

## Survival - lessons from the bushmen

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Last month, we visited the second least-populated country in the world - Namibia - and journeyed to the remote north-west of the country to spend time with the bushmen.

Almost 20,000 years ago, their direct ancestors had migrated from what is now Botswana. Today's bushmen maintain the way of life that has served their culture so well for more than a thousand generations.

**In this article, we share some of our learning and how we believe the hotel industry in a time of crisis can learn to survive from one of the oldest, if not the oldest, peoples in the world.**

### The nest

The bushmen's home is an inverted nest - a nest on the ground made of branches and covered in straw. A nest is a place of protection during sleep and a place for the rearing of the young. The men move to live in their wives' villages with their dependant relatives. Neighbouring villagers are related to each other but the genetic dangers of inbreeding are avoided.

If a neighbouring village needs help or a visiting neighbour needs shelter, it is willingly given for sometime, somewhere, the favour will be returned. Camps and people move regularly following the rains and the annual rotation of food sources. There is no chief –all important decisions are made collectively.

A hotel guest room is first and foremost a place for sleep – protected from the outside and with privacy from others. Hoteliers do well to remember that the quality of each core element - the mattress, the sheets, the pillows, the curtains, the soundproofing, and the in-room climate - assists the guest achieve restful sleep. When the hotelier compromises on any of these elements, the quality of sleep is adversely affected and, with it, the sense of renewal that the guest is seeking. Guest satisfaction falls as a result. In a competitive world, if you compromise and your competitor doesn't, you'll fall at this first hurdle.

A guest arriving at a hotel front desk is like a visitor from a neighbouring village – and should be welcomed and made at home. Welcoming attitudes, when displayed by the hotel staff, will be returned by the guest to the long-term benefit of the hotel. We are, after all, from one tribe.

### Water

In developed societies, we have forgotten the life-preserving nature of water. We drink our coffee. We carry around our bottles of branded waters. We forget where the liquid that keeps us alive comes from and we forget its role in maintaining our health and fitness.

Not so the bushmen who will site their huts and villages close to reliable sources of water. These sources may, of course, change as the seasons move from hot and dry through the short rainy season to the long rainy season. Through the actions of the bushman, we saw plenty of evidence that water is available in what appears to be the least hospitable places to those who know what to look for and to those with an ability to dig down to the water table.

Cash is, of course, the water of a business. Without cash, a business can't start or continue. In a separate article in this edition '*Cash is king*', we address some of the key issues in delivering excellent cash management.

But it's worth noting that, while many hotels provide free drinking water in the bedrooms and on the dining room table, this by no means the rule. We returned from Namibia believing that we need to replace the environmentally damaging provision of bottled water with the provision free potable water wherever and whenever the hotel guest wants it.

### **The hunter gatherer**

The main source of protein for the bushmen is nuts. The bushmen (men and women) gather seasonal roots, fruit, nuts and honey – and they share and enjoy the meat and fish that augments their diet that is the result of successfully hunting and fishing.

This approach means that the gathering activities provide a foundation for year round survival with hunted meat and fish supplementing the core diet and directly adding to the communal sense of wellbeing.

Each hotel needs to find demand for accommodation year by year, month by month, week by week, day by day. These sources will be different at different times. The first goal of the sales force must be to sell accommodation to enough separate segments that there is a base of revenue sufficient to breakeven. Survival is assured.

Only with bankable demand at above breakeven levels should the sales force be empowered to aggressively attract demand. And such 'hunted' demand should be enjoyed because it will be directly contributing to the hotel's team's success.

### **Window shopping**

On their daily foraging trips and when hunting, the bushmen range over a wide area outside the village. Each of them notes where plants are growing and bees nesting, so that the wild honey can be harvested and, that when the seasons change, the new roots, fruits and nuts can be harvested efficiently. Using collective and individual memories to access future stores of food is an essential key to ensuring survival.

Every member of a hotel team has a role to play in paying attention to where tomorrow's business will come from. Everyone should be on the look out for new sources of demand and new channels - and everyone needs to have an agreed vehicle for sharing this knowledge so that the sales force can focus specific messages to specific segments at the right time and with the right offer. The sales team cannot and should not act in isolation.

### **Predators**

The bushmen walk through the savannah in single file and they walk looking downwards most of the time. They are looking for the spores and droppings of animals and the direction of trampled grass. By reading the environment, they are interpreting recent activity in the area they are walking through. Although a hunting opportunity may be uncovered, the core reason for such an approach is to pro-actively guard against danger.

Business can be stolen or lost very easily. A wise hotel team pays special attention to the acts of direct and indirect competitors. As we illustrate elsewhere in this newsletter (*Accidents happen - but you shouldn't lose existing customers*), neglect of guests can cause business to drift away but so too can the launch of new and better offers by competitors.

And it's not just customers that can be stolen. Competitive advantage can lie in IT systems, in HR systems, in procurement.

Hotels that are intent on surviving do not allow competitors to poach their business – but hotels that are intent on surviving will be quite comfortable with continually stealing business from competitors. Businesses that intend to survive ensure their competitively strong processes are bolstered.

## **Opportunism**

The bushman will take each and every opportunity that the land offers. As they forage for roots and fruit and nuts, they will stop a while at a bush to feed themselves on the berries that are in season. And the women will feed the baby they are carrying with these berries too. As the bushman is making his way to a known source of wild honey, he will be on the look out for game to hunt. The bushman survives by augmenting a basic diet with opportunistic gains.

A hotel that is intent on surviving will have a team that is highly alert to opportunities to up-sell and cross-sell to existing customers, as well as to converting tentative enquiries into sales, no matter what channel is being used by the customer.

No stone will be left unturned in meeting in-house customers' demands with attractively priced offers.

## **Conclusion**

We hope that these observations on survival can help you refocus your hotel business on those elements that can contribute to long-term survival during such challenging times as those we are living and working through now.

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