

The High-Tech Effect

Hotels using technology in new ways are driving customer loyalty. Here's how some are doing it.

By Harriet Edleson

The hotel industry has never been known to be tech leaders, but more and more executives are trying to meet than exceed customer tech demands. They realize technology is quickly becoming the point of entry to appeal to guests. But fortunately some hotels are taking the technological leap even further by offering programs and services enabled by technology they hope will differentiate their hotels from the competition.

Independent hotels, hotel groups, and a variety of brands have identified that they need to anticipate guests' preferences in the technology area just as they do for other services. Technology today means Wi-Fi enabled guest rooms as well as plenty of bandwidth so guests can download videos, social media and music as well as access e-mail and attachments. And the problem is compounded because these days multiple guests per room are looking to stay connected.

Starwood's Chief Brand Officer Phil McAveety says understanding the way people work today plays a role in creating public space. "People want to be alone together," he says. "We had to rethink our public space, and create the Link at Sheraton. It's our take on the internet café."

Three and a half to four years ago, Starwood rolled at the Link at Sheraton based on research about what guests want. "Fifty percent of all guests spend time at the Link, more than at the gym or in the restaurant. When they are traveling they feel 'I am getting a sense of the place. I am getting a sense of the people.'"

People are working on weekends, working on the beaches," he says. People want to work in public spaces. "So you have to have Wi-Fi in public spaces. Look around you. This is how people are working. Work, charge, connect. Creating the access ports. You've got to do that."



Aloft hotels, another Starwood Brand, announced in September that it has added software called ICE, Interactive Consumer Experience, tailored for hotel apps, in some hotel lobbies, and plans to roll it out in the entire Aloft group.

"It's an iPad mounted on a stand attached to the table or desk" in the lobby," says Phil Schwartz, chief marketing officer of the Intelity Corporation, which created ICE.

Aloft Tallahassee Downtown, for example, features ICE Lobby software in its lobby, providing guests with digital information about the hotel and the surrounding area.

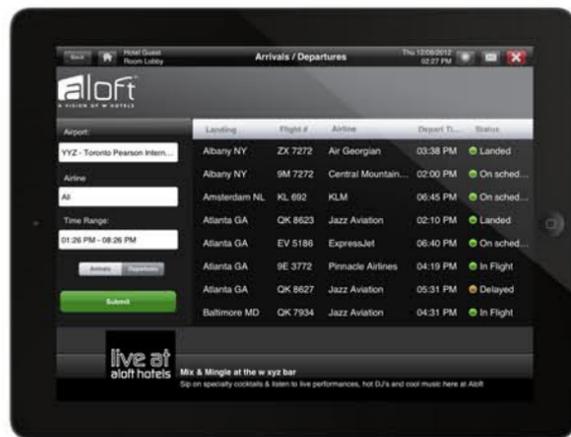
It allows them to look up flight information and print boarding passes, and to arrange for taxi and other services such as maps, directions, and local attractions, restaurants, clubs, and museums. Tristan Dowell, director, brands, Park Hyatt & Andaz at Hyatt Corp., notes that because technology changes so quickly, technology has to be used to achieve goals.

"Technology runs at a rocket pace," he says. "It's not always the right thing for delivering to a customer. I never would say technology is the key. It's a tool to deliver service. Not technology for technology's sake," he says. "We're looking at all the technology that can enhance an experience."

The key is to differentiate a brand, "to stay ahead of the curve with customer service, to have the service element that was different," he says. "Creating customer experience is first." Andaz, a lifestyle boutique brand launched at the end of 2007 in London, features complimentary internet access in the room, free mini bar and juices and free local calls, says Dowell.

The focus at the Andaz brand is to "remove the traditional barriers so customers can engage better with hosts, and deliver a much more personal interactive service," says Dowell. For example, at Andaz at 41st Street in Manhattan a host greets guests who check in via a handheld PC while having wine or coffee in the lounge.

Andaz has six hotels, and expects to expand to nine by the end of the year, says Dowell. Other hotels are making technology available to guests in a different form:



Guests who check into Trump SoHo can rent a limited number of Kindle Touch e-readers pre-loaded with particular magazines and books.

As Wi-Fi continues to be one of the key tech items travelers want, some hotels are offering it as a free perk. An example is the 221-room Hampton Inn & Suites Miami

Brickell-Downtown.

One Fine Stay gives each guest an iPhone for the duration of their stay to make free local calls. In addition, the phone is pre-loaded with One Fine Stay's app that gives information about exploring the surrounding area. The app also can be used as a hotel phone so that guests can call housekeeping or other services with the touch of a button.

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