

## Think Strawberries – James Lavenson

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The following are excerpts from a speech first delivered as the keynote of the AMERICAN MARKETING ASSOCIATION annual meeting in New York City in 1973. It was published the Saturday Evening Post in 1974, October issue.

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James Lavenson owned a marketing and advertising company before being invited to become a senior management executive with Sonesta International Hotels. He was given responsibility for the company's hotel and food interests and some non hospitality businesses, including the famous Mad Magazine and Hartman Luggage. For the last three years of that period he was president and chief executive officer of the chain's 'flagship', the famous Plaza Hotel in New York City.

Unprofitable in the year before his assumption of the hotel's direction, the Plaza was profitable each year of Lavenson's tenure until it was sold in February 1975 to Western International Hotels.

The Speech:

"Across the street from the Plaza Hotel in New York is a movie theatre, and they were lucky enough to be one of the early ones to get to the movie, 'Jaws' don't know if that happened in Chicago, but in New York it was a complete sell out. I wanted to get to see it.

I bought a ticket and went in, and I couldn't find an empty seat. As a matter of fact, the only thing I did see was one man lying prostrate across five seats. So I went and got the usher and said, 'You get that guy to sit up so I can sit down'. So the usher went down and rapped the man on the feet and said 'Sir, would you mind sitting up so that this man can sit down?' And the most terrible groan came out of this prostate — prostate? — no, prostrate figure. He just went 'Ohhhh.' And they couldn't get him to move, he just groaned.

So finally they got the manager, and the manager came down — shone a flashlight in the man's face and said, 'Sit up. You are occupying five seats. You only paid for one, and this man wants to sit down.' The man went, 'Ohhhhhh.' The manager leaned close to his face and said, 'Sir, how did you get here? Where did you come from?' And he said (in a hoarse voice), 'The balcony'.

Well, that explains how I got in the hotel business, because for ten years I was a corporate director and marketing consultant for Sonesta International Hotels, and I had my office in a little building next door to the hotel, and I went there every day for lunch, and I often stayed overnight, and I became in ten years a professional guest.

I'm sure those hotel men in the audience know that there is no one who knows more about how to run a hotel than a guest. But about five years ago, I fell out of this corporate balcony and had to put my efforts in the restaurants where my mouth had been and into the guest rooms, and night clubs and theatre, into which I had been putting my two cents.

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In my ten years of kibitzing about the way things were run at the Plaza, the only really technical skills that I had developed was removing that little strip of paper without tearing it that says, 'Sanitised for your protection'. When the Plaza Hotel staff learned that I had spent my life as a salesman; that I was not a hotel figure; that I had never been to a hotel school — I wasn't even the son of a waiter — they went into shock.

Paul Sonnebaum who was then president of Sonesta Hotels, didn't help their apprehensions much when he introduced me to my staff with the following explanation:

'The Plaza has been losing money for the past five years and we have had the best management in the business. So we have decided to try the worst'.

I don't know if you have ever heard the definition of the kind of hotel managers there are. If you have ever observed a manager close at hand, you will know there is one who walks through the lobby spotting cigarette butts, and the first time doesn't see them. The second kind of manager walks through, sees the cigarette butts and calls the porter and asks him to pick them up. And then there's the third kind of hotel manager who walks through the lobby, sees a cigarette butt on the carpet and picks it up.

I am the fourth kind. I walk through the lobby and I see a cigarette butt on the carpet, and I pick it up myself, and I smoke it. Well, that was actually all I knew anything about when I became president, and I didn't really know how to start on the job, so I just began wandering around the hotel looking for cigarette butts.

One day early in my career there I got a little idea what I was up against with professional staff when, in walking through the lobby, I heard the phone ring at the bell captain's desk, and no one was answering it. So to give a demonstration to my staff that there was no job too demeaning for me I went over and I picked up the phone and said, 'Bell captain's desk. May I help you?' The voice came on the other end. 'Pass it on, Lavenson's in the Lobby.'

Now frankly I think that the hotel business is one of the most backward in the world. It's an antique. There has been practically no change in the attitude of room clerks at hotels since Joseph and Mary arrived at that inn in Bethlehem and that clerk told them that he'd lost their reservation.

One of the executives in a new organization read a speech I gave about a year after I had been at the Plaza and the speech was called, 'Think Strawberries'. Maybe, he thought it was some magic formula for buying strawberries out of season. Some of you may have seen it since the Saturday Evening Post reproduced it in their October issue. And if you did read it, you know it wasn't about buying strawberries, or even growing strawberries. The speech was about selling strawberries.

At the Plaza Hotel, 'Think Strawberries' has become the code words for salesmanship. Actually, a team approach to what I consider to be the most exciting profession in the world — selling. But hotel salesmanship is salesmanship at its worst. So it is with full knowledge that I was taking the risk of inducing cardiac arrest on the hotel guests if they heard one of our staff say a shocking thing like 'Good morning, Sir or 'Please' or 'Thank you for coming' or 'Please come back' — I decided to try to turn the 1400 Plaza employees into genuine hosts and hostesses who, after all,

had invited guests to our house. Secretly, I knew I didn't mean hosts and hostesses; I meant sales-people. But before the staff was able to recognize my voice over the phone, a few calls to the various departments in the hotel showed me how far I had to go.

'What's the difference between your \$85 suite and your \$125 suite?' I asked the reservationist over the telephone.

The answer — you guessed it. 'Forty dollars.'

'What's the entertainment in your Persian Room tonight?' I asked the bell captain.

'Some singer' was his answer.

'A man, or a woman?', I wanted to know.

'I'm not sure,' he said.

It made me wonder if I'd even be safe going there.

Why was it, I thought, that a staff of a hotel doesn't act like a family of hosts to the guests who have been invited, after all, to stay at their house? And it didn't take long after becoming a member of that family myself to find out one of the basic problems. Our 1400 family members didn't even know each other. With a large staff working over 18 floors, a thousand guest rooms, six restaurants, a nightclub, a theatre, three levels of sub-basement including the kitchen, a carpentry shop, a plumbing shop, an electrical shop, and a full commercial laundry, how would they ever know all the people working there — who were the guests? — who was just a burglar smiling his way through the hotel while he ripped us off?

I can assure you that in the beginning if he smiled and said 'Hello', he was a crook. He certainly wasn't one of us. Even the old time Plaza employees who might recognize a face after a couple of years would have no idea of the name connected to that face. It struck me, that if our people who worked with each other every day couldn't call each other by name, smile at each other's familiar face, say good morning to each other, how on earth could they be expected to say astonishing things like 'Good morning, Mr Jones' to a guest?

A short time after my arrival there, the prestigious Plaza staff were subjected to uncouth blasphemy. The Plaza name tag was born, and it became part of the staffs uniform. And the first name tag appeared on my own lapel, on the lapel of God Himself. And it's been on the lapel of every other staff member ever since. Every one — every one, from dishwasher to general manager at the Plaza Hotel, wears his name in large letters where every other employee, and of course, every guest, can see it.

Believe it or not, Plaza people began saying hello to each other by name when they passed in the hall, or in the offices. At first, of course, our regular guests at the Plaza thought we had lost our cool and we were taking some kind of gigantic convention there. But now the guests are also able to call the bellmen, and the maids, and the room clerks, and the manager, by name. And we began to build an atmosphere of welcome with the most precious commodity in the world — our names — and our guests' names.

A number of years ago I met a man named Dr Earnest Dikter. Maybe you know him. He was the head of a thing called the Institute for Motivational Research. And he loved to talk about service in the restaurants, and the lack of it. He had a theory that I just think is nuts. Dikter believed that when you go into a fine restaurant, you are hungrier for recognition than you are for food.

Now just think about that. It's true. If a maitre d' says to me, 'I have your table ready, Mr Lavenson', I positively float over to my chair. And after a greeting like that, the chef can burn my rare steak for all I care.

When someone calls you by name, and you don't know his or hers, another funny thing happens. A feeling of discomfort comes over you. If he calls you by your name twice, and you know you're not world famous, you have to find out his name. And this phenomenon we saw happening with the Plaza staff name tags. When a guest calls a waiter by name — because it's there to be read — the waiter wants to call the guest by name. Hopefully it will drive the waiter nuts if he doesn't find out the guest's name. The waiter will ask the maitre d'. And if the maitre d' doesn't know, he can see if they know at the front desk.

Why this urgent sense of mission? What makes calling a guest by name so important? I am now about to tell you a secret which is known only in the hotel industry. The secret is calling a guest by name — it is a big payoff — it is called, and you can write this down if you want, a tip.

At first there was resistance, particularly on the part of the executive staff to wearing name tags. I was suspected of being what the old-time hotel managers liked, being incognito when wandering around the hotel. It avoids hearing complaints and, of course, if you don't hear complaints, there are none. Right?

Don't ever — ever — walk up to a guest and ask, 'Is everything all right?' In the first place, he may die of shock before he answers. We only had one staff member at the Plaza, only one out of 1400, who refused to wear a name tag. Not only was it beneath his dignity, but for 16 years he had always worn a little rosebud in his lapel. That was his trademark, he said, and everyone knew him by it. And he said he would resign before he would wear a name tag. His resignation was accepted along with that of the rosebud.

And just between you and me, there were times when I regretted wearing a name tag myself, especially on a Plaza elevator where guests can become a little impatient. You see, the Plaza elevators were built at the same time as the hotel, 1907, and they are hydraulic. They are not electric. And a trip on a Plaza elevator is roughly the equivalent of a commute from Earth to the Moon.

With my name tag on my lapel, all passengers held me personally responsible just as they do the pilot of a plane in a two hour holding pattern over the airport.

I soon learned I couldn't hide, so I took the offensive, and feeling like a perfect idiot I smiled at everybody and said, 'Good Morning' to complete strangers, and this was in New York. Those guests who didn't go into shock smiled back. One man, with whom I had ridden all the way to the 18th floor, really caught the spirit. He answered my 'Good morning', when we got on in the lobby, with a smiling 'Good afternoon' when we reached the top floor.

About 500, almost a third of the staff of the Plaza, are Hispanic. I don't know if you know what that means in Chicago. That means they speak Spanish. That means they understand Spanish. It also means that they don't understand English, and they don't read English. But all our communications to the employees were in English. The employee house magazine, with all those profound management messages, and my picture, were in English.

It seems to me that to say we had a language barrier at the Plaza would be an understatement. Before we could talk about strawberries, we first had to learn Spanish and put our house magazine in both English and Spanish. We started lessons in Spanish for our supervisors, and lessons in English for the staff. It was interesting to me to note that the staff learned English faster than our supervisors learned Spanish. With 1400 staff members all labelled with their name tags, and understanding why in both.

Spanish and English, with all of them saying 'Good morning', and smiling at each other, we were ready to make salespeople out of them.

There was just one more obstacle we had to overcome before we suggested that they start selling: asking for the order. They had no idea what the product was that they were supposed to be selling. Not only didn't they know who was playing in the Persian Room and they didn't know that the Plaza had movies, full-length feature films without commercials, on closed circuit TV in the guest rooms. As a matter of fact, most of them didn't know what a Plaza room looked like unless they happened to be a maid, or a bellman who checked in guests. The reason that registration thought that \$40 was the difference between the two suites was because he had never been in one. Of product knowledge, our future salespeople had none, and we had our work cut out for us.

Today, if you ask a Plaza bellman who is playing in the Persian Room, he will tell you, Jack Jones. He will tell you it's Jack Jones because he has seen Jack Jones and heard Jack Jones, because in the contract of every performer there is a clause requiring that performer to first play to the staff in the Employees' Cafeteria, so that all the staff can see him, hear him and meet him. The Plaza staff now sees the star first, before the guests. And if you ask a room clerk or a telephone operator what is on TV closed circuit movie in the guest rooms, they will tell you because they have seen the movies on the TV sets which run the movie continuously in the Staff Cafeteria.

Today, all the room clerks go through a week of orientation which includes spending a night with their husband, or their wife, or (laughter) — just like a guest. They stay in a room in the Plaza. The orientation week includes a week of touring all the guest rooms, a meal in the restaurants, and the reservation room clerk gets a chance to actually look out the window of the suite and see the difference between an \$85 and a \$125 suite, because the \$125 suite overlooks beautiful Central Park, and the \$85 suite looks up the fanny of the A-Bomb building.

The Plaza had a sales staff of three men, professionals. They were so professional that they never left the hotel. They were good men, but they were really sales servicemen who took orders that came over the transom. Nobody at the Plaza ever left the palace, crossed the moat at Fifth Avenue, and went looking for business. No one was knocking on doors. No one was asking for the order.

The Plaza, as you may know, is a dignified institution. It was so dignified that it was considered demeaning to admit that we needed the business, no matter how much money we were losing. And if you didn't ask us, we wouldn't ask you. So there! We weren't ringing our doorbell or anybody else's. You had to ring ours. And this attitude seemed to be a philosophy shared by the entire organization, a potentially large sales staff of waiters, room clerks, bellmen, cashiers, doormen, maids, about 600 guest-contact employees.

If you wanted a second drink in the Plaza's famous Oak Bar, you got it with a simple technique — tripping the waiter, and then pinning him to the floor. You had to ask him. You'd think, wouldn't you, that it would be easy to change that pattern of Oak Room waiters. After all, they make additional tips on additional drinks. Simple sales training. Right? Right?

I had our general manager for the Oak Room — the maitre d' learn my new policy. It was inspirational. When the guest's glass is down to one-third full, the waiter is to come up to the table and ask the guest if he'd like a second drink. Complicated, but workable. Couldn't miss, I thought.

About a month after establishing this revolutionary policy I joined the general manager in Oak Bar for a drink. I noticed at the next table there were four men all with empty glasses. No waiter was near them. After watching for fifteen minutes my ulcer gave out and I asked the general manager what happened to my second-drink program? And the manager called over the maitre d' and asked what happened to the second-drink program. And the maitre d' called over to the captain, pointed out the other table and said, 'Whatever happened to Lavenson's second drink program?' And the captain called over the waiter, and he broke out into a wreath of smiles as he explained that the men at the next table had already had their second drink.

If you asked for a room reservation at the Plaza it was very simple. You were quoted the minimum rate. If you wanted a suite, you had to ask for it. If once there you wanted to stay at the hotel an extra night, it was simple — beg. You were never invited, and sometimes I think there's simple pact among hotel men, it's actually a secret oath that you swear to when you graduate from hotel school, and it goes like this:

'I promise I will never ask for the order.'

When you are faced with as old and ingrained a tradition as that, halfway counter measures don't work. So we started a program of all our guest contact people, along with all of our salespeople, using a new secret oath — everybody sells. And we meant everybody — maids, cashiers, waiters, bellmen, assistant manager, general manager, and me — everybody!

We talked to the maids about suggesting room service, to the doormen about suggesting our restaurants, not the one at the Pierre, to our cashiers about suggesting return reservations to the parting guests. And we talked to the waiters about strawberries.

Now I don't know how it is in Chicago, but in New York the waiter at the Plaza makes anywhere from \$12,000 to \$20,000 a year. The difference between those figures, of course, is tips. I spent 18 years in the advertising agency business, and I thought I was fast computing 15 per cent. I am a moron compared to a waiter.

Our suggestion for selling strawberries fell on very responsive ears when we described that part of our Everybody Sells Program to the waiters in our Oyster Bar Restaurant. We had a smart controller, and he figured out that if — with just the same number of customers already patronizing the Oyster Bar — the waiters would ask every customer if he'd like the second drink, wine or beer, with his meal, and then dessert — given only one out of four takers — we would increase the Oyster Bar Restaurant sales by \$364,000 a year.

The waiters were well ahead of this lecture. They had already figured out that was \$50,000 more in tips, and since there are 10 waiters in the Oyster Bar, I, with the aid of a pocket calculator, could figure out that that meant five grand more in tips per waiter. And it was at this point that I had my toughest decision to make since I'd been in the job, which was whether to stay on as president, or become a waiter in the Oyster Bar. But while the waiters appreciated this automatic raise in theory, they were very quick to point out the negative: 'Nobody eats dessert any more,' they said, 'everybody is on a diet. If we served our specially, the Plaza chocolate cheesecake to everybody in the restaurant, we'd be out of business because they'd all be dead in a week.' 'So sell them strawberries,' we said, 'but sell them!'

Then we wheeled out our answer to the gasoline shortage. It is called a dessert cart. It has wheels. And we widened the aisles between the table so that the waiters could wheel the cart right up to each table at dessert time without being asked. And not daunted by the diet protestations of the average guest, the waiter goes into raptures about the bowl of fresh strawberries on the top of the cart. There is even a bowl of whipped cream for the slightly wicked. And by the time the waiter finishes extolling the virtues of luscious strawberries, flown in that morning from California or Florida — or wherever he thinks strawberries come from — you, the guest, not only have an abdominal orgasm, but one out of two of you orders them.

We showed the waiters every week what happened with strawberry sales. The month I left the Plaza they doubled again, and so had the sales, incidentally, of second martinis. And believe me, when you have a customer for a second martini, you have a sitting duck for a strawberry sale, and that is with whipped cream. The Plaza waiters now ask for the order. They no longer stare at your waistline and say, 'You don't look like you need dessert'.

'Think Strawberries' is becoming the Plaza's sales password. The reservationist thinks strawberries and suggests that perhaps you would like a suite overlooking Central Park rather than a twin-bedded room. Bellmen are thinking strawberries. Each bellman has return reservation forms with his own name imprinted on them as the addressee, and he asks you, in checking you out and into your cab, can he make a return reservation for you?

The room service operators were thinking strawberries. They ask you if you'd like to watch the closed circuit TV film in your room as long as you're going to be there. No trouble, 'We put three bucks on your bill and you never notice it compared with the price of the sandwich'. Our telephone operators think strawberries. When you leave a wake up call, they suggest a Flying Tray Breakfast sent up to your room. 'You want the light breakfast, no — ham and eggs; how about strawberries?'

We figured we added about 400 salesmen to the three-man sales staff we had before. Additional salesmen, at no extra expense, didn't exactly thrill my Board of Directors. But I will tell you what did tickle their fancy. The Plaza sales volume my last year there went from \$27

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million to a nice round \$30 million. And our controller was seen giggling in his cage where we kept him, since our profits were double the year before.

I'll tell you what pleased me most. The Plaza sold \$250,000 worth of strawberries in the last six months alone - \$250,000 worth of strawberries!

We created the Order of the Strawberry Patch. It's a little strawberry insignia worn on the employee's name tag, and any staff member, except those, naturally, in the Sale Department, who gives the sales manager at the Plaza a lead, just a lead, for rooms, or banquet business, gets to wear the little strawberry patch. He has joined the sales staff. And if that lead is converted into a sale, a savings bond is given to the person who suggested it.

Let me tell you what happened with that strawberry patch program. There's a captain in the Oak Room — his name is Curt, and he likes savings bonds. He also has a wild imagination, and he imagined that if a Plaza salesman would call on his wife's friend's daughter, who was getting married, the wedding could be booked at the Plaza.

Obviously he was insane — the Oak Room captain's wife's friend's daughter, who lived in Brooklyn, with a wedding at the famous Plaza. The Plaza salesman was persuaded to call the lady in Brooklyn. At first he didn't want to go. But he was given a powerful incentive like keeping his job. And, of course, you can guess the result, or, can you? Would you believe a \$12,000 wedding?

And that's not all. Just before I left the Plaza, Curt told me that his wife's friend's daughter had a sister, not yet married.

I believe I mentioned there's a laundry in the Plaza. Thirty ladies work in that laundry, three levels below the street. When they are working, these ladies don't exactly remind you of fashion models. They wear short white socks and sneakers, no make-up, and I suspect, although I have never been able to prove it, that three of them chew tobacco.

You can imagine the skepticism which greeted one of those ladies when she asked if she could earn a strawberry patch for a lead on a luncheon of her church group. How many members? Only 500! At least 500 showed up for lunch at the Plaza dressed to the heavens and paying cash. That laundry lady is papering her walls with savings bonds.

An Oak Room captain, and a laundry lady, like hundreds of other Plaza staff members, they wear the strawberry patch on their name tag.

Everybody sells, and that includes me. I made sales calls with the Plaza salesmen, and I have only one regret. I got so worked up myself over the strawberry program that I was indiscriminate about whom I called on. And one day I called on Western International Hotels, and sold them the whole place.

And lest I forget what I have been preaching. The Plaza staff awarded me this (indicating a strawberry patch on his tee shirt), the biggest strawberry patch of all. They told me if I wore it, I would never go hungry, and they must have been right, because I just had a free lunch."