



Taking Care of Business

First I quickly tried to connect to the internet. To my surprise, it worked. In most small towns in Latin America and certainly in older hotels, it was impossible to connect to the internet with my laptop, but today I was lucky. After I downloaded a large number of e-mails though, I wondered how fortunate I really was. When did I have time to read all this?

However, while the number of e-mails always looked overwhelming at first sight, it usually proved to be not bad at all because a lot of the e-mails were not directed at me. It was a modern business trend for people to copy everyone they could possibly think of, even on the most trivial of e-mails. It was an easy way for people to cover their backs and spread their responsibility around! Now, nobody could blame them in case something went wrong, because everyone had been informed about what they were doing. If no one complained or stopped them, that meant their planned action was automatically supported. In addition, they copied others to ensure that everyone noticed how much work they were doing just in case management considered cutting their position.

I answered the few urgent e-mails, then headed down to the reception area. When I looked for the stairs I noticed there was only one central emergency staircase. This would certainly become a safety issue according to our hotel chain's standards, which prescribed a minimum of two emergency staircases.

The general manager was already waiting for me and provided me with a quick tour of the hotel. The hotel was dated and worn down. Approximately ten percent of the rooms were refurbished; the

rest of them were old and scruffy. The lobby was nicely modernized in art-deco style, but I knew that this partial renovation would not have the expected economic return. In fact, the renovated lobby would *contribute* to increasing guests' dissatisfaction, since it would raise expectations about the quality of the accommodation! Upon arrival, a guest would check into the nice lobby, only to receive an old, rundown room to stay in! Thus the hotel's renovation plan, spread out over a six-year period, was simply not working. Such partial and unsuccessful makeovers happened all the time in hotels, and by the time the renovation of the last room was complete, the first rooms would be worn and the cycle would have to start all over again. So hotel owners would keep pouring money into their hotels, only without ever increasing guest satisfaction or impacting market performance.

During dinner I tried to explain this, but as usual found the owner's mind so set on the renovation plan that it stifled all flexibility and rational decision-making. Before retiring that evening we planned another meeting in the morning with the other hotel partner. There I would try to explain the mistake in their renovation plan once more, most likely to no avail. This hotel would not create a positive guest experience, and so I knew we would not want to incorporate it in our hotel chain's portfolio.

This made me hope that the meeting would be over by lunch so I could explore this nice provincial town during the rest of afternoon and evening. "I should give Mario a call and see if he can show me around," I thought.

Around eleven p.m. I was back in my room. I quickly prepared for bed, but before falling asleep I recalled the events with the old woman earlier in the day and wondered if finding the little piece of paper was just a coincidence. Where was Ayacucho? Would it be close by? Maybe it was a village close to Salta or a meeting place, a bar or someone's name. Without answers, and tired after a long day, I finally fell asleep.

The next morning, before my meeting with the owners, I quickly phoned my teenage friend. To my delight, Mario said he could

meet with me at three that afternoon. He proposed to show me around town and take me out for dinner. I found myself already looking forward to it.

The morning meeting went according to my expectations. I toured the hotel again, now with both owners who proudly explained to me their six-year refurbishing plan. I tried to explain to them how to get a higher return from the dollars they were planning to invest, but to no avail. We went for lunch, got to know each other a little bit and all regretted we could not do business together. By around two o'clock I was back in my room.

Mario was going to pick me up in an hour. That gave me just enough time to change into something more casual and download my e-mail again. In reviewing my messages, one in particular caught my attention. It was about a new hotel project in Peru. No details were provided yet, but I liked the idea of having to visit Peru. I hoped to be able to link a weekend to it and visit Machu Pichu. Old archaeological ruins had always interested me, and I had heard that the unique mountaintop setting of this ancient Incan site was spectacular.

