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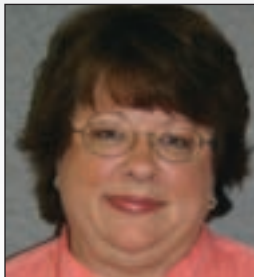
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Barb Kastens  
 Editor

# Cream of the Crop

**T**he last year and a half have not been the easiest of times, even for those of us who are still gainfully employed. We all know someone who has lost a job, closed a store or ceased production of a product line. Companies have changed hands, gone out of business or diversified to stay afloat. If there's one thing a bad economy will do, it's to relentlessly weed out the weak, and even some that are not so weak.

The really good thing that happens in times like these, however, is that the cream tends to rise to the top. Most businesses no longer take their success for granted, as the status quo just doesn't cut it anymore. Many strive to improve, knowing that consumers are being more picky about how and where they spend their dollars.

As an example, I recently booked the Hampton Inn and Suites in Littleton, Colorado for the first night of my latest stay in Denver. I was going to be playing in the WESA Open Golf Tournament, with registration beginning at 7 a.m., and I wanted to be close to the golf course. I had no high expectations going in—it was a chain, after all, and at \$89 a night, how good could it be, right? Wrong. What I found upon checking in pleasantly surprised me.

The front desk staff was top notch. The nicely decorated, clean, two-room suites included a wet bar, microwave, refrigerator, two flat-screen TVs and free internet. The relaxing view overlooked the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. There was a pantry where you could buy everything from a pack of gum to frozen dinners, a spotless business center, a pool and whirlpool, an exercise room and a breakfast room where hot and cold food choices were served each morning. Express check-out, with the bill placed under your door during the night, meant no waiting at the front desk in the morning. It had every guest service a traveler could want, and then some, right down to the warm sugar cookies that had just come out of the oven when I returned from dinner. Upon leaving, I found myself thinking that I would like to stay there again. And believe me, there have been plenty of hotels that I've checked out of with the exact opposite thought in mind.

This was my first stay at a Hampton property, so I had nothing to compare it with, but it struck me that the exceptional experience was no accident given the economy. We all have choices when it comes to what businesses we will patronize.

Think about your store in this way. There are several things you and your staff can do to make customers anticipate their next visit, even as they are walking out the door. Evaluate your store's decor, cleanliness and ambiance. Give customers value in their visit. That doesn't always mean slashing prices to the bone. What extras can you offer that Joe Shmoe up the street is not?

Making it a personal goal to become part of the cream of the crop by increasing the services you offer will surely strengthen your store and help you survive whatever challenges the economy can dish out.

*Barb Kastens*