

by Michael Schubach

The GOOD NEWS about EDUCATION

You learn to ask questions
and perhaps might even
learn something—

Under the general category of “physician, heal thyself,” I’ve made a dramatic change in my life — I am engaged in a formal process of taking advice rather than just dispensing it. After a brief, multidecade absence from the halls of academia, it’s boola, boola, back in school-a. Through a relationship that our resort has with

in the industry for more years than I care to calculate, it is amusing to have the nuances of your everyday work life explained to you in formal academic terms. The second advantage is more far more practical — you can accidentally learn something.

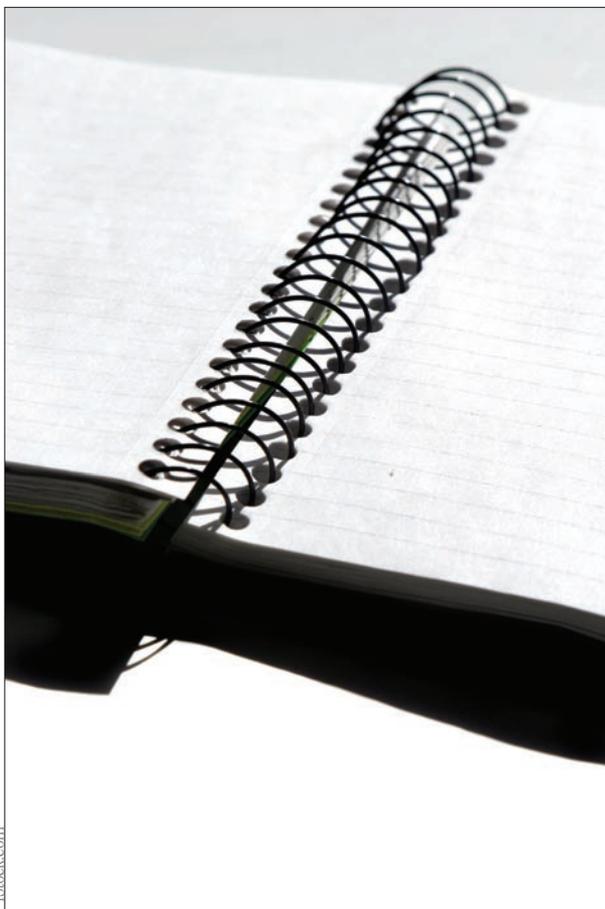
Take for example a recent assignment we were given. For our marketing class, my group was assigned to review and analyze a Harvard Business School case study that examined the Hilton HHonors program as a worldwide leader in the fiercely competitive arena of guest recognition and reward. Immediately prior to my weekend of desperation (the weekend prior to my weekend of education), I was attending a HITEC advisory council meeting in New York. When it dawned on me that I was sitting across the table from a high-ranking Hilton veteran, I

managed to catch one. I decided to prepare a handful of sharp, insightful and stunningly original questions. When the appointed hour arrived, Mr. Burke responded to my questions with an encyclopedic torrent that led me to believe that my stunningly original questions might possibly have been asked a time or two before.

Having never majored in journalism, it didn’t occur to me to record the conversation. I was ready with the questions, but was surprised by how quickly I had to transcribe the answers. I scribbled furiously for the better part of an hour, and as we were finishing up, I launched my final stunning volley. Being an IT guy, I felt I had to throw in an IT/marketing question, so I asked Adam what he saw as the new technology innovation on his radar that would help drive customer recognition and retention. His reply was astounding. Burke said, “Actually, the technology at Hilton is not our issue — our systems provide us with all the information we need. Our opportunity is living up to the *promise* of technology. Guest service agent(GSA) turnover is an ongoing challenge; we are working to make certain that our GSAs understand and use the technology effectively, and in a genuine way with our guests.” Even though that looks like a verbatim quote, it’s a paraphrase. I was so stunned by his response that I dropped my pen.

Ask an ordinary marketing professional that same question and you are likely to get an inventory of Star Trek devices that are “required” to recognize and welcome valued guests. We seem to need smart cards, RFID necklaces, retinal scanners, strategically placed stealth cameras and dazzling screen graphics (or perhaps a mild electrical shock from the keyboard) to tell the clerk that the guest standing across the counter has visited before.

The delivery systems suggested are all space-age technology but the information — and more importantly, the result — is as real a possibility today as it will be after you purchase as many bells and whistles as you can afford. Perhaps there hasn’t always been



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a nearby college, I find myself in the second semester of a professional MBA course. In this case, the term professional applies to us, the students, who are gainfully employed in the private club and resort industries. This should prove to be helpful, since the degree (should any of us actually attain it) has a specialty in resort management.

There are two distinct advantages to this type of formal education. The first is entertainment. As an adult student employed

asked (a euphemism for whined, begged and pleaded) for an electronic introduction to the program’s founders interviewed in the original case study. I managed to wangle an opportunity for a telephone conference with Adam Burke, the senior vice president and managing director of Hilton HHonors Worldwide.

Needless to say, excitement was mixed with more than a little trepidation. Like the proverbial dog chasing a car, I was faced with the dilemma of what to do once I’d actually



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TRAINING

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the imperative that we feel in today's repeat guest culture, but, as noted by Mr. Burke, the opportunity is living up to the *promise* of technology. It's a smart turn of phrase – the promise of technology is not the deployment of an arsenal, it's the seamless and apparently effortless ability to recognize, respond and delight.

The Hilton approach: training. No new gizmos, no flying monkeys coming out of the monitor, and nobody blaming service discrepancies on the computer system. It's about training service agents to find the information, deliver the product and fulfill the promise. Burke addresses the turnover issue as a part of that challenge; HHonors members expect (and the program requires) consistency – every location, every visit. Training cannot be viewed as a singular event or an extraordinary opportunity – it must be a standing part of the culture. Even if you are part of an organization blessed with low turnover, there are always changes, infrequently used procedures that need practice and polish, and the opportunity to improve what might currently be working.

Not only does Hilton examine function, but form as well. I call your attention to Burke's phrase "... use the technology... in a genuine way with our guests." Genuine delivery is the difference between the requirement to conduct business and the desire to serve. Here we have a program with 18 million members checking into 2,700 locations around the world, and the goal is not only program compliance but also the warm welcome of recognition that valued guests always look to receive. Lofty goals, these.

I'm sure my take on all this is a little more poetic than the average day at the front desk, but it was refreshing to open a school textbook and discover... well, a textbook example. It restores your faith in higher education... even when it's for me.

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