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Hotel Online News for the Hospitality Executive

Booking Sports Teams & Events – Are You and Your Property “Game Ready”?

By Gary R. Hernbroth Chief Motivating Officer

January 30, 2013 So you're a hotel sales professional tasked with booking teams or sports events. Are you "game ready"? The sports event and team business can be an enjoyable, challenging, and lucrative market, but there are some major differences from the usual corporate or association groups that come your way. They can be, shall we say, quirky. Many travel managers say you're either in the sports/team business or you're not. **A different breed of group business** "Sports teams are unique," cautions Barry Waters, former director of team travel for the Houston Astros and a long-time veteran of MLB team travel. "A lot of what we do is last minute, and you've got to be able to adjust and react to that flexibility. You and your property have to be totally dedicated. We get last minute changes to our rooming list due to injuries and trades, special requests from families travelling with the athletes on a trip, etc. Your operations team has to be primed to handle those. Nowadays it's all last-minute. *"But you first have to get the business.* If you and your property or facility are new to the teams/sports business, it isn't always easy. Reputation and word-of-mouth testimonials count for a lot. Bill Brown, team travel advisor for the Detroit Tigers, looks back on his 32 years of arranging the Tigers' travel this way: "My top 3 criteria for booking a hotel are, one – what do the other baseball travel managers say about it? Number two – what do the other baseball travel managers say about it? And number three is what do the other baseball travel managers say about it? Only then does rate come in to play, but if the other guys really liked –or were leaving – a hotel, that counted far more than anything else for me." **All hands on deck – sales & operations pulling together** Inexperienced hospitality salespeople may not know that they can't go it alone in this market. They'll need the operations team to fulfill their promises to the teams and events. Making sure the operations team backs up a salesperson's promises is critical to making successful sales pitches to new team accounts or retaining team business. In my own experience booking teams at the Parc 55 Hotel in San Francisco for 11 years, we could not have increased our sports business if the internal operations team – front desk, reservations, and bell staff – were not primed and "game-ready," just like the athletes. Waters was the MLB trailblazer for us as he signed his Astros to our hotel. We took great care of them that season, and when I pursued other MLB teams for the next season, as Brown said, he was instrumental in backing up my claims as to how we could handle teams. That was the break we needed to begin building our sports market share. We spent a lot of time planning in advance for the uniqueness of the teams and sporting events we hosted, including NHL, NFL, US Open Golf, the ATP Tennis Tour, and MLB clubs. Operations had to make good on the delivery of what I promised the travel managers and event coordinators. We realized the critical nature of successfully hosting that first team to make a positive impression on the others. **Do your homework** It helps know a bit about the sport or event you're pursuing, and many of its quirks. I met with Dirk Smith (founder/president of Sports Destination Network), the travel manager for the San Francisco Giants at the time, assembling the things I'd need to know before going into my first sales presentation at the MLB Winter Meetings, where all of the team travel managers gathered. Dirk was

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