

CREATING THE BEST GUEST EXPERIENCE

Hoteliers across the region are working to improve their offerings

All guests in a hotel are unique, with their own sets of desires, whims, likes and dislikes. So tailoring a guest experience is a supremely difficult task. Hoteliers today must juggle the requirements of an increasingly globalised, disparate and demanding customer base, via a mixture of physical assets, food and beverage (F&B) outlets and customer service.

The most obvious starting point for planning guest experiences is the physical structure of a hotel. A delicate negotiation between owners, investors and operators, planning what goes into a hotel requires a balance between what is economical and what is required to attract guests.

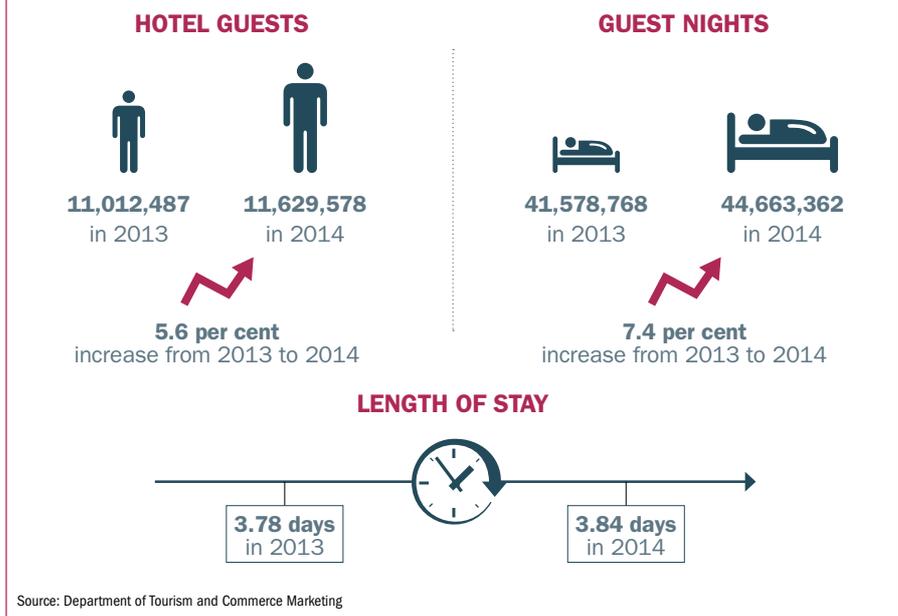
"There's research that's done through the area team prior to building a hotel: looking at how many restaurants to have; how many rooms we should have; what the market segments will be for the hotel; is there a requirement for a big gymnasium in the destination, because there aren't any and we can therefore generate revenue from membership," says Toufic Tamim, vice-president for sales and marketing for the Middle East at Movenpick Hotels & Resorts, a Swiss hotel operator. "These are studies that are done jointly with owners and investment companies, to ensure the product is at its optimum, before it's opened."

Brand standards

Along with financial considerations, operators also have to bear in mind their own brand guidelines, says Pascal Gauvin, chief operating officer for India, the Middle East and Africa at InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG), a British hotel operator. "Revenue and profit is important – it's why our owners and investors are there – but we also have to take into consideration our brand standards," he says. "Our standards are very specific in terms of what you can have, or cannot have. We're not going to overbuild; for example we're not going to build a pool in a Holiday Inn Express [IHG's budget chain]. The brand standards are defined not just because they're what we want, but because guests expect these types of services or amenities in a hotel."

One scenario where this can create problems is when an operator is looking at taking on, or taking over, a pre-built property. In these cases, says Tamim, the brand must consider whether the hotel can fit into its requirements for guest experi-

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Source: Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing

ence. While some flexibility is allowed, there are certain rules that cannot be broken.

"Say the minimum size of a room should be 38 square metres, and this room is 36 square metres, then you're looking at the market: would the market accept that product or not? Would it ultimately fit the brand standards of our company or not? If it doesn't fit, then it wouldn't be a Movenpick hotel, and we won't take it," he says.

"Along the line, we may take on a hotel that has a couple of outlets that need refurbishment to bring them up to brand standards, and that is understood with the owner. Over the coming years, that hotel will undergo refurbishment as per our standards, to reach that level. It need not be done in the first year; it can be done over a

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Simon Casson, Four Seasons

span of four or five years to bring up the hotel, so that we generate enough revenue to do these refurbishments," he adds.

But while hotels may be justifiably strict over the physical requirements for a property, the actual hard product may not be the most important factor in creating a memorable guest experience.

Meeting expectations

"When guests write to me, I can't remember the last time they talked about the marble, or the Murano glass staircase, or the hand-woven carpet," says Simon Casson, general manager of the Four Seasons Resort Dubai at Jumeirah Beach, and regional vice president of Four Seasons. "We've invested hundreds of millions of dollars in developing this individual business, but people don't write about that, and I think it's because they've paid for it. By staying at the Four Seasons they're making a choice to stay at a price point at the top of the market, and so that meets their expectations."

"However, you can't pay for someone to show you a human kindness. You can't pay for someone to anticipate a need and be thoughtful in the way they deliver it. What the guests write about

are the really small touches by the people who make a difference during their stay. They write very vividly about it, and it's always about the people and the experience they created. Of course, for a good hotel you need a good location, good architecture, a good physical product, but everything that's involved in that transition from good to great is human, and experiential."

Operating at the top end of the market, Casson says Four Seasons aims to deliver personalised service to every guest, through high customer service levels and attention to detail.

While this high standard might be desirable for every hotel brand, practical considerations make it harder to deliver across the board – and so operators must work to find other ways to approach service delivery.

Targeting customers

IHG's strategy is rigorous segmentation, says Gauvin. "We know our target customers; we know exactly who they are and what they want, what they expect from us. What is critical is the purpose of the trip – many of our customers are using different brands at different times of their travel. So they could be on business and use the Crowne Plaza brand, and then go on a vacation with their family and use the Holiday Inn, or the InterContinental."

Dubai-based Emaar Hospitality Group, a relative newcomer to the hotel industry, rejects this type of segmentation. Instead it has adopted a "one size fits all" approach for its properties such as The Address hotels, reasoning that a guest may take on multiple roles during the course of a stay. "We don't put our consumers and guests in a box," says Philippe Zuber, chief operating officer of Emaar Hospitality. "You don't select your hotel because you have a meeting; you select your hotel because it's a destination. You will do a meeting for six hours, and afterwards you will enjoy the pool and a great restaurant within your own hotel. You want to be where the activity is; you want to be part of the story."

Zuber goes so far as to reject the concept of following fashion altogether. "I think the trend is that people are tired of trends," he says. Of particular concern to him is the growing obsession with technology in hotel rooms.

"Guests want to have a guarantee of the basics in any hotel, but many of the big companies still don't do the basics right. They want to provide technology when the consumer doesn't want technology in the rooms. All of our studies show customers hate electronic curtains, for example. They might be good for your home, if you know the system and how it works, but not in hotels."

While gimmicky technology is out for Emaar, the company is investing in upgrading its wi-fi infra-

CASE STUDY: DEVELOPING A FIVE-STAR PROPERTY

Simon Casson explains the process behind launching a new Four Seasons hotel

Developing a new hotel can take anywhere from four to 15 years. First, we look for a suitable owner to be a business partner who shares our values. Our contracts are generational – often they're 50, 60, 90 years – so they outlive the people who have signed those business deals.

■ Choosing a site – we could have been in Dubai a long time ago, but we wanted to wait for a site on Jumeirah Beach.

■ Agreements – letters of intent are signed, as well as a management agreement. This is several hundreds of pages, and very detailed. We work with the owner to agree on an architect, designers and consultants for the property, for interiors, restaurants, spas, gardens, music, lighting, etc.

■ Design and development – Four Seasons works with the owner to agree the final designs for the property.

■ Construction – early on, a model room is built, to give an idea of how it will look, then this is tweaked and developed.

Staff housing is also under construction;

in Dubai the 200-bedroom hotel requires a 400-bedroom staff facility.

■ Management team – a year before opening, the general manager is appointed to set up the operational side of the property. He establishes the legal entity and bank accounts, rents temporary offices and hires the senior management team.

■ Procurement – the general manager leads the purchasing of cutlery, crockery, tablecloths, bed linen, etc. Staff uniforms are designed and produced.

■ Recruitment – the management team travels the world to recruit hotel staff. This is done directly, not via agencies.

■ Training – staff arrive and are indoctrinated with Four Seasons brand requirements, operating procedures, etc.

■ Food and beverage – restaurant concepts are developed, menus created and finalised.

■ Opening day – the property opens to guests.

Simon Casson is general manager of the Four Seasons Resort Dubai at Jumeirah Beach, which opened in November.

structure to improve the bandwidth available to guests. The growing use of connected devices is a trend observed by most hotel operators, with many moving to allow services such as online check-in and check-out, and the ability to lodge a query or complaint electronically while staying at a hotel, instead of picking up the phone.

Another general trend Emaar is embracing is the growth in entry-level hotels. Following the success of brands such as Ibis, Premier Inn and IHG's Holiday Inn Express in Dubai, Emaar has announced the launch of Rove, a budget hotel offering in the \$100-150 a night range. Zuber believes this category can offer a guest experience that is largely overlooked, combining a better value offering with a strong lifestyle component.

"Most people don't want to sit in an entry-level hotel, because they don't feel any lifestyle element," he says. "We're focusing on design that people will like, and on bringing enough activa-

tions towards the residential area to make people feel proud, want to have a coffee, want to have a meeting, happy to have their friends pick them up from the hotel – which is not often the case when people are staying in a value proposition hotel."

Small touches

Away from the big trends, brands across the region are working to improve the little things in their properties. Across many of its hotels, IHG has increased the height of its wardrobes, to allow guests in local dress to hang a full-length dishdasha. In Four Seasons hotels, the company recently moved the mini bars from floor to eye level. Casson says he is unsure why anyone once thought it was a good idea to force guests to get on their hands and knees.

"We're also looking at the public areas of hotels, to make them more liveable," he adds. "We'll not do business centres so much in hotels any more. There used to be a business centre because you had to plug your laptop in to a connection, needed to print and so on. Today, guests want much more of a living room experience where they can do their work anywhere; they want comfortable spots around the hotel to work. Those are all design things we're looking at to make the hotels relevant to today's guests' expectations." 

Eliot Beer

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