

today's hotelier

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FEATURE

Finding uses for
blockchain technology
in the hotel industry

PERSPECTIVES

How to avoid hotel
tech disasters



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EXCLUSIVE INSIGHTS

from Lynn Minges, President & CEO,
North Carolina Restaurant &
Lodging Association

FOOD & BEVERAGE

From hotel rooms to
dining rooms: Exploring
tech and personalization
in hotel F&B

STRATEGY

Five ways hospitality
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The tools for success

JAGRUTI PANWALA
AAHOA Chairwoman (2019-2020)

I CAN SAY WITH CONFIDENCE AND certainty that an AAHOA membership is unlike any other. During the many years I have been a member, I have witnessed the association open doors and expand opportunities for so many hoteliers, both new and experienced. This membership gives each and every one of us tools and resources that help our businesses succeed, but the success of AAHOA itself is totally dependent on us taking full advantage of these benefits. Active participation allows AAHOA to gauge the needs of members to determine what initiatives and benefits are most important to the entire association moving forward.

With over 200 events each year, AAHOA makes it easier than ever for members to get involved. At many of these events, such as Regionals, AAHOA offers relevant education sessions that help hoteliers navigate new industry trends, learn best practices, and get tips on business development. Members can even access education sessions digitally through the online AAHOA HOTEL OWNERS ACADEMY™ where all AAHOA webinars are housed for use at any time. AAHOA's education team relies on member engagement to tailor education sessions and webinars to the needs of members, making them as helpful and informative as possible.

AAHOA's efforts on human trafficking awareness, for example, is one of the most important education initiatives to the entire association. In partnership with leading prevention groups, Businesses Ending Slavery and Trafficking (BEST) and Polaris, AAHOA Members have access to free, comprehensive training on human trafficking awareness. Sadly, human traffickers take advantage of the privacy inherent in hotels to exploit their victims, but all hotel owners have the power to make a difference by getting trained and requiring

staff to do so as well. This step equips trainees with the ability to spot trafficking situations and learn how to respond appropriately. Every participating hotelier brings our industry and American communities across the country one step closer to being rid of the criminal acts of traffickers. Every member of AAHOA's Board of Directors has been trained and challenges hotel workers to do the same.

In addition to educational opportunities, it's essential for AAHOA Members to engage with their elected officials on both the state and federal levels. To do this, all members can attend their state's lobby day and both of AAHOA's annual advocacy events in Washington, the Legislative Action Summit and the Spring National Advocacy Conference. Hoteliers are invaluable advocates for the entire hotel industry, and lawmakers can utilize this important perspective to understand the effects of certain policies on small business owners in their districts and states. Members who attend these events form relationships with legislators at the highest levels of government who become key allies on our legislative efforts. And to make sure that pro-business officials make it into office, AAHOA Members can contribute to AAHOA PAC, which supports candidates with a proven track record of advancing our initiatives.

Opportunities for members to engage in the association are not limited to education or advocacy, but these are great ways to get started. Members should also take advantage of brand development days, various certification and training workshops listed on aahoa.com, and AAHOA's annual convention, which boosts the industry's largest trade show. Being an active participant allows AAHOA to serve us and our businesses in the best way possible, and since this year is AAHOA's 30th anniversary, it's the perfect time to get involved. ■

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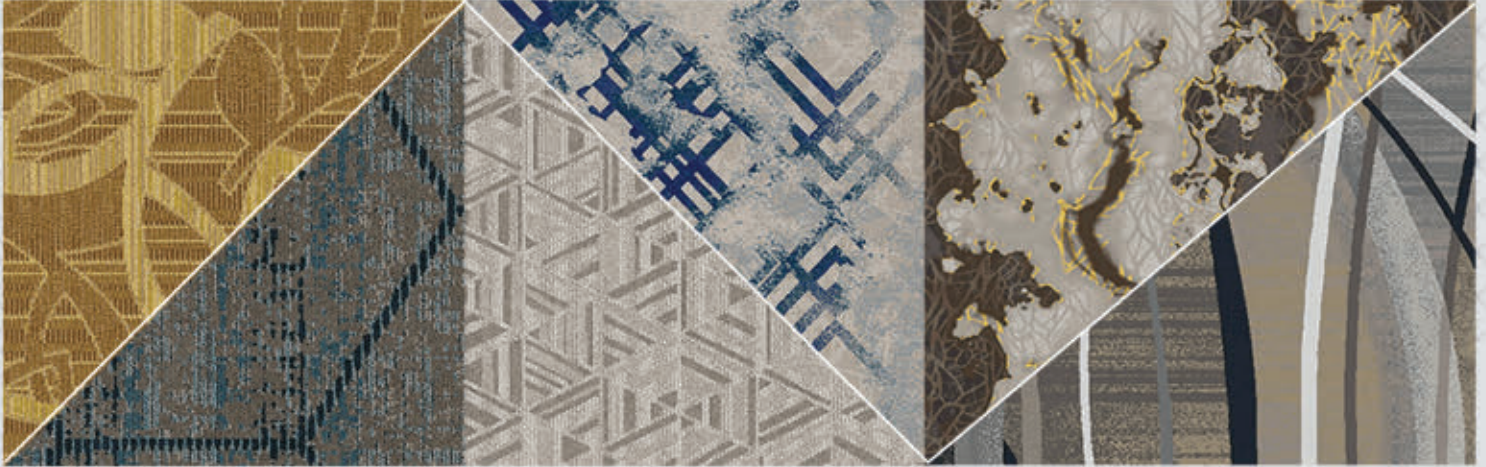
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Look before you leap

RACHEL HUMPHREY
AAHOA Interim President & CEO

INCORPORATING NEW TECHNOLOGY is a great way to make hotel stays easier for guests. From mobile room keys to WiFi equipped workspaces, guests have more freedom to tailor their stay to their personal needs. The benefits of tech are numerous, but it's important to remember that no matter how advanced it becomes, technology can never replace the need for traditional hospitality services or guest expectations.

One key example is remote check-in options. Several brands have recently started to implement room check-ins through guests' mobile phones to expedite the front desk process. This is an impressive innovation that undoubtedly adds another convenience for guests, but it also can detract from the traditional travel experience that many hotel guests still value as an important part of their trip. A welcoming smile at the front desk is one of the first interactions that travelers have when they arrive at their destination and guests often rely on these staff members to learn more about the local area. Warm greetings from a local can make a guest's stay start out on a high and consumers will remember that the next time they go to book again.

New technology doesn't always result in staff no longer being responsible for a certain task, either. When any new feature, such as room service via robot, is integrated into a property, there is always staff behind the scenes who are in charge of making sure it is performing correctly. For this reason, it's imperative that staff are appropriately trained in how the service functions. But when tech features are implemented too quickly, comprehensive training is at risk. The guest experience can be jeopardized if onsite technology

isn't operational and guest satisfaction with hotel staff could suffer. It's important to give staff appropriate time to get used to one new feature before introducing another. A longer training period allows staff to get accustomed to the new technology, leading to a smoother transition that reflects positively on the property and the entire brand.

Aside from staff concerns, cost is another factor that should be taken into account. For brands, it makes sense to put a heavy focus on innovation. Unique tech features can set one brand apart from another, but too much innovation too fast can take a financial toll on hoteliers. Technology is changing so fast that, for many hotel owners, it's impossible to keep up. As soon as the next innovation is out, two or three more are following right behind. This makes it increasingly difficult for hoteliers to afford these changes. While technology is a great tool for brands and hoteliers alike, it's important for brands to not jump too quickly. Giving hoteliers time to acclimate to new costs will make sure that other aspects of the property, like maintenance needs or new hires, aren't put on hold in order to finance new features.

In the hotel industry, reputation is everything. That's why it's important to see technology as the assistant it is without sacrificing traditional hotel services. Finding spots where tech can help streamline services and give guests more control over their stay can create a better guest experience, but this is only possible if each new change is implemented with time and care. Remember, technology trends are changing constantly, but good, old-fashioned customer service never goes out of style and should never be a casualty in the race for the newest features. ■

5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT AAHOA THIS MONTH

1

AAHOA Chairwoman Jagruti Panwala will appear on the "Franchising: The Growth Engine for the Industry" panel at the 41st Annual NYU Hospitality Industry Investment Conference on June 2 in New York City.

2

AAHOA Chairwoman Jagruti Panwala and Immediate Past Chairman Hitesh (HP) Patel will speak on the "Fireside Chat: View from the Top" session during HITEC on June 17.

3

AAHOA has partnered with Hyatt to offer the "AAHOA Women & Young Professional Hoteliers Development Day at Hyatt" on June 28. Seating is limited to the first 25 registrants.

4

AAHOA Washington D.C. Area Regional Director Sandip Patel will kick off the post-Convention Regional Conference season with his event in Baltimore on June 18.

5

AAHOA Gulf Regional Director Nick Zaver will host his first Regional Conferences in Lake Charles, LA, on June 13 and Jackson, MS, on June 25.

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The shape of things to come

by TONI-ANNE BARRY



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SHAPING THE FUTURE OF America isn't an easy task. Everyone living in a America in 2020 will have the once in a decade opportunity to play a role in doing just that, and the participation of each individual is equally invaluable. In mid-March of 2020 the U.S. Census Bureau will begin gathering data for the 2020 Census by giving all households the opportunity to submit their census questionnaires online, by mail, or by phone. Unfortunately, not all U.S. residents see the impact that census data can have on their community and instead ignore the census form. In reality, each response directly contributes to the development and representation of their local area.

Data gathered from the census will be first and foremost used to determine how much federal aid or grants a community is eligible for. This helps the construction of new schools, hospitals, roads, and housing. These community improvements may lead to other long-term benefits such as the creation of jobs and new opportunities for community members. But that's not all—a state's representation in Congress is also dependent on this data. A complete population count means that a state will be apportioned the correct number of

Congressional seats to represent its residents in Washington, D.C.

It's clear that every U.S. resident is personally impacted by an accurate census, but census data can offer small business owners in particular some benefits that are unique to them. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, an accurate census can impact future business strategies and informs business decisions. Census data helps business owners, and hoteliers specifically, identify optimal locations for expansion projects. They can see what geographies have emerging markets, where there is a solid consumer base, and concentrations of populations of job seekers. Analyzing the data on population and household income can even help employers develop competitive pricing and wages. This is an opportunity that hoteliers can't afford to pass up so now is the time to personally commit to responding to the 2020 Census and encourage others to do so as well.

It's also important to note that certain subsets of the American population, such as Asian Americans, are actually much less likely to participate in the census than other ethnic groups because of unfamiliarity with the effort. This means that, in 2020, Asian Americans are at a high risk of being undercounted. The 2020 census is an opportunity for

AAHOA members to change this trend and use their responses to highlight the economic contributions of Asian Americans.

Now, AAHOA members care deeply about the protection of their personal privacy and it's understandable why some hoteliers might hesitate before sharing their information. Title 13 of the U.S. Code, however, is a safe guard against any dissemination of personal information gathered through the census. The law requires that any data collected on individuals, households, and businesses can only be used for the purpose of generating statistics. This protection allows all citizens to rest assured that their information will be kept totally confidential and secure.

Responding to the Census next year will be easier than ever. It's a quick process consisting of simple, straightforward questions that everyone can respond to by phone, online, or in the mail at their convenience. Remember, complete participation in the census allows communities, small business, and the nation to progress. It's never too early to start getting out the word, making sure that you and those in your community know that this simple yet important civic duty can have a lasting effect on the future of this country. ■



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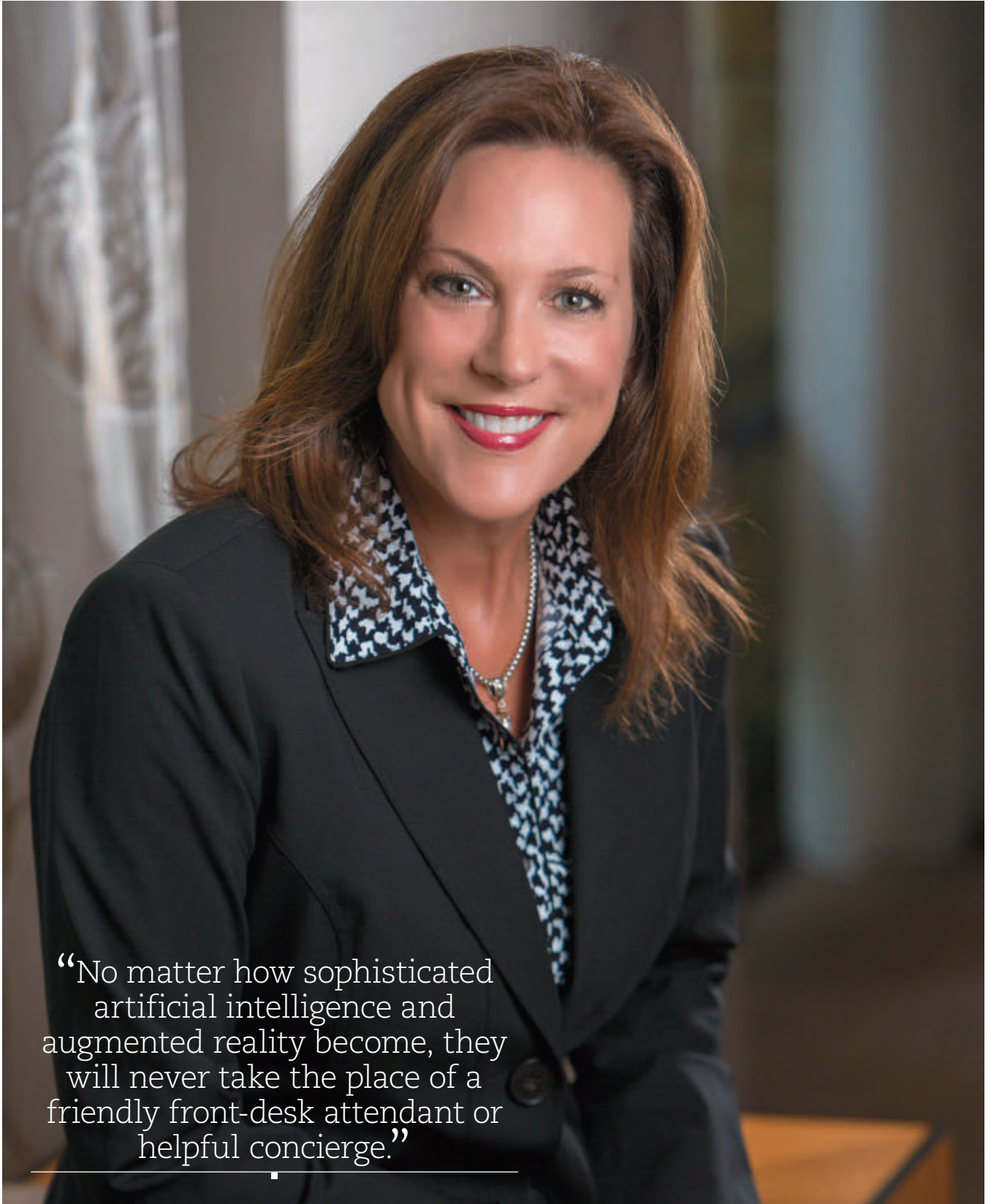
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“No matter how sophisticated artificial intelligence and augmented reality become, they will never take the place of a friendly front-desk attendant or helpful concierge.”

Finding the right blend of technology and human touch

by LYNN MINGES, PRESIDENT & CEO, NORTH CAROLINA RESTAURANT & LODGING ASSOCIATION

IN NORTH CAROLINA, WE HAVE seen a boom in hotel construction, with new lodging properties being announced almost weekly. Many of these facilities will feature cutting-edge technology. Like other industries, lodging is experiencing a technological leap forward. Advances in facility and in-room technologies are helping hotels provide a more enjoyable experience for guests. We also are witnessing firsthand how high-tech solutions can improve hotel operations by increasing efficiencies and maximizing profit. The challenge is to find the right balance between advanced technology and irreplaceable human interaction.

From business travelers to families, today's guests expect a personalized lodging experience. New hospitality software applications are enabling hotels to offer just that. Hotels can now easily obtain individual customer preferences through social media tracking apps and customer relationship management programs. This valuable data allows hoteliers to provide custom marketing promotions and web pages, personalized menu offerings, and other unique guest services. Starting at booking all the way through checkout, guests can enjoy a better experience that is tailor made for their individual preferences and needs.

We also are seeing how technology, such as the latest generation of property-management and point-of-sale systems, can streamline many day-to-day

business processes for hotel management and staff. Data gathered by these systems can be used to optimize daily operations and improve a facility's bottom line. Among other things, the data can assist managers in fine-tuning their staff levels and predicting how long room cleaning should take. The newest point-of-sale systems further simplify booking and check-in, greatly speeding up these transactions. They also allow hotel staff to spend more time answering questions for guests, addressing issues, and providing guidance. However, one of the most valuable pieces of hospitality technology has nothing to do with efficiency or the guest experience. Panic buttons, like those being adopted by many hotel brands, have provided enhanced security and protection to hotel staff while doing their jobs.

Even with the emergence of these exciting technologies, there is little chance that traditional customer service and simple human interaction will ever be replaced. In fact, it's already been tried in the hotel industry, and it failed. In 2015, the Henn-na Hotel in Sasebo, Japan, opened with a staff consisting primarily of robots. Their novel approach to staffing caught the attention of the media and curious hospitality professionals worldwide. However, according to recent reports, the Henn-na Hotel has "laid off" half of their robotic workforce, replacing them with human staff.

No matter how sophisticated artificial intelligence and augmented reality become, they will never take the place of a friendly front-desk attendant or helpful concierge. The human touch can simply never be replaced. Hotel staff always will be called upon to provide their priceless local knowledge, such as recommending their favorite restaurant or offering firsthand insight into local entertainment options. Hotel management will always be needed to solve problems as they arise, using their experience and real-world wisdom. No machine will ever be able to comfort a distraught guest or lend a helpful hand in an emergency.

The goal for hotels is to find an ideal balance between high-tech solutions and human interaction. Technology should be used to improve a hotel's guest experience and to increase operational efficiency. But it should never be thought of as a replacement for time-tested customer service techniques or human judgement and caring.

The future looks bright for the lodging industry in North Carolina and across the nation. We are experiencing a historic level of growth and prosperity. As the hotel industry continues to expand, guests will enjoy better experiences thanks in part to ever-improving hospitality technology. And behind the scenes, technology will help make life easier – and business more successful – for hotel operators, managers, and staff. The key to success for everyone is striking the right balance between technology and the human touch. ■

COMMON GROUND

Rebranding the visa waiver program

by TONI-ANNE BARRY



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These days, it seems like politicians cannot agree about anything. That's because it's convenient for the media to use a gridlock narrative as shorthand for the contrarian and obstinate behavior that defines how our elected representatives address a few big issues. However, a different, more nuanced picture emerges when one takes a closer look at the actual lawmaking process – the pursuit of positive change. Common Ground profiles two members of opposing parties who are working together to advance issues important to hoteliers.

THE ISSUE

Renaming the Visa Waiver Program to the Secure Travel Partnership
The Visa Waiver Program (VWP) allows citizens from 38 designated countries to travel to the U.S. for up to 90 days without needing to obtain a visa. The VWP was first established in 1986 and continues to enable millions of tourists to travel to the U.S. each year, supporting American small businesses across the nation. According to the U.S. Travel Association, 23 million travelers arrived to the U.S. through the VWP and generated \$190 billion in economic output in 2017 alone.

For many Americans, national security is a top priority, and the name “Visa Waiver” can cause concern that this program poses a security risk. In reality, every traveler who uses the VWP must adhere to the strict security requirements of being

pre-screened and pre-approved through the Electronic System for Travel Authorization before being allowed into the country.

COMMON GROUND

Legislators on both sides of the aisle understand the importance of the VWP and are concerned over possible misconceptions that can arise due to its name. U.S. Representatives Tom Rice (SC-07), Raja Krishnamoorthi (IL-08), Guy Reschenthaler (PA-14), and Mike Quigley (IL-05) worked together to introduce legislation to rename the Visa Waiver Program to the Secure Travel Partnership to fix this issue. Renaming the program gives it the integrity it deserves as a key economic driver of the national economy without any doubt about the strength of its security. ■



Rep. Tom Rice (R-SC)

First Elected: 2012

Committees: Ways and Means

“Renaming the Visa Waiver Program to the Security Travel Partnership more accurately reflects the program’s intent to strengthen national security and spur

tourism to the United States. This important step is part of our larger effort to bolster homeland security, create American jobs, and bring more tourism dollars to South Carolina.”



Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi (D-IL)

First Elected: 2016

Committees: Oversight and Reform, House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence

“The Visa Waiver Program exists as a crucial program that protects our nation’s

security, creates American jobs, and bolsters alliances with our friends. The rebranding of the Visa Waiver Program to the Secure Travel Partnership encapsulates these major benefits to our economy and national security, while eliminating any confusion about the true mission of this program.”

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FINDING USES FOR BLOCKCHAIN TECHNOLOGY IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY

by CHRISTOPHER CURRY

IN THE DIGITAL ECONOMY, HOTELIERS HAVE STARTED to embrace new technology to enhance the guest experience and streamline operations. Guests book rooms, order room service, make a reservation at the spa, and even access their rooms with mobile apps. Data collection provides insight into guest preferences to craft a more personalized experience. Artificial intelligence and chatbots allow you to adjust the room temperature or request maintenance by voice command.

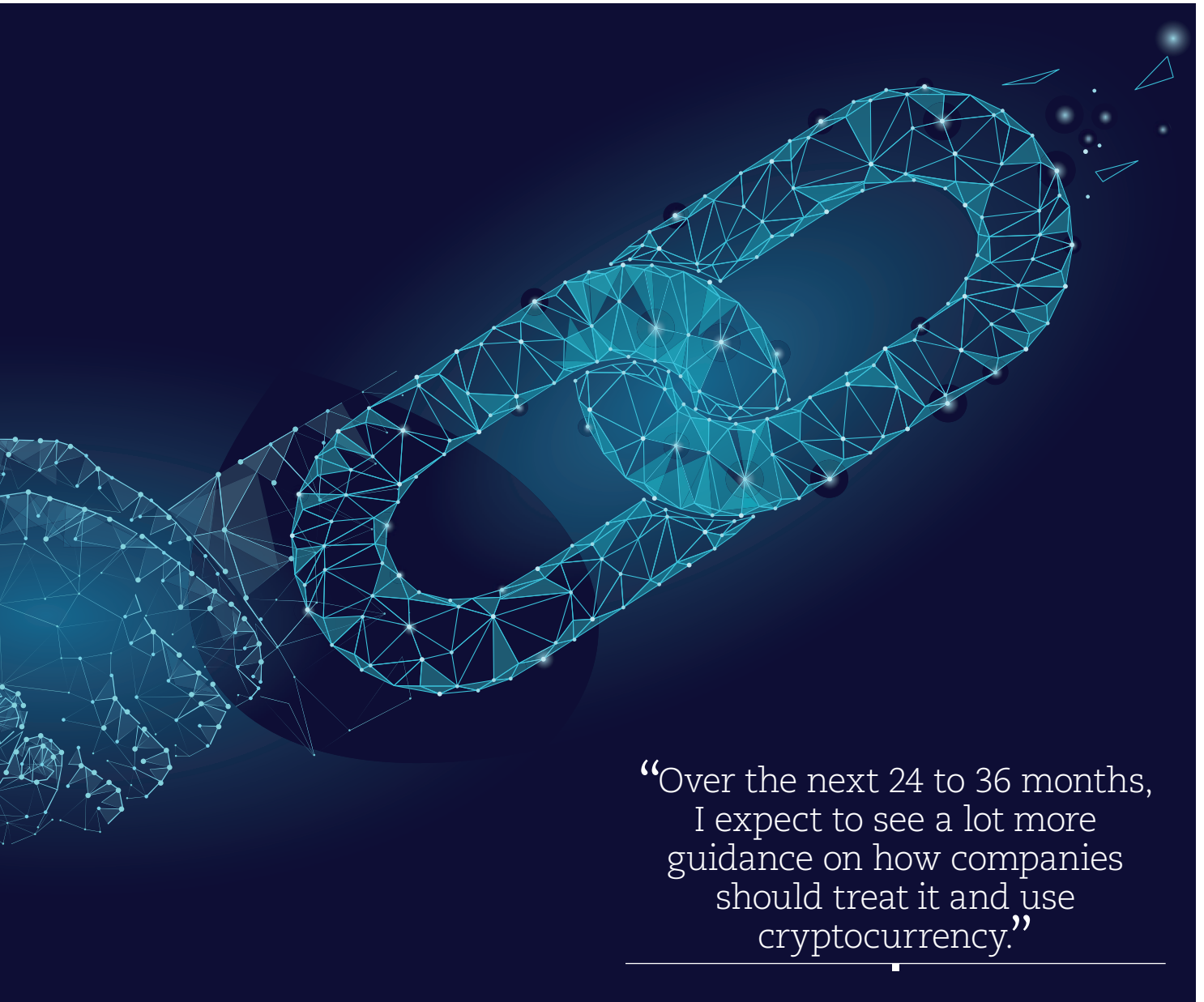
But where does much-hyped blockchain technology fit in? At this point, the jury is still out. On one hand, a wave of startups say blockchain can transform booking, payment processes, loyalty programs, and marketing.

KeyoCoin is one. Formed in early 2017, the company is launching a blockchain-based universal travel rewards program as well as a travel concierge and booking app targeted at independent hotels.

“We will be their technology partner and they don’t need to know a thing about blockchain,” KeyoCoin CEO Adelle Demko says. “It will be set up on their dashboard for them.”

On the other hand, established industry players like global travel commerce platform Travelport are taking a deliberate approach to determine if and where blockchain has a use in their business operations.

“Our approach has been looking for suitability and not just fitting in blockchain for the sake of fitting it in because of the



“Over the next 24 to 36 months, I expect to see a lot more guidance on how companies should treat it and use cryptocurrency.”

LUCKYSTEP/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

hype around the industry,” says Monty Doshi, Travelport’s director of architecture in the Asia-Pacific region. “I think it’s important from our perspective to ensure there is proper use case implementation of blockchain and not just use blockchain for the sake of using blockchain.”

In Travelport’s case, the company worked with IBM to look at use-case scenarios, including potentially putting content from smaller travel companies onto its platform.

In the end, Travelport decided the best short-term return on investment is using blockchain to solve inefficiencies in the commission payment process between hotels and travel agencies.

Those are just two examples of blockchain making inroads in the industry. To sort the hype from the reality, hotel and

tech insiders offer additional insight on where blockchain is today and where they see it going.

CUSTOMER PAYMENTS

Blockchain is a decentralized digital ledger of transactions spread across a network of computers. Each transaction is linked to the previous one as a timestamped block, making it easy to follow money or inventory back to the starting point. It is difficult to tamper with because at least half the computers on the network have to agree a change or transaction is legitimate.

At this point, the best-known product of blockchain technology is cryptocurrency, particularly Bitcoin, the digital

ANDREY SUSLOV/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



currency launched in 2009 to facilitate peer-to-peer transactions without a central bank.

Samantha Ahuja, an attorney with the firm Greenberg Traurig who specializes in hotel acquisitions, operations, development and management, says some hotels do accept cryptocurrency as guest payments to carve out a niche for themselves.

“I would not say it is becoming mainstream, but it is gaining traction,” Ahuja said. “More places are taking cryptocurrency as a form of payment. Vendors are accepting it. A handful of hotels see it as a unique opportunity to stand out and attract guests who want to use cryptocurrency as a form of payment. Every six months you see a couple more hotels signing on, but you don’t have the major brands yet.”

Ahuja says the price volatility of cryptocurrency and uncertainty over tax policy and regulations have more hotels in a wait and see mode, particularly in the U.S.

“It’s not mainstream yet because a lot of companies remain hesitant to trade in cryptocurrency or accept it as payment because of that volatility,” Ahuja says. “But I think you will see it gain more traction. Over the next 24 to 36 months, I expect to see a lot more guidance on how companies should treat it and use cryptocurrency.”

LOYALTY PROGRAMS AND TARGETED MARKETING

Before Bitcoin, rewards points were the original digital currency, says Thom Kozik, the chief commercial officer at industry leader Loyyal and former vice president for global loyalty at Marriott International.

Kozik feels hotels should use blockchain to improve the management of a loyalty program instead of shifting to a model where guests earn cryptocurrency tokens as rewards.

The complex and costly IT processes of keeping track of the liability of unredeemed rewards, determining payments to vendors and partner companies in the program, and adding partners to a program, even for limited-time promotions, are all simplified, Kozik says.

“When you think about blockchain, all of that goes away because you are all now dealing with the same shared ledger,” Kozik says. “That’s what a blockchain is – a distributed ledger. There’s no reconciliation because we’re all looking at the same set of records. Also, when you go to a blockchain, something magical happens that never existed. You now have the ability to revenue-manage your liability. We’ve not been able to do that before. You have a tremendous amount of control over liability and how you work with partners.”

Kozik says for hotel ownership groups, blockchain also can create a new asset class by allowing them to trade or sell points between properties. At the same time, he does not expect major players such as Marriott or Hilton to embrace that type of relationship with competitors even as startups introduce cryptocurrency that could allow ubiquitous interchange between rewards programs.

What Kozik does foresee is more targeted marketing and promotional offers to guests and customers. That's because the blockchain will automatically know when, where and how loyalty program members earn points, giving hotels insight into their habits and preferences without an intensive IT exercise.

"That will benefit the consumer, whose ability to do more things with those points is really limited by the legacy systems and approaches of these programs," Kozik says.

KeyoCoin is taking a different approach, with a universal travel rewards cryptocurrency intended to give independent hotels and travel experience companies access to a rewards program and provide guests more ways to earn and redeem rewards.

"Under the current model for rewards points, they are not very inspiring for customers to earn," says Demko, KeyoCoin CEO.

Guests can earn cryptocurrency rewards by booking through the mobile app, purchasing a cocktail at a rooftop bar, or even taking a picture of the Hollywood sign, Demko says. They also will be able to use the cryptocurrency rewards earned at any partner in the rewards program's marketplace.

BOOKING

Right now, a handful of large online travel agents (OTAs) dominate the online booking landscape.

Hotels get better visibility through those OTAs but pay a commission in the range of 10-to-30 percent for every booking made through the site. That costs hotels a portion of their revenue and drives up costs for guests.

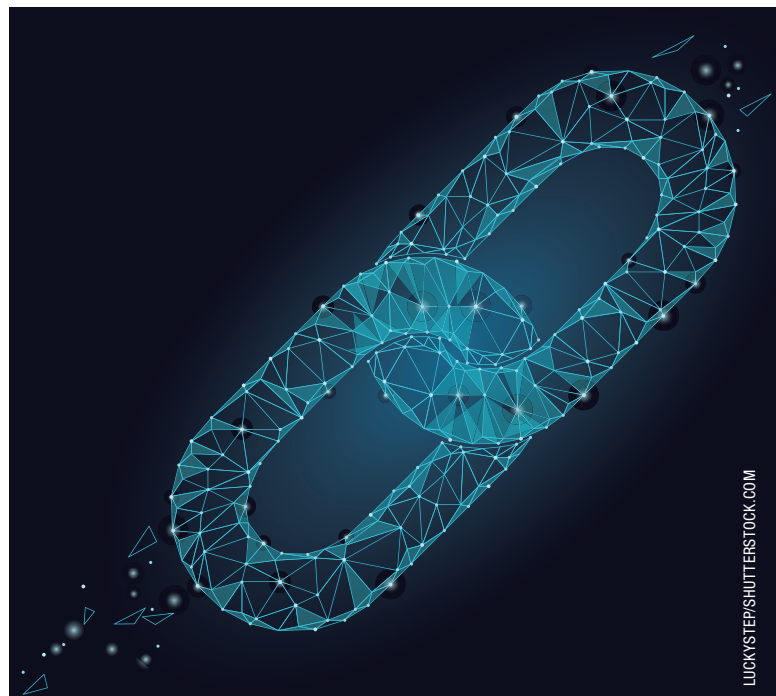
Winding Tree, LockTrip, Travala, and other startups are launching blockchain-powered booking platforms that allow guests to directly book rooms from hotels. The goal is to loosen the grip OTAs have on the hotel booking ecosystem and cut costs for hotels and guests.

Companies like KeyoCoin plan to use a cryptocurrency reward as an incentive to get customers to book through their mobile app instead of an OTA.

"We are very keen to offer an alternative to the OTAs and use travel rewards to disintermediate the OTAs," Demko says.

SPEEDING UP B2B PAYMENTS

In the B2B space, the shared digital ledger of transactions allows everyone involved to look at the same records, accelerating the process.



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"Essentially blockchain becomes that source of trust instead of separate distributed data sources," Travelport's Doshi says. "It will streamline the process of reconciliation."

Jen Plahm, a spokeswoman for Fenex, a blockchain-powered payment and services solution for the travel industry, says blockchain technology can be easily incorporated into a hotel's ERP system to simplify and accelerate the process of paying vendors, suppliers, and travel agents.

"On blockchain platforms, the transaction token can hold way more information than traditional systems in a secure form," Plahm says. "This will make the process of reconciliation and settlement much faster. Moreover, the payments can be tracked in real-time applications even though the settlement times are minimized to a maximum of two days."

A LOOK AHEAD

Looking ahead, Travelport's Doshi says their mid- to long-term forecast sees increased use of blockchain as a form of payment and for inventory and order management. The idea that an entire trip will be booked and paid for from end to end by blockchain is a more long-term possibility, he says.

Ahuja, the hotel industry attorney with Greenberg Traurig, says blockchain will continue to gain a foothold.

"If you look at blockchain over the last three to five years, the evolution has been fairly constant," she says. "The ability to process, to create, to transact has been growing. So, while it's definitely not there today, it is on its way to mainstream usage. I think you do see it more internationally than domestically, but certainly the hospitality industry will be a beneficiary." ■

WHEN TECHNOLOGY MISSES THE MARK

by FIONA SOLTES





“Today’s hoteliers are under pressure to adapt to a new breed of guest whose needs and demands are entirely different than those of previous generations.”

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YANI DEROS HAS MOVED hotel mattresses and dug under desks to find an outlet for charging his devices.

Tom Moore has found himself wary of hotel WiFi security.

And Michael Driedger has touched what looked to be a light switch at a property in Riyadh, and found it opened the curtains instead. He also delighted in a record player at a boutique hotel – until he noticed it was connected through Bluetooth, switching the sound from analog to digital and ruining its quality.

Regardless of good intentions, the introduction of technology, or the ability to power it, sometimes misses the mark. Loyalty programs can go too far with familiarity and become creepy. There’s the realization that a virtual assistant in a hotel room, though convenient, is always listening. Guests may be able to go straight to their rooms using a special code, but they still end up at the front desk asking if they missed a step. And then there are those who gain access to the property with a digital key app, but their phone has died.

The definition – and expectation – of a great customer experience certainly has changed over time. Individuals increasingly receive instant and personalized service everywhere else, so why not at hotels? Hotels, in turn, are attempting to apply what works in a home capacity to the commercial environment, often with mixed results.

“Today’s hoteliers are under pressure to adapt to a new breed of guest whose needs and demands are entirely different than those of previous generations,” said Deros, CEO and cofounder of CIRQ+, a platform that turns hotel rooms into smart spaces by allowing guests to seamlessly operate the thermostat and lights as well as charge their devices and more. “The customer experience is no longer just about quality service and a clean and comfortable room; it’s about the entire customer journey.”

That’s especially true with the tech-dependent millennial generation, he said; more than 70 percent of them, according to an Eventbrite/Harris Poll study, would prefer to spend on a desirable experience rather than a desirable product. Keep in mind that they’re now the largest living generation, and a sea-change is underway.

“Properties are realizing they are severely lagging behind the times with technology adoptions and are scrambling to find solutions to update and modernize their rooms,” he said. “As Internet of Things (IoT) or smart technology accelerates in the marketplace, we are seeing that room control systems are the fastest-growing trends in the industry, surpassing wireless door locks and connective TVs.”

“Most hospitality brands recognize that making a guest feel important and appreciated can go a long way,” Deros said. As technology continues to evolve, however, “brands will be required to gather and leverage big data to automate personalization and drive loyalty.”

So how do they do that, exactly, without potentially negatively impacting the guest experience?

Driedger is a green building consultant in addition to CEO and cofounder of Operto, which offers keyless entry and self-check-in software solutions. Positive experiences with technology, he said, begin with understanding what tools are right for what spaces. A learning thermostat such as Nest, for example, might be a joy in an individual home, but not provide the same benefits when it has to “relearn” every hotel guest. And then there was that light switch in Riyadh. “That’s a mistake that people make in trying to automate things,” he said. “They change what the expected human interface would be. The interface has to be super-simple.” If it’s not clear and relevant to the large majority of guests, it doesn’t matter how exciting or advanced the technology is.

Operto allows guests in rental, hotel, and other properties to check themselves in and out using unique codes for each booking. The dashboard allows properties to see who has accessed rooms and when; eliminate guest lock-outs from failed keys; adjust temperature settings based on occupancy; increase revenue by allowing early check-ins and late-night bookings; and cut down on lines at the front desk. Automation, after all, can lead to efficiency.

Granted, getting guests accustomed to the idea of not having to go to the front desk will take some time. Even though using Operto’s keyless entry is the equivalent of “punching in a code” as when using an ATM, Driedger said, in the early days, some properties had up to 80 percent of guests asking if that’s still all they needed to do.

“It can be hard to get used to,” he said. “It does take time. But it’s all about communicating. If you’re not communicating change to people, it can be unnerving.” Over time, that 80 percent dropped to 50, and then to 20. “And now that people understand, the ease and quickness of not having to line up at the front desk is a key driver for return guests.”

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It’s an important point. The best way to introduce new technology – assuming it’s the right technology, naturally – may be to ensure that its presence, purpose, and benefits are clearly shared.

Moore, retail and hospitality industry lead for Zebra Technologies, said hoteliers have to be “very methodical in how they engage with their guests.” Some ideas that appeared promising in the past – take the use of beacons to provide location-based services, for example – haven’t panned out the way people expected. Issues of privacy and security have continued to be paramount, even as guests expect personalization.

Zebra works across numerous industries in a variety of ways. In the hospitality realm, Zebra endeavors to help properties provide seamless and streamlined experiences to guests by empowering staff to communicate through mobile computers and Workforce Connect software, whether by phone, text, or push-to-talk. Zebra also offers a software security solution called LifeGuard for Android, extending the service life of Zebra’s Android-based devices three to five years beyond consumer operating system support with extended security support, and predictable periodic security updates.

At the end of the day, he said, there’s a balancing act. Technologies aim to focus on the guest, but also on the staff and how they can help the guest with less friction from the guest perspective.

“The other thing, the big challenge, is how do I make sure my staff is in the right places to serve the guest?” he asked. With larger properties in particular, being able to dispatch the task to the worker closest to the guest can lead to a better experience. In that case, location-based sensors can be a boon, especially if some automation is involved.

In his view, it’s the check-in process that is still “stuck” in terms of streamlining and technological efficiency.

Micah Solomon, customer service consultant and speaker, said technology that feels intrusive and isn’t offered as a choice can “very quickly” destroy the hospitality experience, especially a luxury one. Solomon, who wrote *The Heart of Hospitality: Great Hotel and Restaurant Leaders Share Their Secrets*, brings up check-in kiosks of the past, and how some brands pressured guests to use them rather than be greeted by a person. That bombed, he said, but other hotels are starting to get things right. He points to European brand Citizen M, for example, which offers a human-assisted kiosk check-in instead. Solomon also offers a “Jetsons Test,” based on the 1960s TV show, to help companies determine when humans add value – and when they just get in the way. Among the considerations: whether a person can do a job more efficiently, effectively – or warmly – than a machine.

“Without the human touch, properly applied,” he said, “we quickly become a commodity.” ■

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WHAT MAKES A HOTEL A SMART HOTEL?

An exploratory discussion with
three industry veterans

by SANDY SMITH

Today's hotel owners are met with technology options on every side, from voice-activated room enhancements to information that drives more insight on the back end. So, how does a hotel owner become savvier as hotels become smarter? To find out, we asked three technology experts: Alexandre Simionescu, co-founder of Float4, which builds interactive and immersive experiences for a number of properties including hotels; John Edwards, CTO at RLH Corporation, the corporation behind brands like Red Lion and Americas Best Value Inn; and Dominic Locascio, VP, Americas, for InnSpire, which acts as a gateway to allow a simple, single interface for the hotel guest to access smart technology.



WHERE IS THE OVERALL HOTEL INDUSTRY IN TERMS OF USING SMART TECHNOLOGY TOOLS THAT ARE AVAILABLE?

Locascio: It is still early in the adoption cycle of these new technologies, but more and more guests have a better tech experience at home than at the hotel. Most hotels today do not have the need or budget to deploy a full smart platform, but it is important to make sure that whatever pieces of that puzzle you deploy to your properties today that those technologies are scalable and integrate well with other vendors.

Edwards: From the overall guest room experience, we've really been focused on a couple: guest security and making sure that we find the right solution that allows the technology to be simple and streamlined without any challenges or objections from the travelers on whom that is implemented. With voice-activated solutions, there is the issue that they are listening all the time. We've been really focused on communicating with our hotels to make sure that they know that and, at the same time, trying to help them understand what we're doing on the back end to allow a guest to opt in to those services.

WHAT IS THE LOW-HANGING FRUIT THAT A HOTEL OWNER SHOULD KNOW ABOUT IN SMART TOOLS?

Simionescu: Given the immense concentration of applications that we have on our mobile phones, it is in integrating mobile platforms into the experience. It offers so many possibilities and it's hardly something that is an emerging technology. It's widely adopted.

Edwards: The focus for us in non-emerging technology has really been around our smartphone and our guest communication platform. We're starting to drive the guest adoption around mobile check-in, SMS messaging to the hotels and getting that communication flow with the guest. We're starting to look at ways that we can leverage artificial intelligence or call centers to get back information to the guests.



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HOW ARE ROBOTS BEING USED AND WHERE IS THE POTENTIAL?

Edwards: We have our two pilot hotels: Red Lion Anaheim (California) and Americas Best Value Inn in Hayward, CA. The operations housekeeping teams are working with the robot

manufacturer, Peanut Robotics, to find ways that the robotic tools can enhance how the housekeeping team works through their day. Our housekeeping group in Anaheim is really excited that they have a new tool that actually directs the way they do their job, how well, and how fast.

Locascio: InnSpire currently has a hotel where guests can use their TV or a web app to order room service that is delivered by robot. This provides more than just a wow factor, but it dramatically impacts revenue. It may be 20 years before we see real scale here, but I believe that robots will definitely have a role.

WHERE IS THE MOST SKEPTICISM ABOUT THE VALUE IN CUSTOMER-FACING SMART DEVICES?

Simionescu: Technology evolves at a faster pace than ever, which presents both opportunities and challenges. When clients are building or renovating a property, their cycle is five, 10, or 15 years. But even within the smallest cycle, technology would have gone through at least one new generation. Like any person who makes an investment, you want to reduce your risk and maximize returns. Technology can create these opportunities, but it's not a silver bullet. It's an enabler, not the solution in itself.

Edwards: I think it's about execution. We have a lot of pilots going on. Some work out and some don't. The ones that don't typically fail around, 'Can we successfully execute this across all our brands or for the right customer set?' That's why our system-wide initiatives have really been focused around the low-hanging fruit.

MORE SPECIFICALLY, WHERE DO YOU SEE THE MARKET CURRENTLY FOR VOICE-ACTIVATED DEVICES IN HOTELS?

Simionescu: The fact that it is something being adopted in private homes will help it being adopted in places like hotels. It will be something that people are already used to.

Locascio: People use voice every day in their home or just to "ask Siri." Adapting this technology for the hotel environment has great potential. Ten years ago, it was revolutionary to put AppleTV into hotel rooms; now streaming is commonplace. I believe we will see the same for voice in some form or another.



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WHAT CONCIERGE TOOLS DO YOU SEE HAVING THE BIGGEST POTENTIAL?

Edwards: There's a ton of solutions for guests to get local recommendations. One of the things we've been focused on is making sure those are valid and up to date. One of the things that we've been working on that we're piloting internally is the ability for our hotels to make enhanced recommendations.

Locascio: There are so many tools like hotel apps, smart TVs, web apps, and text-based services that can support the traditional concierge and improve the guest experience. I believe that hotels are at the tip of the iceberg in terms of maximizing this potential. The question is, will our industry outsource this expertise or will we integrate and leverage these tools to bring our own knowledge and experience into the process?

WHAT POTENTIAL EXISTS OUT THERE THAT HASN'T YET BEEN FULLY REALIZED IN TERMS OF HOTEL OPERATION?

Edwards: As an industry, it's still a personal experience, so there's always going to be a lot of human touch. Finding new technical solutions that enhance that overall experience, there's still quite a bit of opportunity there. Getting more access to more data will continue to drive innovation within the industry. Not having to work as hard to get that data will drive innovation significantly.

Locascio: Whether it is streaming their favorite shows or ordering food through their smartphone, expectations are higher than ever for technology to drive a faster, better, and easier hotel stay. Our industry needs to get better at adapting our technologies to what the guest is doing rather than expecting the guest to learn different systems and processes. We need to find ways to expand integration into the tech they are already using to improve ease of use and speed of adoption.

FINALLY, IF YOU WERE TO FORECAST ONE YEAR OUT, WHERE WOULD THE GENERAL HOTEL INDUSTRY BE WITH THESE TOOLS?

Simionescu: It's a very small amount of time considering how long it typically takes. It's hard to say if there's something that we currently don't have that will be present throughout the hospitality industry in that short amount of time. What I think we will see is current trends and adoptions will increase.

Edwards: My goal is you would be talking about a bunch of robots in a bunch of hotels. We have a strong initiative and strong belief that the solution provider has a way to impact the way we operate our hotels. Our goal really is to get that out in those pilot hotels and not just one or two robots, but several within those hotels that we're starting to learn from and roll out more widely. ■

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TOP 5 HOSPITALITY & TECHNOLOGY TRENDS

#1

▶ INTERNET OF THINGS FOR DATA

- a. Allows for increased monitoring of things such as room temperature, lighting, television use, etc.
- b. Helps hoteliers anticipate energy costs, develop budgets, etc.

#2

▶ VOICE-ACTIVATED SMART ROOMS

- a. Allows tasks like turning on the lights or TV to be completed using voice activation and smart technologies
- b. Provides for a smoother transition from home to hotel, as there is an increased use of smart technology in the home

#3

▶ INCREASED SELF-SERVICE OPTIONS

- a. Provides self-service options for concierge services such as requests for amenities, etc.
- b. Allows remote check-in and checkout through kiosks and apps

#4

▶ TECH LOUNGES & CONNECTED MEETING ROOMS

- a. Provides increased connectivity to allow business to be completed on trips
- b. Includes such technology as video conferencing, smart boards, and high-speed data connections

#5

▶ ROBOTICS

- a. Creates greater efficiency in repetitive processes such as cooking simple foods and room-service delivery

(Source: Napa Technologies)

How is technology changing hotel financing?

by RUSHI SHAH



SFIO CRACHO/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

IN TODAY'S WORLD, YOU WOULD be hard-pressed to name an industry that hasn't been affected or even disrupted by technology. As hotel owners, you experience the advancements every day in how you attract customers, manage your business, and communicate with your staff. The capital markets are no exception. A commercial loan transaction can be a clunky process, and there are many companies turning to technology to streamline it. While technical

advancements will certainly increase efficiency and improve the overall transaction experience, hotel financing will still continue to need strategically placed human touch to get borrowers to the closing table. Let's explore why.

THE ART OF THE DEAL

Hotel financing is complicated and no two deals are exactly alike. A skilled intermediary will draw on his or her expertise, lender relationships, and creativity to tell the story, and sculpt the

optimal capital stack and loan terms that meets both the lender's criteria and borrower's needs. He or she will know how to guide the transaction, adjusting the course as needed. This is the art of the deal.

The science of technology can empower the art by making the financing process faster but cannot replace it. This is because so many of the decision check-points in the loan transaction process rely on expert judgements and are not rule based. Human touch is

critical for negotiating terms, influencing decision-makers to make exceptions to a policy, driving valuations, architecting deal structure to create a win-win for borrowers and lenders, and turning deal weaknesses into opportunities for a capital source. For example, we closed a heavily structured deal with a sponsor who had a previous credit blemish and had only recently acquired the assets. We were able to demonstrate to the lender that the asset had significant upside and that the sponsors had already created value. We used ground lease bifurcation to secure a full cash-out strategy and achieve effective higher leverage and lower overall interest rates to the sponsor on assets that needed significant CapEx. This was a story that would have been difficult, if not impossible, to tell through software. Bottom line: Our human intervention resulted in a successful \$77 million closing for the client.

EMPOWERING THE ART THROUGH SCIENCE

For a typical CMBS transaction, an intermediary does a tremendous amount of research to assess market dynamics and devise an option of value and size a loan for optimal execution. All of that hard work can unravel, however, if undisclosed items are uncovered after the lender starts its due diligence process. Some surprises will merely stall a transaction. Many will trigger the lender to adjust the terms (not always in the borrower's favor). Others will outright kill it. Leveraging technology early on to analyze market and comp data and spot accounting irregularities can speed up this arduous research phase. When issues are brought to light earlier, there is a better chance that they can be addressed and even solved, instead of derailing the transaction later.

WHERE TECHNOLOGY OFFERS THE MOST IMPACT

Some of the more common technology being used in our industry today includes application programming

interface (API), artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning. APIs allow one software to talk to other data sources seamlessly without human intervention. Capital market intermediaries use API to get better data faster, so they can make knowledge-based decisions. Better decision-making upfront, translates into less risk of changes to the loan terms later, known as re-trading. Through AI technology, intermediaries can more quickly assess comparables, determine an opinion of value, and calculate the optimal levels of debt the asset can support. Wall Street analysts rely on machine learning technology to evaluate financial statements and convert the data into cash flow underwriting models. This strategic use of technology empowers the players, streamlines the process, and prevents unnecessary human error. It's no wonder many institutions are putting significant venture and institutional capital behind these technologies to try to disintermediate the capital markets.

A great example of how technology is improving the hotel financing transaction is using API to enable access to the information available in a hotel STR report. The ability to easily download the competitive set from STR, accurately analyze the information, quickly identify positive and negative trends, immediately highlight any irregularities, and then use that robust information to create a data-backed story that addresses any pain points is powerful.

It's humanly impossible to uncover everything upfront using the current methodology. With the power of technology, however, much of the information that historically has taken 60 to 90 days to uncover can now be detected in 60 to 90 seconds. For example, many jurisdictions in the country have automated court records. Thanks to technology, other more readily available data sets include new construction activity, airport landings and departure schedules, local jobless claims, crime

rates, delinquent real estate taxes, and negative environmental issues. Automation makes it easier to frontload the data into the deal process, which brings greater certainty of execution at the end.

Use of technology within the hotel financing world is growing every day, but there is still a greater concentration of usage among higher-volume intermediaries and capital sources that enjoy economies of scale. Over time, strategic technology advancements will become the standard, as borrowers and capital sources demand the efficiencies, likely cost savings, and minimized risk of re-trade it delivers.

BRINGING BOTH SIDES TOGETHER

The ideal intersection of humans and tech occurs when savvy humans leverage the rich data generated by integrated software built with AI technology to structure terms and then overlay those decisions with their relationships and negotiations. Even as advancements are made, the human touch, expert judgment, and strong relationships between capital providers and seekers all still have more of an impact on the success of the final outcome, then the integration of technology. ■



Rushi Shah is principal and CEO of the commercial mortgage and real estate investment banking firm and AAHOA Club Blue Member Mag Mile Capital.

As a leader in hospitality financing, Shah specializes in structuring and placing high-leverage, non-recourse bridge and permanent debt with cash out for full- and limited-service hotels nationwide. Since joining the firm's predecessor, Aries Capital, in 2015, Shah has structured and closed hundreds of millions in financing for all property types. Shah has held previous positions at Northern Trust and has an MBA from the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business.

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Five ways hospitality brands can benefit from audiovisual technologies

by BRAD GRIMES



ACCORDING TO A RECENTLY published AVIXA report, the global market for audiovisual (AV) technology in hospitality is forecast to reach \$7.5 billion for 2019 and grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 6 percent through 2023; hospitality brands are increasingly turning to AV technology to elevate their guest experience and optimize internal operations.

From enabling guests to operate window shades, thermostats, and lighting, all from their personal devices, to

transforming ordinary lobbies into glitzy nightclubs, AV technology is creating memorable experiences for guests and points of competitive differentiation for brands. Here are five ways that hotels, restaurants, and more are using technology to usher in a new generation in hospitality.

TRANSFORMING OPEN SPACES

Hotel lobbies are usually large open spaces with seats scattered throughout, and are generally viewed as places to travel through, not destinations.

When the W New York – Times Square sought to change this perception and



GAVRANBORIS/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

elevate the appeal of its second-floor main lobby, it created a tribute to Times Square, which is located just a few blocks away. Offering a lively atmosphere that shifts from a bright, airy daytime setting to a vibrant, colorful nightclub setting with a custom DJ booth, the space houses custom neon lighting, vibrant signs, and a digital countdown clock that's almost 7 feet tall.

Hidden speakers deliver high-quality audio to 32 independent zones, with many speaker arrays directed at individual guest seating booths where patrons can control the volume

for their specific zone. Using touch-screen-based entertainment control systems, W New York staff also can adjust every light and speaker to produce the desired atmosphere from a selection of presets.

PUTTING SMART DEVICES IN GUEST ROOMS

With app- and voice-based home control systems growing in popularity and acceptance, hotel guests increasingly expect personalized control of their room's lights, shades, media, and thermostat from a smartphone or tablet.

The 1 Hotel near the Brooklyn Bridge was constructed with this in mind, integrating the latest in automation, AV, communications, and energy management in all the guestrooms, as well as public spaces, ballrooms, and the rooftop pool deck. Smart technology ensures that 1 Hotel remains "green" and provides guests with advanced control of lighting, shades, and climate.

To make each guest's stay as smooth as possible, all of the lights in the room can be turned off with a single "Good Night" button located beside the bed, while the classic "Do Not Disturb" door

hangers have been replaced by a button to request privacy. The automation system also ties into a backend platform with energy-usage statistics that provide hotel management with a tool to track and improve sustainability.

IMPROVING NAVIGATION WITH LARGE-SCALE DISPLAYS

To provide better, larger maps for navigating the hotel and surrounding neighborhoods, the Hyatt Regency McCormick Place in Chicago installed four large LCD video walls at key points in the lobby, in corridors and at entrances and exits. With one located behind the concierge desk, two at opposite ends of a high-traffic ground-floor hallway, and another at the base of an escalator, guests can always find their way to their destination quickly and easily.

The displays are sufficiently bright to overcome direct sunlight entering through large windows on the south side of the building, and all four are controlled and updated from a small rack behind the concierge desk. Beyond way-finding, the video walls are also used for promotions, advertising, and communications, such as signage packages during

a trade show or custom messaging that supports branding efforts for the Hyatt Regency's local city partners.

MAKING A HOTEL FEEL LIKE HOME

There is a clear trend among hotels to make the guest experience more like home by creating inviting and familiar rooms and spaces. For example, Marriott Hotels updated a 30-year-old property in Charlotte, NC, turning it into an inviting, flexible, and modern space.

The check-in area includes a touch-screen monitor where guests can find their reservation, while a public kitchen, open to all guests, serves as a central place to socialize. In addition to the very latest in kitchen appliances, multiple 55-inch OLED televisions provide entertainment. The impetus for this space? Marriott recognized that when friends get together, they inevitably wind up in the kitchen, and it's proven to be more popular than the hotel bar.

As for the guest rooms, all 444 of them feature a 55-inch LCD TV that serves as a hub for in-room information and entertainment. Hotel and local area information is at each guest's fingertips, and the TVs allow guests to stream

Netflix, Hulu, YouTube, and Pandora from their smart devices directly to the big screen.

REDEFINING RESTAURANT AND BAR SPACE

For sports bars and social clubs, it is crucial that no patron is left out of the audiovisual action.

When Lodging Hospitality Management opened The Westport Social, a 13,000-square-foot classic bar and gaming lounge packed with amenities and entertainment, they chose to use large-scale fine-pitch LED video walls to ensure that every seat is the best seat in the house.

Three 16-foot-long, 9-foot-high LED video walls are each complemented by four smaller widescreen video displays that show alternate channels, giving patrons a total of 15 different screens to watch live sports.

As elaborate as The Westport Social installation is, each one of the 15 displays can be controlled by any employee using nothing more than an iPad. This allows the morning and evening shifts to turn everything on or off with one button, as well as change channels and switch from a single screen to a quad view.

As consumers increasingly rely on modern technologies to navigate their daily lives, hoteliers that integrate AV experiences will offer meaningful benefits to guests and differentiate themselves from the competition. By offering enhanced services such as personalized control of guest room electronics, on-demand wayfinding through digital displays, and the latest audio, video and lighting systems in restaurants and lobbies, the hotel industry will continue to improve guests' stays and attract new generations of travelers. ■

Brad Grimes is senior director of communications for AVIXA the Audiovisual and Integrated Experience Association. AVIXA represents the \$186-billion global commercial AV industry and produces InfoComm trade shows around the world. For more information, visit www.avixa.org/hospitalityAV.

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How to avoid hotel tech disasters

by DON KERMATH

BUYING NEW HOSPITALITY tech is like buying a new car. You should take it for a test drive before you buy it. Guenter Gephart, general manager of Four Seasons Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, says the best tech advice he's received is, "Always test it before you use it." In the case of Four Seasons, they test end-user tech in a lab six to eight months before it ends up in a hotel room. "Always have a backup plan just in case the platform fails," said Hazelynn D'Arco, general manager of La Quinta Downtown Baltimore, MD. Additionally, said Gephart and D'Arco, there is a class of guests that prefers to avoid technology.

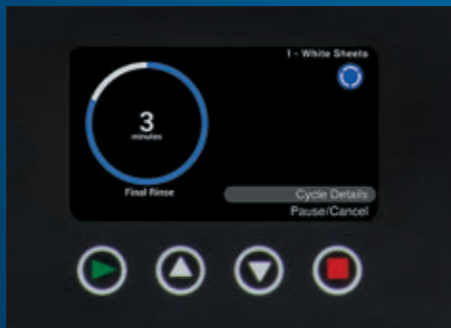


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“Ultimately you are in the hospitality business. That means the human touch will always be desired. Technology can be used to improve the human touch.”

For these guests, you need to make the tech seamless and give them a way to bypass the tech and deal directly with a human. That’s advice any hotelier can use, from international luxury brands to local casual hotels.

Introducing new hotel tech can have unintended, but often predictable, consequences. For example, Four Seasons tested a system to open and close curtains from a control panel. During testing, they discovered guests pulled and consequently tore the curtain instead of first looking for a button to open or close the curtain. As a result of testing, they were able to have the system modified to sense when the guest was trying to manually open or close the curtain. At this point, the motor would finish the task for the guest. In this case, the technology was unfamiliar to the guest. If you don’t have a laboratory to test new tech, ask your vendor to install the tech in one room and test it over a period of months before committing to full-scale implementation. Be sure to ask your vendor about redundancies and back-up options in case the system fails, temporarily or permanently.

Redundancy makes good business strategy, D’arco said. It is easy to become dependent on the latest tech. La Quinta has a lodging operating program, for example, that automatically translates communications between the varied languages of the staff. You can’t trust that your technology will always work, you need a backup plan. Try to have at

least one bilingual person on staff, in this example, so you can convey important instructions during a communication system failure. Where practical, you should inventory replacement parts for customer-facing technology, like room thermostats, TV remotes, and WiFi routers. Once you introduce the new tech, the guests will expect it to work reliably. You could lose repeat business, for example, if your WiFi is not working during a guest’s visit – not to mention generating poor online reviews. Always have a backup plan or workaround in case of system failure. According to D’Arco and Gephard, you also need to accommodate the guests who prefer not to engage with technology but rather with you, a human.

Ultimately, you’re in the hospitality business. That means the human touch will always be desired. Technology can be used to improve the human touch. Property management systems for luxury and casual hotels now store personal information about the returning guest.

Suggested data points for a luxury brand:

- ➔ Does the guest like chocolate?
- ➔ What is his or her preferred room temperature?
- ➔ Does he or she prefer dealing with a human instead of a mobile device?

Suggested data points for the casual hotel to maintain and monitor:

- ➔ When was a guest’s most-recent visit?
- ➔ How long did he or she stay?
- ➔ Were there any complaints or compliments logged?

With this information at hand, your staff can personalize the stay for your repeat guests. An automated text or email will never replace the feeling your guests get when you call them by their names.

Hotel technology is advancing faster than a savvy business person can comprehend. Imagine how your guests and staff feel. Always test the tech before wide-scale implementation so you can avoid disastrous unintended consequences. Tech is going to fail, sooner or later, temporarily or permanently; have a back-up plan so your guests always have the best experience possible. Finally, while you are fiddling with your workstation or staring into your mobile device, don’t forget to look up; your staff and guests want to see your joyful smile and hear your gracious voice. You are in the hospitality business after all. ■

Don Kermath is a human resources, communications, and connections expert who strives to empower hospitality leaders to transform their workforce into productive, cohesive, team players who stay for the long haul and contribute to innovation and excellence on the job. After meeting with Don and exploring how you are currently trying to improve your organization, you may discover that his highly customized programs make sense for you (and could really benefit your bottom line). Email Don at Don@DonKermath.com or visit www.DonKermath.com for more information.

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HOUSTON

by ASIF LAKHANI

KAMIL ZELEZIK/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

AT LEAST A DOZEN PUBLICATIONS have named Houston, Texas, as a top destination to visit in 2019 – all for a variety of reasons. Whether it is the travel value, culinary excellence, invigorating nightlife, or all of the above, Houston is one of the hottest cities in America at the moment.

The city experienced more than 21 million visits in 2017, according to research done by OmniTrak Research Group on behalf of the Houston First Corporation, a local government body

created to manage the city's convention and performing arts facilities.

Nearly 90 percent (18 million) of those 21 million visits in 2017 were made by domestic travelers, while the remaining 3-million plus were international. (The city hosted Super Bowl LI in February of that year.) Still, Houston's domestic travel numbers are higher than both the state of Texas and U.S. national averages, according to the report.

It only makes sense then that Houston's hotel scene is scorching hot right now. In just a few years, the city will have completed a master plan that

includes bringing 2,300 more hotel rooms online in downtown Houston alone, with hundreds more opening in nearby neighborhoods and communities, according to Visit Houston.

One of the city's newest hotels, the Post Oak Hotel in uptown Houston, earned a AAA Five-Diamond rating within six months of opening, according to Visit Houston. The 38-story hotel features a Rolls Royce showroom and a Bentley and Bugatti dealership on site in addition to 250 guest rooms, 20 executive suites, and a sizable conference facility.

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Recent hotel plans also have included renovating and rebranding the Melrose building in downtown, commonly known as “Houston’s first modern skyscraper,” into a Le Meridien hotel, which falls under the Starwood Hotels

portfolio. The building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, according to the *Houston Chronicle*.

Maybe what’s most remarkable about Houston’s hospitality boom is the 17 percent Hotel Occupancy Tax rate, which

is among the highest in the nation. Six percent of the tax goes to the state of Texas, while the remaining percentages split across the city of Houston, Harris County, and the Harris County Houston Sports Authority, according to Houston First Corporation.

Houston First facilitates the success of the city’s tourism scene in multiple ways. Its primary responsibilities include overseeing the execution of 40 major events and 200 smaller ones (trade shows, conventions, etc.) a year, in addition to 600 concerts, theater shows, and civic events annually as well.

One of the biggest events taking place in Houston this year is the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing. To celebrate, Visit Houston has worked with hotels, restaurants, artists, and more to curate a variety of space-themed itineraries for multiple demographics. The offerings include space-themed meals and snacks – some menu items being resurrected from 1960s – at restaurants and hotels across town. (Houston’s food scene, in general, has earned a reputation as being one of the best in the country.) For more local culture, visit the Museum District or arts and crafts vendors in the Avenida Houston District in downtown.

Despite the success of the moon landing, “Houston’s favorite tradition” is the annual Livestock Show and Rodeo, which takes place over the course of three weeks each spring. The 2019 event set records for concert attendance and livestock auctions, while awarding more than 800 scholarships to Texas students, according to Rodeo Houston.

In the end, it’s no surprise that Houston is a marquee destination for 2019 and well beyond. The city aims to please and succeeds in doing so with a multitude of experiences that can either convey big city or represent the unique pride of a small town – sometimes both simultaneously. No matter what the leisure or business objective of a trip to Houston is, it’s safe to say an encore visit will be called for in the future. ■



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FROM HOTEL ROOMS TO DINING ROOMS

Exploring tech and
personalization in hotel F&B

by JOEL MONTANIEL



ANN GEORGEVA, SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

COMPETITION IS AT AN ALL-TIME high for hotel restaurants to win over guests and with total guest spending in hotel restaurants, bars, lounges, banquets, and more totaling \$48.7 billion in 2017, it's never been more important to stand out. From restaurants hiring award-winning sushi chefs to the rise of robot bartenders, buzz-worthy experiences that help restaurants stand out have been taking center stage in the press.

While it's too early to label these experiences as experiments or mainstays, they continue to get attention from consumers. Regardless of your viewpoint on these stunts, it's clear the most successful hotel operators are focusing on technological advancements for their F&B outlets that will enable them to integrate previously siloed tech and allow them to deliver exceptional service and hospitality to their guests from the hotel room to the dining room. And the opportunities are endless, with brands like Marriott, which recently dedicated much of its recent investor day presentation discussing its F&B strategy, taking notice of the changes in consumer behavior and thoughtfully revamping its food and beverage outlets with a focus on personalized experiences.

Today, the food and beverage industry is leveraging new connected technologies to streamline operations, manage reviews and loyalty, and deliver the personalized offers and dining experiences consumers crave at their properties. Hotel F&B outlets are no different. The hotels integrating this technology are poised to stand out from the competition.

TECH WITH A HUMAN TOUCH

While technology continues to play a bigger role in every aspect of consumers' lives, including restaurant and hotel experiences, operators are learning to focus on what diners really want: personalized, memorable experiences. Restaurants today, and particularly those within hotel properties, are starting to leverage technology for the convenience and personalization it offers without losing sight of delivering a human touch.

Hotels using platforms connected to both their property management system (PMS) and point-of-sale system (POS) are able to collect,

“While technology continues to play a bigger role in every aspect of consumers’ lives, including restaurant and hotel experiences, operators are learning to focus on what diners really want: personalized, memorable experiences.”

store, and analyze important guest data and preferences that enable more proactive hospitality. For example, operators can store a guest’s favorite pinot noir that they ordered at their hotel restaurant in Miami and put a complimentary bottle in the room during their next stay at their sister property in NYC. Similarly, if a guest mentions a peanut allergy at dinner, the hotel can remove peanuts from the mini-bar in their hotel room. By leveraging technology to create a high-touch hospitality experience, hotel operators are staying ahead of the curve on every guest’s experience.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH REVIEWS

With 91 percent of 18-34-year-old consumers trusting online reviews as much as personal recommendations from friends, and 30 percent of diners looking to online reviews for new recommendations, a bad review can make or break any restaurant, and by association, the hotel property.

While it’s often resource-intensive for hotels to monitor all reviews, recent innovations have made it seamless. New platforms that aggregate reviews across multiple sites like Yelp, Google, TripAdvisor, and social media, allow managers to easily stay on top of responding to each review, whether positive or negative, and grow that customer relationship. They can easily pull reporting of any date range, and get a daily review summary in their inbox so they stay on top of ways to improve their hotel’s restaurant experience.

Each review also contains important information about the guest, which hotels can now automatically pull and add to guest profiles that span across properties. This means if a diner raved about the champagne recommendations, the hotel can see the review and offer them a free glass of a new offering when they check in for their next stay. Alternatively, if a reviewer complained about the vegetarian options at a hotel restaurant in Los Angeles, when they check in to a sister property in Chicago, the front desk can recommend a new vegetarian room-service offering.

OFFERING PERSONALIZED SPECIAL OFFERS

One-size-fits-all marketing is no longer effective today with 58 percent of all revenue generated from emails coming from targeted campaigns and 79 percent of consumers saying they are only likely to engage with an offer if it has been personalized based on a previous interaction.

With the abundance of guest data today, hotels can pull and aggregate data from reviews, reservations, and dining experiences to segment unique audiences and automate personalized email marketing. Whether it’s inviting all guests who frequently order a Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon at the restaurant to an exclusive tasting or selling tickets to a holiday cookie-decorating class for local families, every offer should be tailored to your guests. Restaurants also can manage settings to make sure they aren’t sending an email more than once a week and track ROI on each campaign in real time, ensuring

guests are truly benefitting from the offers they receive.

HEY ALEXA, WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR THE FOOD AND BEVERAGE INDUSTRY?

Amazon spent 2018 making Alexa a staple in homes across the country, with people using the voice technology to do everything from calling an Uber to turning on the lights. A recent study estimates 50 percent of all searches will be voice searches by 2020, so the trend isn’t slowing down.

Voice-powered technology has been huge across all sectors and hotels are no different. While we’ve already seen an Alexa for hospitality partnership that allows guests to order room service, control lighting, and play music from in-room devices, the future will bring the convenience of voice to operators as well.

In fact, Amazon recently made its first foray into restaurant operations in 2018 with an investment aimed to bring voice-enabled tools to the in-service experience. Think, “Hey Alexa, how many VIP hotel guests do we have dining with us tonight?”, “Is anyone celebrating a birthday or anniversary tonight?”, or “Hey Alexa, do any guests have a shellfish allergy?”

Further down the line, we’ll continue to see personalization play a major role in the industry as hotel restaurants apply emerging technology to deliver new offers and memorable experiences across the hotel, ultimately building deeper guest relationships across the guest journey. ■

Joel Montaniel is the CEO and co-founder of SevenRooms, a reservation, seating, and guest-engagement platform, where he leads business strategy and sales. Prior to founding SevenRooms in 2011, Montaniel served as the chief of staff at LivePerson, leading strategic, operational, and cultural initiatives. He started his career at Credit Suisse within the Real Estate, Finance & Securitization Group. He graduated with a B.A. from Georgetown University.

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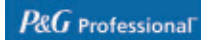
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AAHOA *around the nation*



1. AAHOA hosted an exclusive panel at BDwest in Los Angeles. Secretary Nishant (Neal) Patel, Female Director Western Division Nimisha Patel, South Pacific Regional Ambassador Jyoti Sarolia, and former Director at Large Vipul Dayal shared their insights on what hotel owners and designers can learn from and teach each other.
2. Young Professional Director Eastern Division Purvi Panwala was a guest speaker at the Tourism and Hotels Globally Empowering Women and Sustainable Development event in New York City. Purvi participated in a panel at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, the United Nation's largest gathering on gender equality and women's rights, and the single largest forum for United Nations Member States.
3. North Central Regional Director Naresh (Nick) Patel hosted a Town Hall in Lincoln Park, MI.
4. South Central Texas Regional Director Mike Patel held a well-attended Town Hall in New Braunfels, TX, one of several held in the state.
5. AAHOA Lifetime Member Trusha Patel conducted BEST's Inhospital to Human Trafficking Training sponsored by AAHOA at the Southwest - Albuquerque Regional in New Mexico.
6. Southwest Regional Director Imesh Vaidya hosted the first of 30 AAHOA Regional Conferences in 2019 in Albuquerque, NM. Vice Chairman Biran Patel and Immediate Past Chairman Hitesh (HP) Patel were on hand, as was guest speaker, Albuquerque Mayor Tim Keller.
7. South Pacific Regional Director Mike Riverside and the South Pacific Regional Ambassadors hosted a Town Hall in Chino Hills, CA, that was attended by more than 100 members.
8. Female Director Eastern Division Lina Patel led a Women Hoteliers Town Hall that drew more than 100 attendees in Cincinnati, OH. At the event, they hosted a Ladies in Lodging Panel, along with three guest speakers.



9



10



11

- 9. Treasurer Vinay Patel was in attendance as Southwest Regional Director Imesh Vaidya hosted his second Regional Conference and Trade Show of the year, this one in Phoenix, AZ.
- 10. Arkansas Regional Director Girish (Gary) Patel held the last Town Hall for the Gulf Region in Little Rock, AR. Because of the amazing growth in membership, Arkansas is now a separate region, and the Gulf Region consists of Louisiana and Mississippi.



12



13

- 11. Vice President of Government Affairs Chirag Shah spoke at the Hunter Hotel Investment Conference in Atlanta, where he conveyed the importance of building relationships between government and business. AHLA President and CEO Chip Rogers, AAOHA's former President & CEO, also spoke at the event.
- 12. Florida Regional Director Bharat Patel hosted a Town Hall meeting in Tallahassee prior to the Florida Tourism Day at the Capitol, co-hosted by AAOHA and Florida Restaurant & Lodging Association.



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- 13. More than 60 members earned their certification in the BEST Inhospital to Human Trafficking Training sponsored by AAOHA at South Central Texas Regional Director Mike Patel's Town Hall in San Antonio. Immediate Past Chairman Hitesh (HP) Patel and former Director at Large Navnit (Nick) Patel also were in attendance.



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- 14. Southwest Regional Director Imesh Vaidya and the Regional Ambassadors hosted a charity golf tournament in Phoenix, AZ, that raised more than \$30,000 for the East Valley Firefighters and the Pediatric Cancer Research Foundation.



16

- 15. Mid South Regional Director Sunil Patel and the Regional Ambassadors hosted well-attended Town Halls in Paducah (pictured) and Bowling Green, KY.



17

- 16. More than 300 AAOHA Members joined North Texas Regional Director Mayur (Mike) Patel in Irving, TX, for a Town Hall.



18

- 17. Immediate Past Chairman Hitesh (HP) Patel, CHLA President & CEO Lynn Mohrfeld, AAOHA Interim President & CEO Rachel Humphrey, and AHLA President & CEO Chip Rogers attended the California Legislative Action Summit in Sacramento. The event was co-hosted by AAOHA and the California Hotel & Lodging Association.



19

- 18. Immediate Past Chairman Hitesh (HP) Patel and Trusha Patel were in attendance as South Central Texas Regional Director Mike Patel hosted a Town Hall in Killeen. Officer K. Moore of the Killeen Police Department spoke at the event.



20

- 19. Chairwoman Jagruti Panwala, Interim President & CEO Rachel Humphrey, Treasurer Vinay Patel, Immediate Past Chairman Hitesh (HP) Patel, and Sanjay (Sam) Patel, Mid Atlantic Regional Director held an open forum at the Edison, NJ, Town Hall.

- 20. Mid Atlantic Regional Director Sanjay (Sam) Patel and Female Director Eastern Division Lina Patel held a Women Hoteliers Town Hall in South Brunswick, NJ.

AAHOA Vendor Partners

AAHOA is pleased to provide this list of its Club Blue, Platinum, Gold, Silver, and Allied members as a resource for members. AAHOA, however, does not endorse these companies or the products or services they offer, or any of the discounts, deal terms or other offers related to the price that any of these companies may advertise, market, or promote to AAHOA members.

AAHOA strongly encourages all of its members and any users of this list to conduct all reasonable and necessary due diligence and research prior to selecting a company with which to do business.

Gray shading denotes Platinum (Dark Grey) & Silver Members

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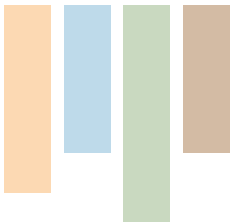


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