

Ep.99 How to Master Real-World Networking

With David Berry

Maria Lloyd

Hello everyone and welcome to the My Local Marketer podcast. I'm Maria and today I'm speaking with David Berry from Holiday Inn, Reading South. David, hello and welcome. How are you?

David Berry

I'm good, thank you. Thanks for having a chat at my second home.

Maria Lloyd

It's beautiful. I mean, we are actually in Holiday Inn, Reading South today and I love these rooms. I mean, behind us at the moment, we've so much artwork of Reading. It's amazing.

David Berry

Yeah, we love working with the local community and we believe it and recruit local people and being born and bred like myself, we love having the photos of new and old Reading around the hotel.

Maria Lloyd

I think it's a great thing. Just before we started, we see some of the challenges that Holiday Inn, Reading South is facing, which aren't uncommon as we said to other challenges that other hospitality I think in particular are facing at the moment. So could you just outline a couple of those?

David Berry

In terms of challenges, there's various different ones like any business, you know, rising costs, simple things like food. You know, if eggs go up 20% for example, you think how many hundreds of thousands of eggs we serve here, breakfast, dinner, that sort of thing. But obviously you can't put your rates up 20% as an example either.

Another great example is the recent summer. We're fortunate here. We've got air con throughout the whole hotel, including all the bedrooms.

So it's really, really good for guests. The electricity bill was interesting, but that's fine. That's why we're here to help and look after people and make them feel home from home.

Maria Lloyd

Well, we said as well before we started about AI and about technology and digital, how people I think, especially since COVID, although it was six years ago now, it feels like people haven't quite got to the stage they were at before then with actually meeting in places. What ways have you tried to overcome that to encourage people into holidaying?

David Berry

For me, it's opening the doors to community. I want people in many ways to forget about the hate on the door and come here because they feel comfortable, happy. They don't have to be staying in the hotel or attending the meeting.

We've got the lounge bar here. We've created lots of fantastic co-working spaces and a local discount card for charities, community groups, SMEs, that sort of thing. And that came from feedback.

When I first joined a couple of years ago, I went out to my network because we discussed networks are so important, both professionally and personally. And I said, what can I do? I'm here.

How can I help after the impact? And a lot of them just said they wanted somewhere to work, what is nice and easy, relaxed and professional.

Maria Lloyd

You came up following that with the RG2 card, haven't you? Which I've got, which is brilliant. Could you say a bit more about the RG2 card?

David Berry

Yeah, certainly. The name comes from the postcode, if anybody didn't realise about that. A simple, straightforward discount card.

There's no upfront costs, contracts, pre-booking required. It's solely for this hotel. So local people what need somewhere to come and work or catch up with colleagues, that sort of thing, can speak to me about getting an RG2 card.

And literally, it gives them discount off food, beverage, or they can come and work here for the day. And it's only £12. And that includes all your parking, your Wi-Fi, and unlimited tea and coffee as well.

Because as we know, parking costs are going up everywhere. So certainly from my network, they like to come here in terms of parking as well. But it's all about flexibility, really.

I think that's key in today's world and in today's challenges is actually going out asking your network, what do you need from me? Rather than me thinking, you need that and then I go away and do it and then nobody uses it because it's a waste of time, money, effort. So it's all about talking and being that open and honest business, really.

Maria Lloyd

Do you have any examples of any business owners who have been using the space?

David Berry

Yeah, and one's actually become a supplier to mine as well. She recently helped me put on our wedding fair. So Emma Reeves events, I connected with Emma, she lives locally, working in the area, we had a chat, she now hosts actually a monthly networking event here as well.

So I've benefited from getting new people through the door and learning about us and that sort of thing. And I like to think she's found a home here as well.

Maria Lloyd

Well, as we said before, connections are so important. Is that why you started to go on LinkedIn and use LinkedIn? Do you actually get anything from that or is it just something to get reach?

David Berry

It's a mixture of both. In today's world, generally speaking, no job is for life. People move around all the time and where technology changes, trying to keep up with people can be tricky.

LinkedIn, almost from my point of view, is like a personal database in your network. So if you've got a challenge, you need help, you need a supplier, it's like your old business card folder, if you like. You've got that.

In terms of why I use it, it's a combination of stuff. Keeping in contact with people, promoting the hotel, but in a very subtle way, how we do it, because it's all about people, in my opinion, and helping people. People put on there for help and support and that sort of thing as well.

Naturally, I'm very fortunate, I have picked up some enquiries from it, but that isn't why I do it.

Maria Lloyd

I think that's a very good way to do it, yes. You can't be putting out the content expecting leads because then if you're expecting leads as the measure of your success, they don't come. It really affects the mindset and it'll stop you doing them.

David Berry

I agree. We all want leads, we all want more business, but that isn't guaranteed. You have to have the stepping stones in place and hopefully the leads is the cherry on the top.

Maria Lloyd

As we said before, you are into a lot of local networks and opportunities like that. Do you have any advice for anyone on how to make the most of networks?

David Berry

Depends on your business. Do your research in the local networking because not every group is suitable for every business or individual. Go along, speak to them, try them.

Many of them do one or two free visits so you get along. It's important you connect with people. What I mean is not going around giving out hundreds of business cards, just having a chat, being yourself.

That's the biggest advice. You've got to be yourself. People steal by people in my opinion, certainly in my industry.

If you're yourself and you start talking to people and that sort of thing, I think that networking event could work for you. You have to keep at it six, 12 months because you have to build that trust. People have to get to know you and so forth.

There's something for everybody and not all of them are paid for either. There are some free ones as well. If anybody's unsure, they're welcome to contact me.

Hey, we'll say LinkedIn as we've just talked about that. Drop me a message and I'll help you out and give a bit of advice and hopefully point you in the right direction.

Maria Lloyd

It's very easy to say this. I know it's hard to do. You can't go into a network thinking you'll measure it by how many leads you get from it.

You just need to meet and regularly meet as many people as possible in the right areas. At some point, opportunities may or may not arise. It could be the form where they know someone, they happen just refer someone to you.

They may actually never do business with you themselves. They may give you a tool that you end up finding really useful. I think measuring the success, quote unquote, and how you use the network is so important.

David Berry

I totally agree and I think if you're true to yourself as well as your business, I think naturally long term, the leads will come. But you've got to be patient. Don't expect it in the first few weeks or even months unless you're extremely, extremely lucky.

You've got to be realistic with these sort of things as well. Not give up. Keep going.

Keep being yourself and take advantage. I've done networking 20 probably odd years, different groups working, different jobs of mine, as I've said. But it's about doing your research first rather than just turning up and expecting it to fall in your lap.

Maria Lloyd

Going from connections to marketing, what have you found has worked marketing wise for Holiday Inn? Even in a tough environment, but your goal is just to get people in here, isn't it?

David Berry

It's about spreading the word. A client said to me the other day, you're sort of the hidden gem of the Thames Valley, which I thought was very sweet because so many people may know us years ago as The Post House back in the day, but we're near the football stadium on the old Basingstoke Road. So we're on a real good traffic area, but so many people drive past and don't necessarily come in or realise how large we are.

So I'm a bit of a nutty scatty person and I thought, let's try some videos. Let's get down with the youngsters, you know. So I had a go, one off take, had a rough idea and it went from there really.

So it's just tying in with either the hotel facilities or like Ascot or Henley or other things going on in the area. So we help promote local area and local events and that sort of thing. And at the same time, having a laugh.

Life's too short. It's so stressful for everybody for various reasons around the world. If I can put a smile on somebody's face because of a video, happy days.

And if I get something from it, it's even better.

Maria Lloyd

It sounds like it's very natural though. It's not as if you have your content calendar and you've planned out and you know all the events coming up and what you're doing. Is it more as you go coming up with ideas or are they planned out and scheduled and you know which videos you're doing coming up?

David Berry

No, they're not planned at all. For me, it's about being natural. So it could be that we're having a chat in an office about an enquiry or event coming out and I say, right guys, let's nip outside.

Five minutes, we do the video. One of the most famous ones, if you like, in terms of getting asked about it is the rowing one in the gym here at the hotel what residents get to use. I said to the guys, let's just have a bit of laugh on the rowing machine.

We promote Henley because we have people stay with us for Henley, for example. And I said, if you feel up to it, you know, you can chuck a bit of water. Well, they all lined up with pint glasses and made the most of it.

So from a sort of team bonding point of view, we all get involved. I may be the one on the camera, but we're all involved behind scenes, having a laugh and learning as well. At the same time, it's completely new in terms of things like Instagram and that sort of thing.

I do the hotel Facebook and Instagram page. I've had to learn about Instagram and stuff like that because it wasn't around when I was younger. So from my point of view, I'm learning all the time too.

Maria Lloyd

What have you learned recently?

David Berry

Reels, about reels. So putting that together is quite interesting as well. Collaborating, adding collaborators, which has been great with the wedding fair and all our lovely new local suppliers and that sort of thing.

So, and that's a real good community what has worked well for us, bringing on lots of new local suppliers for a new market we're now doing at the hotel.

Maria Lloyd

I think collaboration is a really good one because, as you said, with the wedding fair you've recently done with Emma, just by people having to come here for something then puts you because they'll have been in once. They know where you are, they know what you do. So the trick is, I think, getting them here and then educating them while they're here and all the things, the RG2 card, what you can do for them.

So is that what you're looking at now and what other events do you have coming up?

David Berry

I'm looking at lots of different packages. Obviously, Christmas is a big thing at the moment. We've done it a little bit different.

We've still got the joiner and private parties in the evening, but we're doing some different price points because lots of companies now don't necessarily pay towards Christmas. So it has to come out of the individual's pocket. So we've got to make it as value for money as possible with added extras.

So we're doing Christmas family lunches, afternoon teas, we're trialling this year with a Christmas twist. But what we've done for some companies, just to make it a little bit easier for them, because a lot of them will do end of year wrap ups and that sort of thing, we're doing a Christmas themed meeting room package. So they get all the benefits of training, but then they get a Christmas themed lunch included as well.

And also from that point of view, it helps their costs. They're killing two birds with one stone. So they can still celebrate Christmas with their colleagues and give them something back, but tie it in with some training at the same time.

And that came from an idea from a client as well. So I'm always open to ideas. So if any listeners out there got any great ideas, by all means.

Maria Lloyd

I think that's the best way to get ideas is to crowdsource them because then people actually tell you what they want and what they're willing to pay for.

David Berry

Indeed, indeed.

Maria Lloyd

The one thing I've always really liked about the hospitality industry is I think you need a lot of processes. I'm a processes kind of gal. You need a lot of processes in place, surely for things to run, cost efficiency and to run smoothly, especially when you're customer facing, you have to deliver such a service.

So how do you do that at Holiday Inn? What kind of regular training do you provide for staff? Or do you have SOPs or standard operating procedures?

David Berry

That's a blast from the past. Yes, we do have those. But unlike when I started, you could go in a kitchen and make a sandwich or you could work on the restaurant floor.

The staff here have so much training before they even are let loose on the customers, if I can put it that way. Because you are dealing with life and death. If somebody's got a nut allergy, for example, as sadly we've seen in the press over the last few years, it can do some serious damage, if not worse.

So there's so much online training, certification, face to face training and practical training. And that's in every department for different things, you know, housekeeping, chemicals, for example, myself and my team all about GDPR and that sort of stuff. So every department is really, really good.

So the company I work for is Valour Hospitality, because the hotels franchise, and they're fantastic with the amount of training support and ongoing as well, because it's important, not only obviously to keep all the guests safe, but the staff safe and protected as well.

Maria Lloyd

Is there anything from your point of view that you see businesses doing or not doing? Do you have any advice for businesses?

David Berry

For me, a lot of things get over complicated by admin, certainly in my industry. I'm not talking about my company, I'm talking about the industry as a whole. Hospitality, in my opinion, is people looking after people, making sure they're happy, they're safe, they're warm, if they're having something to eat, it's of the highest quality or if they're having a sleep, it's a comfortable bed.

Behind that, there is various admin tasks and that sort of thing, but I think we forget the core purpose. So when I go out and speak to schools or colleges and that sort of thing, it's opening their eyes, it's not hiding behind a laptop and looking at spreadsheets all the time. There are jobs like that in the industry, but there's so much more than that.

You could study to be a painter and decorator and then go work on the cruise ship and do the maintenance, but you wouldn't necessarily think of that as part of a hospitality industry. So it's finding the right roles, the right personalities to fit the right position, really.

Maria Lloyd

I suppose for some people, it is more natural than for other people, some of these forward, front customer facing things.

David Berry

Indeed, and we like to recruit on personality, it's more important. We can train people's systems to use the tool and all that, but you can't train that personality. And I think that's the most important thing.

And we're lucky here at the hotel. We have a lot of local people from South Reading work here. I'm born and bred in Reading myself as well.

And some of the staff have been here many years, and that's quite unusual for a hotel and the industry generally. So I think if you look after your, what we call staff community, they help look after the external community, which is a really cheesy thing to say, but it is true and I do believe it.

Maria Lloyd

You mentioned that you go to talk to schools. What do you go to talk to schools and different groups about?

David Berry

It depends what they want me to. Some of the time it's about my career. Some of it is about the industry at the moment.

Some of it is giving them advice about the industry if they want to move into it. Because historically, in my opinion, in this country, the industry has generally been looked down upon by certain organisations and bits and pieces, whereas in many other countries it's seen as a really strong, good career. And I think the industry, generally speaking, has always been seen for a bit of pocket money or part-time job rather than a serious career.

I've been very lucky in my career and looked after some celebrities and worked in some fantastic venues and that sort of thing and given me great opportunities which I wouldn't have had otherwise in maybe other jobs.

Maria Lloyd

I think you're right. Customer-facing roles, they're so important. They give you so many skills, but they are not treated with the same, I think, respect as some other careers.

David Berry

Totally agree. We've got a great reception team at the hotel and they're the first point of contact, as in seeing people. If they don't nail it, say if I've got a meeting or a show round, that can affect everything else.

So it's that knock-on effect and we're all a team here. You have to be a team. We've got a fantastic leadership team.

We're all on the same page and that makes life a little bit easier as well.

Maria Lloyd

I think hospitality is very focused on the customer, what the customer needs, and the ultimate goal, but that's the same for every business. If you contact one business and they take ages to get back to you, all those little touch points make such a difference and give an impression, even if you don't mean to, to the person who may be wanting to spend money with you.

David Berry

I totally agree and this is where I'm lucky where I work. We have somebody in every position which maybe historically in some hospitality organisations you don't have. So we've got manager Raluca, myself.

We've got in-house reservation teams dealing with reservations on site at the hotel, the events and meetings, coordinators on site at the hotel. So sometimes they're sort of area roles or in a call centre. We have everybody on site because we can make quick decisions then.

If a client is there and they want this, can we do it? Yes, easily. You're not wasting time going up the chain and red tape and politics and that sort of thing.

So this is just how we like to work and it works for us. It doesn't work for everybody, but from our point of view, it's the best for the clients.

Maria Lloyd

Going back to what you were saying about talking to schools, how did you find those opportunities?

David Berry

I got approached from a networking event, funnily enough. So I've done three or four now over the last year and I've even done the primary schools locally. They come on site here, have a look around certain areas, ask some questions, have a glass of squash and off they go again.

It's nice to involve them and they always want food.

Maria Lloyd

Then that goes to show, like you said, you never know what you're going to get from your network. It may not be leads, but opportunities of some sort, you never know what will lead onto what. I was going to ask you about where you get your inspiration for your videos and the collaborations from, but as we've said

before, but just to reiterate, it sounds like it is just the people you speak with and it could be very random, like a team meeting you're having and something randomly just comes out.

So it sounds like it just happens as part of a normal daily process rather than you actually put things in place to go actively looking for inspiration.

David Berry

You're exactly right. It's living in the moment, I suppose you could call it. There's certain things you have to plan and advertise in and all that sort of stuff, but I think what I'm learning all the time on these videos, it has to be natural, it has to be genuine, to be funny and not staged.

So I don't even write out a script. We just go, I have a rough idea in my head and give it a go. 99 times out of 100, it's on the first take as well, which I know I'm very lucky.

I'm probably because I'm a bit scatty and a bit out there, those people who know me, but from my point of view and how relaxed and how I like to do it, that's the best way. In the past, I've tried to write certain things and then perform to it. It just doesn't work for me.

I'm not saying it doesn't work for everybody, but then you feel under pressure in case you forget something or you should have said something before something else. Whereas this way round, it doesn't matter because it's just more of a short, sharp, having a laugh, what's going on.

Maria Lloyd

Well, I suppose we're drawing to a close now. So I just want to say, what are your plans for Holiday Inn Reading South going forwards?

David Berry

We're working on lots of exciting things. So we've touched on, we've just released our wedding brochure, had our first wedding fair. We're going to have a couple more next year.

I'm looking at hopefully doing some school proms, looking at packages for that out there. We're going to continue hosting networking events with our partners here. So everybody's welcome and helping the community.

I just want them to come out and if they need vouchers for fundraising or they want to put on a fundraising event here, I've got 11 function suites here, so I have something to fit them. So yeah, just really continue to support the community however they need it.

Maria Lloyd

Oh, that's lovely. Do you have any final thoughts for our listeners?

David Berry

Be true to yourself when you're dealing with people and network. Be genuine. Be honest as well.

If you need help with a certain thing, ask for it. It's more than likely somebody else in that group has gone through it or know somebody who's gone through it. But yeah, just stick at it.

It can be scary and nervous, but give it a go.

Maria Lloyd

David, thank you so much for your time today. I really enjoyed speaking with you and being here at Holiday Inn Reading South.

David Berry

Pleasure. Always welcome.