B. Look where you want your business to come from before you choose what chunk of the marketplace you are earning those tough grades for.

There's so much more to being a successful hotelier than a sign with a smart row of diamonds, crowns, stars or roses. Many identify it as their sole mission, whereas choosing the appropriate grading system for your business, physical building and customer base is a far more rewarding move. You might even find you don't need one in the first place.



If you have a scenario or dilemma you would like Angie to look at for possible inclusion in Hotel Owner, please email angie@aptmarketing.co.uk (Hotel Owner or Angie cannot reply individually to everyone but we welcome your stories).

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