

An Open Letter to a New Innkeeper

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Congratulations on your new innkeeping adventure! If it's okay, we'd like to share some pieces of advice with you. You may ask "why the heck is a photography company giving advice to new innkeepers?" Well, exactly 20 years ago, we (along with our friend, Carolyn) purchased our "dream inn", The Woolverton Inn in Stockton, New Jersey. Like many new innkeepers, we left our comfortable corporate jobs, and moved—in our case to the Delaware River Valley near the tourist hub of New Hope, Pa. We sold our interest in the inn a mere 5 years later, having driven occupancy from 29% to over 70%, and more than quadrupling our gross revenue. When it was time to sell, we were fortunate to be looking at a nice profit. (OK, enough tooting our own horn!)

Upon leaving the inn in 2004, we started a consulting business to leverage that innkeeping knowledge and success. We soon pivoted to photography services, realizing this was a vital element lacking in most marketing efforts at the time and professional hospitality photography services were quite limited. During the past 12 years, we've worked with hundreds of properties, from new and relatively clueless innkeepers to veteran innkeepers looking for a "business reboot". We hear a lot of stories—about things that worked, and things that didn't. We'd like to share some patterns we've witnessed resulting in either success or failure.

Lifestyle or Profit? Clarify your Intention

By necessity, we ran our inn as a business, not as a lifestyle proposition. Likewise, our photography clients tend to be very serious about the business (hence their investing in professional photography); they rely on this business to produce income. Running a lifestyle business is a viable path, but your intentions should be clear at the outset. If you have fewer than 8 rooms, you may fall into the lifestyle category whether you want to or not.

Your Passion, Your Theme, Your Concept

Let's face it: innkeeping is a tough job. It's much more fun—and has a much better chance of success—if you wrap your personal passions in the inn's concept. If you are enthusiastic about baking, gardening or decor, be sure to make it part of your theme. Having a passion or point of view makes your property stand out, and attracts like-minded guests. Those like-minded guests will return to your property, rave to their friends and share their opinions on TripAdvisor or Google.

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But remember: It's not ALL about you!

Yes, a successful innkeeper expresses his or her passion, but there's a fine line between expressing your passion and assuming all your guests like *exactly* what you like. You may not care for oatmeal for breakfast, but to some, it's heaven in a bowl. You may take only showers, but remember many vacationing folks prefer a big soaking tub. We see this all the time: "I love an early breakfast, so we do breakfast at 7:30!"

Don't Underestimate the Complexity of Your New Venture

A common and disturbing trend we've seen is successful "corporate types" believing that general business experience directly translates into hospitality know-how. Our advice: Go to conferences such as the annual AIHP Conference or at least to your local association meetings. Be proactive and ASK QUESTIONS! Better yet, go to your next conference with a short list of questions to be answered by various colleagues, i.e., what was the best decision you ever made? What was the worst? Did the addition of a soaking tub increase occupancy? How about king size beds? Spend more time listening and less time talking. Be curious. Sadly, we've seen many inns fail, with two brilliant corporate types at the helm, simply because they "did not know what they did not know" and made a series of poor decisions, based on their personal instincts. Solicit guidance from those who KNOW. Honestly, we've seen Madison Avenue marketing executives fail at marketing their tiny inn! So, be humble. You'd be surprised by the openness of other innkeepers.

Way back in 1999 we worked with Inn Partners in the search for our perfect inn. We continued consulting with them as we made major improvements and investments. The guidance they provided was vital to our success and growth. Develop a relationship with an inn consulting outfit early on to avoid the mistakes so many new innkeepers make!

Interior Design is Important

90% of our clients act as their own decorators; sadly only about 10% of those should! It is not fiscally sound to spend money on decor that is not "on point". People expect decor at an inn to be "a cut above", and inspiring. At the very least, consider consulting with a designer to get some sound guidance. Good design creates superior photos, increased appeal, and ultimately, higher bookings! Apologies for the tough love, but hire someone who knows what they are doing.

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A New Car...or A New Website?

Your new \$30,000 car is great....too bad it depreciates the moment you drive it off the lot. That same investment in professional photos, a new website and a marketing program puts money in your pocket the moment it goes live. Your nephew might offer to design a site for free, but we have stacks of emails from innkeepers desperate for professional help once they see the disappointing results from going the “friend or relative route”. Generally speaking, it’s best to hire a professional in the hospitality sector, preferably the small lodging sector. There are exceptions, but for a new innkeeper, it’s best to go with one of the industry experts.

Hospitality-focused, small-lodging website design and marketing companies know how to take a complicated business structure and make it easy to digest. For example, the recently-launched website for L’Auberge Provencale Inn in Virginia ([design by White Stone Marketing](#)) has beautifully streamlined a complicated business that encompasses multiple properties, a high-end restaurant, casual dining options, catering operation and lodging. Hey, those pics ain’t

bad either

King-Size beds: Duh?

Captain Obvious here: If you have the space, even if it’s a tight fit, it ALWAYS makes financial sense to replace a queen bed with a king. Don’t be locked into a queen because the existing bed is pretty or “goes with the set”. Business comes first, and you are losing money. Don’t delay!

Photography is Job #1

If you plan on redoing an inn you’ve just purchased, it is usually a mistake to wait to get professional photos until you’ve completely changed everything. Depending on how bad the current photos are (and chances are they are bad, sorry to say), it’s usually best to make a modest investment with a hospitality photographer (we know some guys) immediately and get a few killer shots to boost your business even before the renovations are completed. Reinvest the revenue generated from the photography investment to begin a cycle of improvement, to finance the other upgrades you envision. Hire a professional photographer who specializes in interiors, gardens and food. We have reshot countless inns after they’d hired a nature or wedding photographer with tragically poor results. Trust us!

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Complacency is the Enemy of Success—Never Stop Improving!

Continually looking for ways to make the guest experience better is a hallmark of all successful inns with whom we have worked. Guests like to see improvements being made and it makes everyone feel part of something special. One of the best ways to get new ideas is to visit other inns, which may be the last thing you want to do when you get away from your own inn, but do it! Stay at properties that inspire you or properties you aspire to emulate, and that means hotels and short term rentals, too. We work with many inns which are “lost in time”, completely unaware of new things happening in hospitality today.

Hospitality is Harder than Marketing

One of the biggest misconceptions we see is the assumption that Marketing is the magic bullet, bringing about total success. Marketing IS important—vital, even—but truly successful innkeepers put as much effort into *hospitality* as they do into marketing. The reason why many innkeepers don't do this is because it is much harder! Great hospitality requires *constant* attention. And worst of all, you can't “farm it out” to an outside company. It's YOU. It's all about creating a culture of “surprise and delight”, i.e. actively looking for ways to delight your guests, and solving problems with grace and positivity. Always. Ongoing. Everyday. In order to do this, it's important to hire staff with a very high “HQ”, or hospitality quotient, a term coined by hospitality genius Danny Meyer. Eventually you may have to replace staff members with a low HQ, as it simply can't be learned. If you as the innkeeper do not have a high HQ, hire people who do...and work more in the background!

Ask and LISTEN, watch and LEARN

At The Woolverton Inn, the most significant question we asked on our survey card was, “What was the single most important thing we could do to make your stay better?” When you ask more open-ended questions, guests tend to ramble and only tell you things you want to hear. When you ask them *specifically* what could be done better, you get actionable answers. Answers to this question guided us on improvements and new developments. It was invaluable information. Take time to talk with guests and get intelligence from them—what they liked, what they've seen elsewhere, why they booked with you, etc. Along these lines, it can be very informing to visit guest rooms while they are being serviced; it is then that you might notice a chair or reading lamp has been moved to a more guest-friendly location, or your collection of sea shells has been moved from the dresser top to allow for their personal belongings, or a spare blanket has been hung over the window to keep out early morning light... It can be very informative about things that might never get mentioned.

*As you embark on this very exciting and very fulfilling adventure, always keep in mind that you are really there to SERVE your guests...and do it in a way that conveys to them that doing this actually **brings you pleasure!** Do that and you can't go wrong.*