

Understanding today's customer: Matching our needs with their expectations

Data-driven decision-making works both ways

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Trying to capture what guests are looking for in a hotel stay has always been a challenge for sales teams and revenue managers.

Do location and convenience matter the most? What about brand loyalty and anticipated service levels? Or will the buying decision come down to the best price possible?

In this quest, as we work to drive occupancy and revenues at any given property, we must grasp a profound reality of modern hospitality: While we know much more about customers than ever before, they also know much more than ever about us. The pandemic and its emphasis on “distancing” only helped accelerate a greater reliance on technology that had been progressing for some time.

Transactional habits

Today, within this context, both parties — the guest and hoteliers — are becoming adept at data-driven decision-making. Consider the road-warrior business traveler. Many to most will review offerings, make reservations and check in through their smartphone and a brand loyalty app. Let’s skip any waiting at the front desk; I need efficiency, ease and speed. I will leave as quietly next morning, just email me a copy of the receipt. My expectations are simple: everything in my room and any other guest areas must perform to what I understand as brand standards.

For leisure travelers, their transactions and data review look different. These guests need different options than the single business traveler is looking for in a stay. Think about youth sports teams and their adult chaperones, weddings or family celebrations, and the group business that often can so nicely complement our business occupancy, including shoulder days. These groups generally have more individual needs, whether for suite configurations or adjustments in check-in and check-out times, specific bed types or larger rooms.

Interestingly, the major hotel brands are working aggressively to develop brands that fit distinct demographic and use profiles to ensure the experience is targeted. Of course, the key is to market these brands well to their intended audiences. While we can sometimes wonder about this brand proliferation, rest assured there is a carefully studied method to it. Done well, it should make our revenue-generating tasks easier.

Spending habits

With more information available, hotels are able to market to individuals in new ways, much like the airlines do. This means not just individual property presence on social media and online travel

agency platforms but also serving up customized promotions. It can get complex at times, but today's consumer seems adept at searching out and responding to what is seen as the "best offer."

Data mining and customization, albeit with recognized data privacy protocols and permissions, also offer an opportunity to upsell to customers. Examples include larger rooms or rooms in a better location at the hotel; incentives to extend length of stay; additional for-fee services; offers from local affiliate merchants or attractions; or even making potential guests aware of pet-friendly policies. In this way, we are giving the consumer the decision-making power for what to us are revenue-enhancing strategies, which are extremely important in the drive to enhance revenues.

Most importantly, in what may now seem like a technology-dominated, transactional world, there must still be a place for intuition, understanding and caring about people in fitting with our hospitality traditions. Our challenge is to recognize when high-tech applies, as well as high-touch, and empower our teams to engage and serve customers in the best ways possible.

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