

BRANDS DELIVERED THROUGH PEOPLE

Maintaining a distinct identity is essential in a crowded market

Building an effective identity is a basic, vital element for any business, but in the hospitality sector companies live or die by their brands' abilities to capture and retain guests' attention. Developing an effective brand is not only vital for hotel operators; it is also far more challenging than in many other industries.

While companies in other sectors may need to do as little as ensure their logos, websites and advertising are aligned, a hotel conveys its brand through hundreds of different touchpoints. Many of these are items such as information cards, toiletries and check-in areas, but the most important touchpoints are human, in the form of client-facing staff.

Service industry

"When you talk about the brand, in hospitality the brand is delivered through people," says Pascal Gauvin, chief operating officer for India, the Middle East and Africa at InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG), a British hotel operator. "It's not only the buildings and facilities; the service industry is about people, and it's our employees who bring the brand to life. It's the experience our customers have with our brand that we're obsessed with."

Simon Casson, general manager of the recently opened Four Seasons Resort Dubai at Jumeirah Beach, agrees: "Particularly at the luxury end of hotel keeping, you're not selling a commodity such as a watch or a car or something of that nature. In the hotel business you're really selling an experience, and experiences are delivered by human beings."

Having a brand so dependent on people creates an interesting challenge for hoteliers, in that they rely almost wholly on their lowest-level staff to express a property's brand values. Casson says that, as general manager, his power to influence a guest's stay is minimal compared to that of the hotel's waiters and housekeeping staff.

While this makes delivering a brand identity much more complex, it also presents a significant opportunity, says Gaurav Sinha, founder and CEO of Insignia, a Dubai-based hospitality marketing firm. "I believe that in hospitality, like in most other businesses, great human values create great business values. So we need to go back to basics, and make sure people in power on the front line are actually the ones you focus



❖ Oman: Boutique hotel operator Alila has worked hard to incorporate the destination into the details

on, not just the bottom line in regards to making money," he says. "I think customers travelling to a new destination want the story; they want something culturally authentic that is rooted in human values."

According to Sinha, the key for hotels is to identify the "enduring essence" of their brands, and to build on that. For luxury brands in particular, he suggests this is very much an introspective task, and not necessarily an exercise in differentiation.

"When you're making people fall in love with places or hotels, I don't believe there is such a

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Simon Casson, Four Seasons Resort Dubai

thing as a unique selling proposition (USP). USPs are comparative – they're very good when you're selling cars and cereal boxes, but when it comes to defining the enduring essence of a place, usually luxury is superlative. It's unapologetically saying 'this is who I am'; it's not necessarily saying 'this is who I am compared with somebody else'," says Sinha.

Staff interaction

For Movenpick Hotels & Resorts, this enduring essence is "natural enjoyment" – making sure a guest feels comfortable, relaxed and pleasantly surprised at his stay in a Movenpick hotel. And while much of this depends on specific guest experience strategies, all the staff training programmes and operating procedures are built on this brand foundation, says Toufic Tamim, vice-president for sales and marketing for the Middle East at the Swiss hotel chain.

"It is the way our employees are able to interact with that guest, and convey the brand promise to

that guest: making sure the guest feels happy in our hotel, making him feel he'd like to recommend that hotel or that chain to other people, or come back again," he says.

Although the hotel and its staff still play the biggest role in delivering the brand identity, the rise of the internet and online bookings mean a brand must start much earlier and finish much later in the "experience cycle" if it wishes to monitor and maintain control of its reputation, says Tamim.

"Conveying the brand starts far before the guest checks in at the hotel," he adds. "Up until about 10 or 15 years ago, the team at a hotel would be focused on the guest's stay from the moment he checks in to the moment he checks out. Fortunately or unfortunately, today that scope has expanded much further; we are focused on the guest the moment he starts thinking of travelling.

"So, therefore, we need to be on his radar, in the scope of Google or other search engines, to offer something when he is beginning to plan his travel. And it lasts way longer than checking out; we need to make sure the online reviews are there, that we follow what is being said, that we are monitoring social media, because this is what the guest is telling us after he checks out."

Marketing strategy

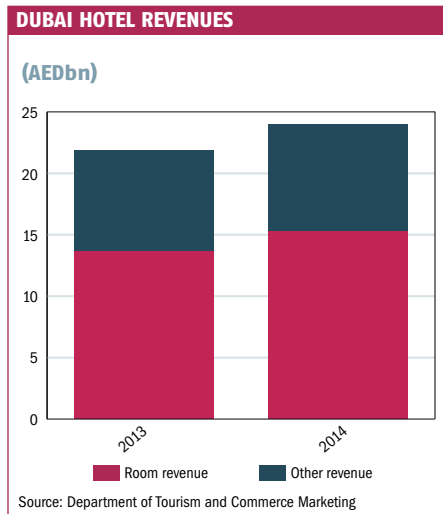
Given the increasingly difficult fight to compete for the attention of potential guests, particularly in saturated regional markets such as Dubai, hotels face a temptation to go after any and all business they can capture. Sinha believes this is a mistake, and will only make it harder for hotels to maintain their brand integrity. But he says it is possible to be flexible and still remain true to a brand.

"If you try to be everything to everybody, there's a threat you can be nothing to anybody. But, if you are astute and well-articulated with your brand marketing strategy, then you can be different things to different people," he says.

"It comes down to having a very clear understanding of your segmentation, of your overall positioning against the concept, and then looking at your key markets and looking at those various touchpoints, which allows you to be pure, yet relevant to different segments, without having a one-size-fits-all strategy."

For operators such as IHG, which has nine brands covering segments from entry-level budget travel to five-star luxury, brand differentiation is at the core of its business strategy. IHG aims to attract very specific market segments to each brand.

"If you come to a Holiday Inn in the Middle East, you will arrive on the curb of the hotel; you



will see a nice entrance, a bench, green plants, a door that opens automatically. You will be welcomed, assisted with your luggage, but not over the top. You'll make your way to the reception, and the employees will be very friendly, a lot of energy. There will be particular music, a special scent in the lobby, which happens in every Holiday Inn," says Gauvin.

"If you do the same walk in an InterContinental, in Dubai Festival City for example, or in Riyadh or Jeddah, the curb will be a bit longer and more dramatic, especially at night; there will be lighting, maybe a fountain, a bit more sophisticated. When you enter, right away porters are with you, helping you with your luggage, calling you by your name. Doormen are there to open the door, to assist you all the way to reception. You are escorted, and you feel like you're entering a luxury brand."

These experiences should be the same around the world, with IHG placing enormous emphasis on maintaining brand consistency across its properties. Even with its entry-level brand, Holiday Inn Express, key features such as room size and fixtures remain consistent across the globe, although certain elements such as public areas and food and beverage outlets may be tweaked for regional properties.

The only IHG brand that sees significant differentiation across its various properties is Hotel

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Indigo. The boutique brand's first offering in the region will open next year, in Riyadh's King Abdullah Financial District, with a Dubai property to follow in 2017. The strategy, says Gauvin, is to create unique properties based around the 'story' of the neighbourhood. The theme of the Riyadh hotel is built around mathematics, to tie in with the financial district.

Global boutique brands such as Hotel Indigo must engage in a delicate balancing act between local flavour and global consistency. Doris Goh, vice-president for sales and marketing at Alila, the Singapore-based boutique hotel operator that recently opened its five-star Alila Jabal Akhdar resort high in Oman's Hajar mountains, says her firm faces a similar challenge.

"Any international hotel brand coming into the region may have to communicate its brand essence to its specific audience, but it need not change what the brand stands for. For brand Alila, our strength is in respecting cultural sensitivities while drawing on the destination attractions to showcase local destination experiences to our clientele," she says.

"However, we've worked to incorporate the destination into the details. Just one example is the soap, designed specifically for Alila Jabal Akhdar; it uses roses, for which the region is famous, yet it still carries the distinct black and white Spa Alila packaging."

Mixed-use properties

Along with the small details and staff training, a hotel can express its brand at the level of the whole property as well. Dubai-based Emaar Hospitality's The Address carries the motto 'where life happens'. According to Philippe Zuber, chief operating officer of Emaar Hospitality, its properties are structured with a mixture of permanent residences and regular hotel rooms to make the motto more real.

"The mixed-use component: I'm insisting on that," says Zuber. "When you have a residence component within a hotel, you create life all year round. And, more than ever, the people travelling in Dubai, especially from the GCC market, want an animated lobby and life, because the hotel consistently has a great vibe. You go to the pool and there's always people there, because you don't just have the hotel guests; you have residents who are making a life, inviting friends, going to the restaurant and spa."

In a region crowded with hotels, operators must make sure their properties maintain high and distinctive brand standards. This will ensure guests are attracted in the first place, give positive recommendations to friends and online, and keep coming back for more. 📌

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