

COLUMNS

## Can luxury staff redesign customers' digital experiences?

May 10, 2013



By **Carol Banks Setter**

Recent articles have profiled how selective luxury hotels are actively involving staff in redesigning the patron experience. The assumption is that employees know what customers request and can anticipate their needs, creating an improved customer experience.

On the one hand, the trend is admirable since it emanates from staff experience and a desire to please clientele.

On the other hand, suggested enhancements may be compiled from requests that patrons make based upon services they have experienced in other hotels.

In this case, the enhancements may bring the hotel to parity, but may not surpass competitors.

For this type of redesign effort, the challenge will be to consider with employees not only what customers anticipate, but to move additionally into unique differentiations.

With this emphasis on improving the person-to-person experience, it raises the question whether hotels will exert the same passion for redesigning and updating their in-house digital platform to improve customer experience.

While some customers may be at the hotel as a respite from a busy life, others must have online access at all times to transact business optimally.

Enhancing their digital experience at the hotel could positively influence future bookings.

**Ask customers and listen**

Often in making changes, it is assumed others will know the customers' needs, but nothing compares to asking their opinions. The old axiom is true: "You are not your customer." Seek out their observations.

In many cases, customers will answer questions based upon what they have experienced, so it is important to also build what-if scenarios for them to consider. This information can be translated into personas with identified preferences.

As upgrades to the digital platform are planned and executed, customer satisfaction data can be linked to specific personas.

You can use surveys, but informal discussions by staff often provide contextual clues to recommendations. These word-of-mouth insights become great source material for brainstorming sessions.

**Free Wi-Fi access for all patrons**

Many luxury hotels give free Internet access to their loyal customers. However, for others it can be an annoyance charge.

It does not form a great relationship with potential customers who may be annoyed by needing to purchase multiple Internet plans for computers and mobile devices if there is poor cellular reception.

Patrons can find themselves paying for computer access from their rooms and then needing to buy a separate plan for an iPad or phone in the hotel restaurant if mobile service is weak. These additional charges may translate into guests feeling the hotel does not understand their needs.

If you want guests to book meals at your restaurants or use the spa and other upscale services, then give them superior, all-encompassing Wi-Fi access for mobile and Web site access. This will encourage them to sample your offerings and empower them to engage in their typical digital activities.

Invite staff to create digital roadmaps

Just as the staff analyzes each step of the person-to-person customer experience, have them assess where digital might play a bigger role at each touch point.

Is it in an advanced mobile check-in (offered by some hotels) teamed with free digital downloads (to match customers' musical preferences) that are playing as they access their rooms? Is it in providing a digital concierge with links to a booking site for local events?

Track your customers through a variety of typical activities. Assume your clientele might have unique digital needs and identify ways that you can not only meet those needs, but surprise and delight them.

Invite staff and agency to work together in "Tabletop" planning sessions

Digital agencies specialize in developing and making insights actionable. Working together at the "table" with staff, they can pose new ways to enhance digital offerings and drive revenue.

By refining the roadmap together, specific ideas can be designed for each step.

For example, a 360-degree digital video of the gift shop may encourage patrons to venture down to shop for gifts and seasonal specials.

A Flipbook 2.0 magazine that lets anyone author a Flipbook might be easily updated by your hotel staff, highlighting amenities and showcasing local events and spur of the moment ideas.

Wireless re-charging stations, proprietary apps and new generation kiosks all work in harmony to optimize the digital roadmap and reinforce the idea that you value your guests.

Bottom line

By involving both staff and your agency in designing a new digital customer experience, there is an integration of day-to-day input as well as technical expertise in planning a longer-term approach.

And in focusing on a digital roadmap, there are analytics that planners can use to understand what different types of guests desire and use. This provides insight in continuing to upgrade and differentiate a luxury customer experience.

The combination of staff and agency creates a digital think tank resulting in a powerful tool to bring about brand differentiating change. Together they can create the unique brand experience that keeps your hotel top of mind.

*Carol Banks Setter is national director of insights and innovations at **Band Digital**, a Chicago-based ad agency. Reach her at [csetter@banddigital.com](mailto:csetter@banddigital.com).*