Client Spotlight: April Weatherly, Director Of Telephony Optimization & Analytics, Red Lion Hotels Corporation (RLHC)

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Contributed by Paula Perrin, Sr. Market Analyst, SHR

How do you see the CRO, Central Reservations Office, today?

I've been managing call centers most of my career, about 20 years. There have been some technological changes, definitely, but the basic goal has not changed, and that's making the reservation while surpassing guest expectations. The bottom line is still the same, too; there is little to no money to be made in the call center as an offering itself. And that means that there's much more to it than just a room full of people answering phones and taking reservations.

So how does managing a CRO work?

There are two sides; outside, from the CRO side, and inside from the hotel side. From the CRO side for us, it's all about transparency. We really need to have a clear idea of the goals and objectives from a guest's point of view. So, the best way we have found to deal with this is to be transparent. For instance, in the booking engine, there are places to upload photos and descriptions. If that feature is not fully used, things are not transparent to the guest or to the agent. Remember, this is your opportunity to showcase the hotel both to the guest and to the CRO agent. Utilizing these features is a great example of being transparent and allowing the guest to see

the hotel through your eyes. As with most things at RLHC, we believe that you're only going to get out of something what you are willing to put in. So, even though we receive several million calls each year, we don't ever see the CRO, or anything else for that matter, as set it and forget it.

What do you feel is the ideal way of managing a CRO?

I really think you have to see the CRO as an extension of your business, because that's really what it is. If you want exceptional performance, your hotel must drive it. We must engage with the guest until they are satisfied. That means from the way we answer the phone all the way to how we end the call. Nothing should happen by accident. The ADR and revenue the CRO drives into our hotels is a direct result of the interactions the agents have with our guests.

What are your main duties and goals in your role with Red Lion?

I have several main areas that I oversee. These are managing our CRO vendors and relationships, managing our telephony structure and how the guests are greeted, data analytics and reporting within the company, plus all our onboarding with hotels in the CRO. My primary focus, though, is improving the guest experience through our CRO channels, and creating new and improved ways of interacting with the guests through our telephony infrastructure.

That's a lot to manage. How does your CRO provider figure into the equation?

I like to keep things simple and direct and not waste anyone's time. I expect a lot from our vendors because I expect a lot from myself and the RLHC team. About five years ago, I successfully managed our onboarding to SHR's system with Sally Ramos, your VP of Implementations and Consortia, and Dan Edmonds, your VP of Client Success and Support. I can tell you right now, you have to have the right people on both sides like I did. It just won't work unless you have a solid partnership, sharp people, and a mutual understanding of expectations. Things are going to happen that you do not plan on, so you need that sense of security that you have the right people on your side.

How do you approach your CRO strategy for Red Lion?

At any given time, I have about 10 strategies in my mind that might change the way we do business both as a company and as an industry, or a calculation to measure our success. For us, first and foremost, it's about improving the guest experience, hands down. Then second, it's about reducing the cost of doing business. In our case, we've grown from 75 to around 1,400 hotels in only four years. So SHR and RLHC have seen a lot of changes and hotel on-boardings together. For me, it comes down to a certain type of personality I prefer to work with to get things done.

What kind of personality do you find most productive?

There seem to be three basic personalities I run into in business. There are embracers who are great listeners and want to hear all your problems. Then there are the logical people who will try to take things in steps and figure it out that way. Then there are the pure problem solvers. Estella Hale, your Chief Product Evangelist, she's a good example of a problem solver. They are my best go-to people because even if they don't fully understand what I need at first, they won't stop working until they deliver the solution. Period. Estella, over the years, has taken the challenges I've posed to her and come up with creative ways to overcome these.

What are your biggest concerns with a CRO?

From our CRS provider's side, it's system uptime, and how long it takes to implement changes in the technology. From the CRO side, it's all about call quality and accuracy. Are the rates on the call correct? Is the info the CRO agent provided accurate? This is why we require a certain percentage of calls to be monitored. We then spend time collaborating to ensure we have a mutual understanding of the call, the delivery, and how we're interacting with the guests. It's really the only way to make sure that the guest is getting the experience they require.

### What are the elements of a successful CRO call?

It may seem amazing, but ideally, we need to achieve each of our key objectives in about five minutes average per call, with the number one goal of booking the reservation while delighting the guest. To get to that goal, you need to understand your guest type: why do your guests call you? Then, you need to guide the guest and the conversation based on their behavior and how they interact with you. Get them

where they need to go by asking the right questions. Don't be afraid to tell them you don't know what they want. Again, it goes back to being transparent. If you can't understand what they are asking, simply be honest and say something like, "I'm having a hard time understanding you. Please tell me what you need." Be real, and treat people with the respect you'd want to be treated with. And of course, don't forget to ask for the reservation!

What do you feel is the bottom line when it comes to choosing a CRO system?

Really, the relationship with your vendor is the most important thing. There's a lot of trust and a lot of money on the table in this relationship which could result in a loss of potential revenue. Ask yourself and answer honestly, who are you trusting to manage your business? If you can say that your CRO partner cares as much about your guests and your business as you do, that's the way to go.

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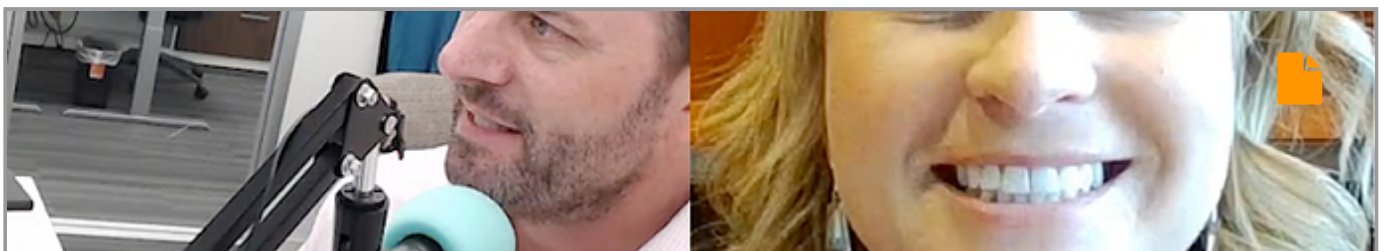
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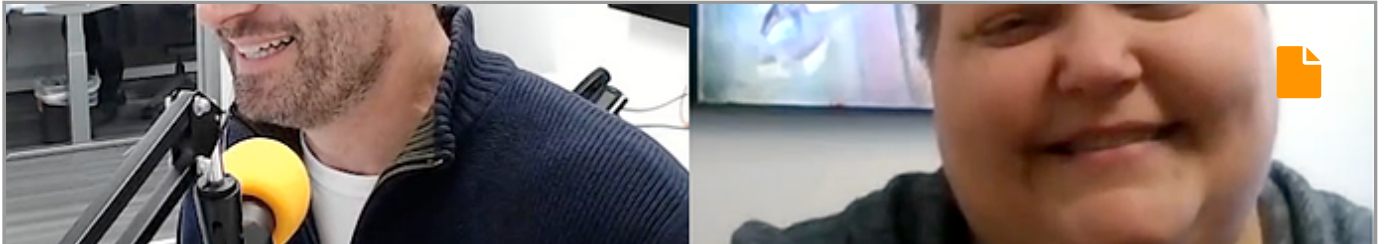
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