What I Learned on My Summer Vacation

By Dr. Richard Kelley

During the past two weeks, my wife Linda and I have been traveling in England and, as usual, I learned a great deal about our industry by experiencing what it is like to be on the customer's side of a hotel's Front Desk.

During my time in the United Kingdom, I sometimes felt I was a character in a lost chapter of Charles Dickens' novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*. The opening line of that classic reads, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness ….”

In England during the past several weeks, it seemed like “the best of times.” The bright red, white and blue colors of the Union Jack were everywhere—on top of buildings, in windows, hanging from street lamps—as the entire nation prepared for celebrations to mark Queen Elizabeth's 60 years on the throne. It is the second Diamond Jubilee in British history. (The first was in 1897 for Queen Victoria.) London streets, parks and public squares were filled with partygoers day and night. In the entertainment district of London, we saw pub patrons spilling out onto the sidewalks and crowding into the streets. Many roads were closed to traffic, creating a nightmare for taxi drivers.

For some terrific photos of the colorful Jubilee events, go to http://tinyurl.com/jubileepix.

While the Jubilee celebrations were in full swing, newspapers, the Internet and television were filled with news of the severe financial crisis looming over the euro zone. Predictions of a banking system collapse, massive inflation and riots in the streets of European cities permeated the media, making it seem like “the worst of times.”

We did not stay in traditional hotels operated by a multi-unit management company. In London, we rented a one-bedroom apartment or “flat,” as the English call it. In the countryside, we stayed at small inns with only a few rooms. Many were quite old.

In those properties, every member of the staff has a number of jobs. The front office staff frequently steps from behind the desk to carry luggage, or moves over to the lounge area to serve coffee or a glass of wine. Everybody pitches in to get housekeeping chores done before new guests arrive. With narrow corridors and no elevators, housekeeping carts are out of the question.

We saw employees who were on duty late in the evening, and then the same people would be back early the next morning serving breakfast.

In one place we stayed, the guest rooms, lobby and dining room were in three separate buildings a block away from each other. Staff members often had to shuttle between buildings for supplies and services, day and night.

In the 1970s, BBC Television produced a sitcom called *Fawlty Towers*, about a fictional British hotel featuring a deranged manager, his bossy wife and a hapless waiter dealing with eccentric, demanding guests. If that was the stereotype of the hotel industry in England then, it has certainly changed, according to Oliver Smith, Online Travel News Editor of *The Telegraph*.

Perhaps as a direct result of the availability of information about hotels large and small through services such as TripAdvisor, in 2012 no one can hide. In fact, TripAdvisor notes, the ratings of Britain's hotels and guesthouses have been steadily rising for several years. They now average 4.09 (out of 5.00), up from a low of 3.48 in 2004. That places them above the global average and higher than the averages for the U.S., Germany, France and Spain.

I am convinced more than ever that the key to making a happy, repeat customer is the brand of hospitality we offer day after day at Outrigger and OHANA hotels. This claim is backed up by the 2012 Certificates of Excellence recently given to 28 of our properties by TripAdvisor for consistently achieving outstanding travel reviews on TripAdvisor.com.

I often say the first five minutes after a guest arrives at a hotel are the “Golden Minutes,” where there is a one-time opportunity to set the tone for the entire stay. If you do a great job during these first moments, you will be forgiven for something less than perfect later on. Screw up early, and it is hard to recover, no matter what you do to please the guest over the next few days.

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Our experience on arrival in London is an excellent example of how crucial the Golden Minutes can be. We had flown overnight from Denver and endured more than an hour in a hot, crowded immigration hall. Then, the airline told us our luggage had gone to Frankfurt, Germany.

On arrival at our apartment, we were pretty tired and discouraged, but the office staff said just the right things to make us feel welcome, special and cared for. Knowing we had flown all night, they had turned our bed covers down, fluffed the pillows, turned on the air conditioning and stocked our kitchenette with coffee, juice and other breakfast essentials. That made all the difference in the world and it will be remembered for a long time to come.

Whether you work at a large hotel, a boutique property or a multidimensional resort, and whether you are in the Bell department, Housekeeping or the Front Desk, you will have similar opportunities to make the most of those Golden Minutes.