

New hotel looks to book added value

In the first month of the University of Tennessee's full-time MBA program, students engaged in an ideation session in collaboration with the Hampton Inn & Suites Downtown. Dr. Kenneth Kahn, associate professor of marketing and co-director of UT's Innovation and Entrepreneurship MBA concentration, asked students to place themselves in the manager's role and identify ways the new hotel could successfully compete in the increasingly competitive market. Students were advised to consider all aspects of the hotel business, including financing,

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Erin Richardson,
general manager, Hampton Inn & Suites Downtown

human resources, management, marketing, operations and strategy.

The company: The Hampton Inn & Suites Downtown is located across from the Convention Center and just minutes from the University of Tennessee, the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame, World's Fair Park and shopping, dining and entertainment. It's a charming, 85-room hotel — big on service and value with complimentary amenities such as parking, wireless high-speed Internet access, hot breakfast buffet, fitness center, indoor pool and business center. Hotel rooms and suites have executive desks, flat-screen TVs, refrigerators, microwaves, coffeemakers and more to make each guest's stay comfortable and convenient.

The approach: Over the course of the session, students engaged in a variety of idea-creating techniques, including brainstorming individually, in pairs and finally as a team of five to six students. This process demonstrated the power of group versus individual creativity. To stretch thinking, students participated in five additional techniques:

■ **Box of materials:** Students looked through a box of newspapers and magazines and discussed ideas and solutions that emerged.

■ **Creative stimuli:** Students were provided adjectives and students thought of solutions that reflected the nature of the given adjectives.



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Desk clerks Andrea Burck, left, and Aurelia Landreat check in guests at the Hampton Inn Downtown. University of Tennessee MBA students did a study to help determine how the new hotel can increase its non-discounted business. One idea was a guest survey to learn ways to "wow" customers with what one student called "customizable customer service."

HAMPTON INN & SUITES DOWNTOWN

Location: 618 W. Main St.

Telephone: 865-522-5400

Website: www.hampton.com

General Manager: Erin Richardson

Director of Sales: Renie Carroll

■ **World leaders exercise:** Students were given names of notable individuals and instructed to write down how that individual would have solved the problem (notable individuals included Genghis Khan, Napoleon Bonaparte, Phillip Fulmer, Pat Summitt, Lance Armstrong, Tiger Woods, Clara Barton and Albert Einstein).

■ **Travel poster:** Students put together a travel poster to a location that everyone would like to travel; students then looked at the poster to see what solutions were suggested.

■ **Who, what, when, why, how:** students identified hotel issues and problems; students then asked who, what, when, why and how and wrote down the answers to these questions and surmised

valuable insights.

The result: Following the ideation sessions, students made team presentations on the one idea that the team deemed most likely to provide the Hampton Inn a competitive advantage. Two executives from the Hampton Inn Downtown — Erin Richardson, general manager, and Renie Carroll, director of sales — attended the presentations to hear the ideas and offer their guidance and feedback.

Although many ideas involved changes to the property that could result in incremental food and beverage revenue for an independent hotel, the Hampton's brand standards prohibit the addition of a bar or restaurant.

"We discussed the importance of our Hampton brand standards and how vital it is to be who we are," Richardson said. "We also encouraged the students to think past ideas revolving around discount programs and to consider creative ideas for new non-discounted-rate business."

Carroll added, "Many of the students revealed a great understanding of the corporate market

and the role customer service plays in gaining and maintaining market share."

Ideas included a survey to be filled out by each guest for the hotel to learn ways to "wow" customers with what one student called "customizable customer service." One group suggested that the hotel partner with local art and sports organizations to bring events into town during the off-season. Another idea involved joint advertising with other businesses such as golf courses to bring new travelers to the area.

The favorite idea came from a group of students who suggested that the hotel put together an "East TN VIP Passport" much like the student's "VOL cards." The goal of this program is to give guests added value from local restaurants and other businesses when they show their Hampton Inn & Suites room key.

"We already have individual coupons for free desserts and discounts," continued Richardson, "but we love the idea of extending our level of citywide participation and making the whole process easier with one simple card."