



# UNIT - 18

## Managing Interdepartmental Communications

### Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Discuss the role of Communication in different hotel departments
- ✓ Explore the role of Total Quality Management in Effective Communication

## Unit 18

### Managing Interdepartmental Communications

The front office plays a crucial part in dispensing hospitality to the visitors. The front office staff also communicate with all other departments of the establishment, including sales and marketing, housekeeping, food and beverages, controller, banqueting, security, maintenance, and human resources. Every department regards the front office as a liaison point for making the best possible service available to the guests. The different departments have a unique communication pipeline with the staff of the front office.

#### Marketing and Sales Department

The Marketing and Sales Division depends on the front office to make **guest history** data available to them, i.e. the specifics regarding the visit of each guest. Partial information is collected based on the postcode, corporate affiliation, visit frequency, special requirements, and room reservations. Additionally, it is the responsibility of the front office to make a good first impression on the visitors, to pass on messages, and to fulfil the requests of guests who use the hotel for seminars, meetings and banquets.

The past history of guests is a vital resource for sales and marketing, as it is used to target marketing campaigns, develop promotions, prepare mailing labels and choose appropriate advertising media. The front office staff must make every effort to keep this database up to date and accurate.

Completion of bookings for special functions (such as conventions, wedding receptions or seminars) is determined by the number of bedrooms available for the guests. The sales and marketing executives need to check room availability three, six, or even twelve months in advance to ensure that the hotel can house the anticipated number of guests. The front office maintains a database of rooms available in the property management system.

The initial contact between the guest and the sales and marketing department normally takes place through the hotel switchboard. A switchboard operator who is capable and friendly as well as properly versed on hotel operations and personnel will make a good first impression. This reassures the potential client that the hotel is competent. When the guests arrive for the function, the front office staff usually make the initial contact. The manager from the front office makes every effort to find out which banquet supervisor is in charge and passes the information to the desk clerk on duty, thus showing that the hotel is fully committed to providing hospitality.

Information for the sales and marketing division has to be delivered accurately, comprehensively and quickly. The switchboard operator supplies the vital link in communication between potential client and the marketing and sales department salesperson. It is the duty of the front office manager to inform all new personnel in the front office about the staff in the Sales and Marketing Division and the duties of each person.

Employees in the front office should practise pronouncing the names of all marketing and sales employees. To ensure that the front office staff are familiar with all of those individuals, managers should show new employees photographs of directors and department supervisors. The front office also normally entertains most of the requests for service at meetings, banquets and seminars. This is because the **banquet manager**, the individual whose job it is to fulfil the details of the banquet or the special event, or the **sales associate**, the employee who books the guests' request for the banquet or other special events, may be engaged in a different function.

Should a guest require an extension cord, or an electrical outlet malfunctions, the staff on the front desk must be prepared to fulfil this need. The manager of the front office should set up standard operating procedures for the front office employees to follow when they contact maintenance, housekeeping, marketing and sales or the food and beverage division to fulfil typical requests. Knowledge about where to locate a toolkit, adhesive materials, adapters, additional table covers, or window cleaning equipment will save time looking for a sales person in charge and will help visitors.

## Housekeeping Department

Housekeeping needs to talk to the front office constantly about **housekeeping room status**, the report related to room availability for immediate visitor occupancy. Housekeeping room status may be detailed in the following conversational terms:

- Available Clean or Ready—the room is ready to be occupied
- Occupied—guest or guests are already occupying a room
- Stay over—guest will not be checking out of a room on the current day
- Dirty or On-Change—guest has checked out of the room, but the housekeeping staff have not released the room for occupancy
- Out-of-Order—room is not available for occupancy because of a mechanical malfunction

Housekeeping also talks to the front office about details regarding potential house count (the report on the number of registered guests on the premises), security, and amenity requests (toiletry items such as toothpaste, shampoo, mouthwash, or electrical equipment for personal use). Such issues are of instant concern to the guest as well as the hotel supervisors.

In hotels not using the Property Management System (PMS), the room status reporting is done on a face-to-face basis. Hourly or bi-hourly visits, made by the housekeeper to the front desk clerk, are a customary occurrence in these hotels. The **housekeeper's room report** is prepared at the end of the day and officially reports the room status. It is prepared by the housekeeper and notes down the room occupancy status as being occupied, vacant, or out-of-order. At times even the systematic updates of room status are inadequate, since guests might be waiting eagerly to occupy a room. In such situations, the front desk clerk will need to telephone the floor supervisor to find out when a room's servicing will be finished.

The housekeeper depends on the **room sales projections** – a report prepared every week and distributed by the manager of the front office, showing the number of departures, arrivals, walk-ins, over-stays, and no-shows – in order to schedule employees. In time, the distribution of projections of room sales helps the executive housekeeper plan for staff members' personal leave and vacation days.

The front office desk also depends on housekeeping workers to inform them of any unusual situations that may suggest a violation of the guests' security. For instance, if a maid or houseman notices unregistered guests, a fire exit forced open, or sounds of a domestic disturbance in a guest room, he or she must bring these potential security violations to the attention of the front office. In turn, the front office staff will contact the proper in-house or civil authority. The front office manager may wish to guide the front desk clerks and switchboard operators to make calls regularly to check activities on the guest floors.

## Food and Beverage Department

It is essential that the front office and the food and beverage department maintain communications. Some of this communication is achieved by relaying messages and delivering precise information on **transfers**, in the manner of forms used to pass information regarding a charge to a guest's account. **Predicted house count**, another communication activity, is the estimated number of guests expected to register determined by using prior occupancy activities, and processing requests for **paid-out** forms, used for recording amounts of monies paid from the cashier's drawer on behalf of a guest or an employee of the establishment. Such vital services help the overworked food and beverage manager, the restaurant manager or the banquet captain to fulfil the guests' demands.

Messages arriving for the food and beverage manager and executive chef from various vendors or other industry representatives are vital to the operation of the food and beverage division. If the switchboard operator is instructed to screen callers (at times when the executive chef cannot be disturbed due to the workload or staff meetings, or for vendors that are of no interest to the chef), only the important messages receive top priority.

In a hotel fitted with point-of-sales terminals, computerised cash registers interfaced with the Property Management System, any data on guest charges are automatically posted on the guest's folio, the record reflecting charges and payments. In hotels that do not have point-of-sales terminals interfacing with the PMS, it becomes the responsibility of the desk clerk to post accurate charges on the guest's folio, and he/she depends on transfer slips. When transfer slips are properly prepared and posted, the night auditor's job is made easier. The front office manager needs to work with the food and beverage director to develop standard operating measures and methods to carry out transfer of charges.

To be able to predict sales and schedule employees, the supervisors in the food and beverage division depend on the predicted house count prepared by the front office manager. For instance, the restaurant supervisor on the breakfast shift will need to know the number of guests to be able to finalise the number of servers that need to be scheduled for breakfast service. Precise and timely preparation of this information tool helps with staffing control and sales predictions.

Sanctioned food and beverage department members will at times ask the front office for cash, in the form of a paid-out, to acquire some last-minute items for a banquet, the lounge or the restaurant, or to utilise other unforeseen opportunities to endorse hospitality. Detailed guidelines regarding cash limits, prior approval, turnaround time, authorised signatures, and the purchase receipts are prepared by the general manager and front office manager. Paid-outs are kept under control with such guidelines.

## Banquet Department

The banquet department, which frequently combines the functions of the marketing and sales division and the food and beverage division, uses the front office to pass information to guests regarding events and bill payment.

The labour required to prepare the **daily announcement board** is also provided by the front desk staff. The board is an internal listing of the hotel's daily events (group, time, room assignment) and marquee (the curbside message board including hotel logo and space for a message). The front office acts as a practical communications centre, as most of the guests at the banquet may not be registered at the hotel.

This daily posting of scheduled events on an electronic bulletin board or a felt board delivers information on group events to all guests and employees. The marquee might include items such as congratulatory and welcome messages, sales promotions, or other vital messages. In some hotels a front office worker might contact the marketing and sales department to collate the messages.

A banquet guest who is unfamiliar with the hotel property may ask the front office for instructions. While this service may appear minor compared to the combined delivery of service, it is vital to the lost or confused visitor. The front office not only has to be able to direct visitors to the specific meeting rooms or reception areas but also has to know which function is being held where. Front office clerks must be ready to offer this information for all departmental activities taking place in the hotel.



Fig: 18.1 The front office serves as a clearing house for communication activities.

The individual responsible for paying the bill for a special event will also end up at the front office to settle the city ledger accounts. If the banquet captain is unable to present the bill for the event, the front office desk clerk must be informed about the details of the food and beverage charges, rental charges, gratuities, payment method, etc.

### Controller

The controller depends on the front office staff to make the daily financial transaction summary available through a well-prepared night audit. The management's ability to meet budget targets is also based on this information. Considering that the front office makes available to the controller the financial data for billing and maintenance of credit-card ledgers, the two departments have to pass payments and charges through a posting machine or property management system.

### Maintenance or Engineering Department

The front office and maintenance, or the Engineering Division, communicate regularly regarding room status and maintenance service requests. Maintenance workers have to know the status of occupancy before scheduling repairs, such as plumbing, air-conditioning, or heating. If the room is booked, a timeframe will be worked out by the two departments to enable the visitor to use the room or transfer to another one. Situations that sometimes appear impossible can be resolved through cooperative efforts. Figure 9.1 shows the vital planning and communication strategy that department managers must follow to make time available for guest services in a way that will not hinder the delivery of hospitality.

Similarly, guests ask the front desk to remedy any problems with the heating, air-conditioning, ventilation, television, plumbing or other room furnishings. These requests are forwarded to the maintenance division. It is the duty of the front desk clerk to keep track of the repair schedule, as guests will want to know when the problem will be resolved.

### Security Department

The exchange of information between the security division and the front office is crucial when providing hospitality to the guest. The two divisions work in close collaboration to maintain guest security. Things such as emergency communication systems, fire safety procedures, and the system of routine investigation of guest security issues necessitate cooperation between these divisions.

### Human Resources Management Department

The Human Resources Management Division also frequently depends on the staff of the front office as the first point of contact for prospective employees of all departments. They might even ask the front office workers to screen prospective candidates. In such cases, training in screening methods must be provided. Some Human Resources Management directors rely on the front office to pass out application forms and other job-related materials to job applicants. The prospective

employee might request directions to the personnel office at the front desk. Guidelines may also be developed by the human resources management division for the front office desk clerk to use for initial screening of candidates. For instance, the guidelines might include things such as personal hygiene, application form completion, educational requirements, citizenship standing, and experience. The Human Resources Management executives can use the information to help them when interviewing prospective candidates.

## The Role of Total Quality Management in Effective Communication

**Total Quality Management (TQM)** is a management technique used by managers to critically review processes employed to deliver products and services. Managers are required to ask front-line employees and supervisors to interrogate every step in the techniques employed to provide hospitality to the guests. Examples would include “why do guests say our table service is rushed?” Managers, along with employees, have to seek answers to such questions.

W. Edwards Deming, a Management Theorist, developed Total Quality Management in the early 1950s. He was determined to provide a new way for American manufacturers to provide better-quality products by reducing defects through worker engagement in the planning process. Initially the American manufacturers were reluctant to adopt the total quality management tool, but Japanese manufacturers embraced its principles of streamlining techniques to manufacture goods such as cars quickly. He supplied managers with flowcharts so that production could be analysed by dividing the manufacturing procedure into individual components and then focusing attention on the portions of the process that yield the final product.

The most critical facet of Total Quality Management, resulting in improved products and services for the guests in the hotel industry, is the interaction taking place between front-line employees and their respective supervisors. The employee interaction in a group and/or one-on-one basis to determine “the root of the problem” and Total Quality Management practices will ensure that the front office checks with housekeeping to determine the availability of a room in a given situation. Essentially, communication between departments is promoted every time a team made up of members of the different divisions meet to analyse a challenge to the delivery of hospitality.

## An Example of Total Quality Management in a Hotel

Total Quality Management might be applied in a hotel as follows: The general manager receives many complaints about the messy appearance of the lobby – furniture and cushions out of place, overflowing ashtrays, wilted flowers, and overflowing rubbish receptacles. The front office manager calls in the Total Quality Management team comprising a front office clerk, a waiter, a maid, a cashier, and the Director of Sales and Marketing. The team discusses how the area might be better maintained. The maid claims that the workers are overburdened and only given 15 minutes to clean the public areas during the day shift. The front office clerk states that while he would like to take some minutes to straighten the furniture and pillows, he does not have permission to leave the front desk unattended. The marketing

and sales director says it is embarrassing when prospective clients entering the hotel are greeted in a messy public area.

When she calls housekeeping to ask them to clean up, she is told, "It's not in the budget to have the lobby cleaned several times a day." All the members of the team realise that the messy lobby gives a bad image of the hotel and the situation needs to be resolved.

The team focuses on each element in the situation. The furniture has wheels for ease of movement when housekeeping is cleaning the area. While the pillows are an additional decoration, they tend to become scattered, creating a messy appearance.

As a joke, the waiter said, "let's sew them to the back and arms of the sofa!"

Perhaps the ashtrays should be removed and replaced with additional receptacles to use as cigarette extinguishers. Might larger waste bins with swinging lids help avoid misplaced garbage?

"The fresh flowers are very nice," one member stated, "but many hotels use silk flowers and plants. This must save money in the long run."

The discussion brings out each person's issues, why the maid can't clean the lobby more often and why the desk clerk can't leave his post to take care of the problem. The comments made by employees regarding appointments and furniture create an environment of understanding. Team members see each other with greater empathy and are not as quick to criticise on various matters. Was the messy lobby issue resolved? Yes, but, more importantly, the members of the team developed a method of looking at the challenge in a more constructive way.

### Further Reading:

- ✓ Michael J. O'Fallon, Denney G. Rutherford (2011), *Hotel Management and Operations*
- ✓ James A. Bardi (2010), *Hotel Front Office Management, 5th Edition*