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Business Travel

How To Negotiate Hotel Upgrades

Jenna Goudreau, 02.22.10, 5:00 PM ET

Joel Rudy, chief operating officer of camera products supplier Photographic Solutions, is a frequent business traveler who delights in receiving travel upgrades. Last spring Rudy was living in New Jersey and traveling often to his company headquarters in Boston, Mass. His hotel of choice, The Westin, became his home away from home while on the road. Whenever he checked in he would politely ask for an upgrade to a bigger room, which they occasionally granted.

On one such occasion they were able to move him to a beautiful suite, in which he could spread out and work more comfortably. Pleased, he posted a message about the upgrade in his Facebook status and received a waterfall of comments. The next day Rudy mentioned to the Westin's general manager that he was surprised he'd received so many comments about the upgrade. The manager was surprised, too. He immediately upgraded Rudy to Gold status at the hotel line, Starwood Hotels, which ensured that Rudy would always be automatically upgraded at any of Starwood's properties if rooms were available.

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"Hotels are built when the economy is strong but can't reduce the number of rooms in their inventory when it isn't," says Kerin McKinnon, an executive vice president at corporate travel agency Atlas Travel International. "Right now, demand for hotels doesn't match supply. It's a great time for anyone to ask for an upgrade."

Is there magic to getting a hotel upgrade? Not exactly. TripAdvisor.com Travel Expert Erik Torkells says: "You don't just call and say, 'I want an upgrade.' They're not going to make it easy on you." However, he says, with a little finesse and a lot of flexibility, you can negotiate a room upgrade, a drop in rates or some enticing extras.

For Torkells, it's a game of persistence. If he sees a good deal, he often books early. But his strategy doesn't end there. He will keep looking for better deals online and will call the hotel to ask if there's a way to make the deal more attractive. For example, he says, "I hate paying for parking." Last summer, when he'd booked a stay at a luxury hotel in Newport Beach, Calif., he called and asked if they would throw in free parking, which was \$30 a day.

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The hotel clerk, as nice as she was, said there was no way she could do it. Torkells asked if there would be any promotions near the time of his stay, and this time, she let him on the secret. There would be a great promotion that would be announced a month beforehand. He later went back online and found what she'd mentioned. The room rate was discounted and parking and breakfast were free. He canceled the first reservation and signed up again. Torkells got what he wanted and ended up saving about \$150 a day.

While Torkells' strategy is to negotiate early, Atlas Travel's McKinnon points out the pros of negotiating late. She advises always asking at check-in if it's possible to get an upgrade. "Inventory changes," she says. "Availability that wasn't there at the time of booking may now be there on the day of arrival."

And be nice, McKinnon advises. Front desk clerks often deal with cranky, travel-weary clients. If you smile, show appreciation and give them a reason to be nice to you, they often will, she says.

Plus, hotels always want to create customer loyalty or gain new business, so working some key angles may get you to the suite. Bringing up your loyalty to the hotel often works in your favor, especially if you're a member of the loyalty group, McKinnon says. Alternatively, mentioning that you often stay at nearby hotel and are new to this one, gives the hotel incentive to impress you. Finally, if you are traveling on business, it may help to mention your title or company because hotels value higher-paying business travelers who are more likely to come back or spread the word.

Despite even your best efforts to be kind and engaging, sometimes the clerk just doesn't have the knowledge or authority to grant your requests. "I ask to talk to the general manager or the revenue manager," says Shirley Tafoya, president of travel Web site Travelzoo. Tafoya is on the road 40% of the year, so she doesn't like to waste time. She goes directly to the power players. "They need to get those rooms filled," she says. "If a room goes empty, [the manager] takes a zero."

An industry insider, Tafoya knows that hotels pay commissions of \$30-\$40 per room to online travel sites like Expedia and Orbitz. She can sometimes talk the manager down in price, or she will agree to pay the rate but will ask what more can she get in return. Sometimes that means a room with a better view, other times a suite or extra amenities.

"It might just depend on who you get on the phone with," Tafoya says, who recalls when her sister was planning a 10-day trip to Hawaii and considering three different hotels, all just above her price range. On Tafoya's suggestion, she called the revenue manager and explained that while she had the other options, she preferred his hotel. He ended up cutting the price in half to gain her business.

At the end of the day, there's no harm in asking. "I always assume the price you're being quoted is an opening offer," says Torkells. "Be open to what they might give you in this crummy economy. Think, What's going to make this worth it?"

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