

# today's hotelier

February 2022 | todayshotelier.com

A publication of AAHOA

## TECHNOLOGY ISSUE

# 3

 tech-savvy ways to boost revenue

### ANDY INGRAHAM

PRESIDENT, CEO & FOUNDER OF NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BLACK HOTEL OWNERS, OPERATORS & DEVELOPERS (NABHOOD)



“ The 2022 travel forecast shows that business travel bookings and meetings remain down, but leisure travel is *on the rise.* ”





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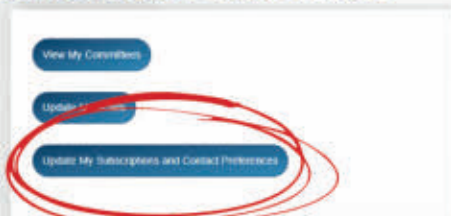
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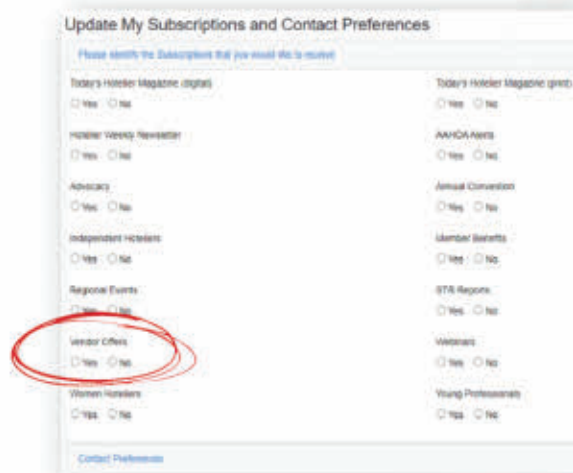
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# 5 Things to Know

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Registration is now open for the 2022 AAHOA Convention & Trade Show, the most-anticipated event of the year! With leading names in the industry, incredible insights from experts you trust, inspiration around every corner, and the chance to network, learn, and make deals on the Trade Show floor, you do not want to miss this year's event, set for April 12-15 in Baltimore, MD. Lifetime Members, don't forget! The deadline to qualify for complimentary registration is February 11, so don't wait! [AAHOA.com/Convention](http://AAHOA.com/Convention)



### SUBSCRIBE TO OUR VENDOR DIGEST FOR DEALS AND DISCOUNTS.

Did you know AAHOA sends weekly deals and discounts from our Industry Partners exclusively for AAHOA Members? We took your feedback to heart and combined their specials into one weekly Vendor Digest, which is chock full of great offerings. Not subscribed? Simply update your communication preferences in [MyAAHOA.com](http://MyAAHOA.com) and opt in so you don't miss out! You also can check out the online Vendor Directory for a complete list of AAHOA's Industry Partners. [AAHOA.com/Vendors](http://AAHOA.com/Vendors)



### WE'LL SEE YOU AT HUNTER NEXT MONTH.

On March 22-24, the 2022 Hunter Hotel Investment Conference will bring together the nation's most influential leaders and investors in the hotel industry to analyze trends, network, and turn prospective opportunities into business transactions. If you believe, as we do, that successful businesses and investments are built on meaningful relationships, you won't want to miss it! [HunterConference.com](http://HunterConference.com)



### WANT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE? SERVE ON THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS.

We are looking for motivated members who are eager to assist AAHOA in achieving its latest goals as set forth in the 2021-2023 Strategic Plan. Answer the call and volunteer to serve. The nomination period runs through February 14, and open positions and eligibility requirements are available at [AAHOA.com/2022Candidates](http://AAHOA.com/2022Candidates).



### HELP AAHOA RECOGNIZE SHINING STARS.

Each year, AAHOA honors hoteliers for their contributions to the hospitality industry. Do you know a hotelier who you feel has gone above and beyond in their efforts? If so, now is the time to nominate him or her for one of seven awards to be bestowed at AAHOACON22 in Baltimore, MD. The deadline to submit nominations is Friday, Feb. 11, 2022, and you do not need to be an AAHOA Member to submit a nomination. [AAHOA.com/Convention](http://AAHOA.com/Convention)



2022

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& TRADE SHOWS

## SAVE THE DATES

<b>02/15</b>	Central Midwest Regional Tulsa, OK	<b>08/04</b>	South Carolina Regional Columbia, SC
<b>05/17</b>	Greater LA Area Regional Los Angeles, CA	<b>08/09</b>	Northwest Regional Vancouver, WA
<b>05/19</b>	North Pacific Regional San Jose, CA	<b>08/24</b>	North Texas Regional Irving, TX
<b>06/02</b>	Georgia Regional Atlanta, GA	<b>08/26</b>	Southeast Texas Regional Houston, TX
<b>06/09</b>	Southwest Regional Salt Lake City, UT	<b>09/13</b>	Mid Atlantic Regional Cherry Hill, NJ
<b>06/21</b>	Alabama Regional Birmingham, AL	<b>09/15</b>	Washington DC Area Regional Arlington, VA
<b>07/11</b>	Mid South Regional Nashville, TN	<b>10/06</b>	South Pacific Regional San Diego, CA
<b>07/13</b>	Northeast Regional Rochester, NY	<b>10/14</b>	North Central Regional Cincinnati, OH
<b>07/26</b>	Arkansas Regional Little Rock, AR	<b>11/04</b>	Gulf Regional New Orleans, LA
<b>07/28</b>	Upper Midwest Regional Minneapolis, MN	<b>11/29</b>	South Central Texas Regional Austin, TX
<b>08/02</b>	North Carolina Regional Charlotte, NC	<b>TBD</b>	Florida Regional Orlando, FL

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**VINAY PATEL**  
AAHOA CHAIR (2021-2022)

“

While under lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was a lonely and isolating time for many. Thankfully, technology helped, allowing people to communicate with loved ones as we protected ourselves from the virus.”

## Knowing when to say when

**W**HEN I FIRST STARTED WORKING IN HOTELS IN A LEADERSHIP ROLE, I learned a very valuable lesson after asking some employees to take care of something but not double-checking that it got done. Later on, a quality assurance rep came to check if it was completed and, long story short, we failed the inspection. Simply trusting people is in my nature, but ever since then, I always confirm that things under my watch are completed.

Technology has given us an easy way to communicate. While face-to-face communication is always important, especially in our industry, we now have tools at our fingertips to send a quick text, make a quick phone call, or send an email for a quick response. With all of our easily accessible methods of communication, we're able to eliminate time and distance, making things like double-checking a task's completion much easier.

We use technology to book hotel rooms, keep our travel documents, and virtualize basic day-to-day tasks. Technology also has given us a wider audience. AAHOA is able to communicate with members, increase productivity, and share content, which allows us to get more creative and reach a more diverse audience than ever before.

While under lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was a lonely and isolating time for many. Thankfully, technology helped, allowing people to communicate with loved ones as we protected ourselves from the virus.

But with everything, there's a downside. Now, wherever you go, everyone is looking down at their cell phone, distracted from the world around them. We're all dialed in all the time and it's often difficult to turn it off. Technology can be a distraction, with several social media platforms vying for our attention. It also can be a tool to spread misinformation. Excessive use also has proven to have negative effects on mental health.

The point is, it's up to you to decide the extent to which you use it in your personal life. Technology has certainly made our lives easier and helped tremendously throughout this pandemic. It has allowed us to operate more lean businesses and make better, and quicker, business decisions.

But when it comes to reflecting on how we each use technology on a personal level, perhaps it's time we take a step back and recognize our overreliance on our devices, and instead take some time to reinforce meaningful interactions – in person. That's what the essence of our industry is all about.

I trust that you'll do it, but this time, I'll be double-checking. ■



THE ROAD  
TO RECOVERY  
RUNS THROUGH AAHOA

## AMERICA'S LEADING ORGANIZATION FOR HOTEL OWNERS

Nearly 20,000 hotel owners rely on AAHOA for the critical information they need to navigate the current landscape and protect their investments. It's during unpredictable times that the power of an association really shines through – letting every one of our members realize that because of AAHOA, they never have to go it alone.



### **ADVOCACY**

AAHOA advocates on behalf of hoteliers at the federal, state, and local levels, and represents the voice of franchisees with their brands. Thanks to AAHOA's efforts, billions of dollars of aid were allocated to state and local governments in the American Rescue Plan.



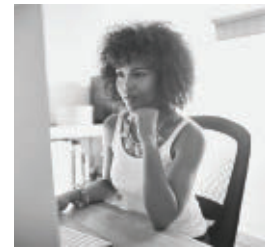
### **EDUCATION**

AAHOA provides the resources hoteliers need to stay ahead regardless of where they are in their career. This includes certificate programs, hundreds of on-demand educational webcasts, and many other professional development programs.



### **EVENTS**

You can't find more events for hoteliers anywhere else – AAHOA hosts events across the country to bring hoteliers and vendor partners together to learn from one another and grow their professional networks.



### **RESOURCES**

With exclusive discounts from AAHOA's Vendor Partners, industry resources, exclusive partnerships, and more, AAHOA is able to provide the critical information and resources hoteliers need to protect your investments.

# Congress in 2022

Redoubled policy priorities and the midterm elections

by SEAN GROSSNICKLE

**T'S A NEW YEAR ON CAPITOL HILL AND MEMBERS OF** Congress returned to a snow-covered Washington, D.C., in early January to commence the second session of the 117th Congress. Lawmakers spent the opening weeks revisiting unfinished agendas from 2021, addressing the Omicron variant, and promoting voting-rights legislation. This new year is host to a jam-packed agenda, from the pandemic response to social spending to federal government funding. And the 2022 midterm elections take place in November, so expect lawmakers to hit the campaign trail in full force. With all that's going on, here is what America's hoteliers can expect from Congress in the coming months.

## COOPERATION IN CONGRESS

After a partisan year of politics, Democrats and Republicans are unlikely to mend their divisive relationship. Political infighting and party-line defectors defined the 117th Congress's first legislative session, particularly in the split Senate where Senators Joe Manchin (D-WV) and Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ) often opposed key measures of President Biden's policies. The 2022 midterm elections will further strain this relationship as lawmakers are keen to achieve as many political victories as possible, whether that is passing legislation

or obstructing it depends on the member's political affiliation. Common ground between the two parties will be scarce.

Congress still faces looming deadlines that it extended near the close of 2021, principally the December continuing resolution that funds the federal government through Feb. 18, 2022. Just months ago, Democrats and Republicans scrambled to pass the continuing resolution and raise the debt ceiling twice, teeing up another test of bipartisan cooperation. The major spike in COVID-19 cases could create an opportunity for a supplemental spending bill passed with bipartisan support. The AAHOA Government Affairs Team will continue to monitor and report the latest news and updates to AAHOA Members.

## POLICY PREVIEW

Congressional Democrats, holding narrow majorities in both chambers, remain intent on delivering the Build Back Better Act, the cornerstone climate and social-spending legislation topping President Biden's agenda. The bill was tabled in December after it failed to receive support in the Senate. At the time this article was penned, lawmakers had yet to renegotiate the policies, price, and measures of the Build Back Better Act, which could be delayed through March. ■

## AAHOA 2022 policy priorities

To learn more about AAHOA's  
policy priorities for this year, visit  
[AAHOA.com/advocacy/policy-agenda](https://AAHOA.com/advocacy/policy-agenda).

# Congress delivers President Biden's Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act

Common Ground profiles members of opposing parties who are working together to advance issues important to hoteliers.

by SEAN GROSSNICKLE

## THE ISSUE

In recent years, the topic of America's infrastructure investment has frequented the halls of Congress and the White House. Crumbling bridges, contaminated water systems, and outdated power grids, just to name a few, are commonplace in the United States. Multiple events showcasing the state of the country's infrastructure in the past decade, such as the contaminated drinking water in Flint, MI, or the power crisis in Texas, have spurred Congressional interest in infrastructure investment. President Biden has adopted infrastructure investment and reform as a key pillar of his presidential agenda, working throughout 2021 to sell both Congress and the American public on historic investments into the country's infrastructure.

## COMMON GROUND

In June of 2021, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) was introduced in the House of Representatives. Congress extensively debated and amended the bill in the House and Senate. On Aug. 10, 2021, the Senate passed an amended version of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act by a bipartisan majority of 69-30, with 19 Republicans joining Democrats to support the bill. The House debated the measure again in September and postponed the vote until November. On Nov. 5, 2021, the House passed the IIJA with a vote of 228-206. President Biden signed the IIJA on Nov. 15, 2021. The IIJA passed through Congress on a bipartisan basis with 50 Senate Democrats, 19 Senate Republicans, 215 House Democrats, and 13 House Republicans voting in favor of the \$1.2-trillion bill.

## Rep. Peter A. DeFazio (D-OR-04), Chairman of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

*"Today, President Biden is making history by signing into law the largest investment in America's infrastructure in a generation. This historic law will help address the climate crisis, create good-paying jobs, and boost American competitiveness by upgrading our roads, bridges, rail, transit, drinking water, and wastewater infrastructure. I'm proud of the role the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee played in setting a high bar for this legislation. I look forward to working with the Biden administration as we began to implement this law and get these much-needed funds out the door as quickly as possible because communities can't afford to wait."*

## Rep. John Katko (R-NY-24), Member of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

*"During the past four years, I served as co-chair of the Problem Solvers Caucus Infrastructure Working Group and successfully developed a consensus-driven proposal that served as the basis for the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. In August, the Senate passed this measure with support from 19 Republicans, including Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell. And last week, this measure passed the House with my support."* ■

# Together, we

# THRIVE

## Technological innovations and NABHOOD's 2022 outlook on Black-owned hotels

by ANDY INGRAHAM

**T**HANKS TO A CASCADE OF EVENTS during the past two years that sparked a global conversation on issues related to race in America, there has been an awakening on behalf of countless industries

with regards to the value, perspective, buying power, and needs of the minority consumer. To look within our own industry, more destination-management organizations and tourism boards are increasing their marketing efforts to reach minority consumers. Similarly, the welcomed focus on “Black Lives Matter” has shifted many longstanding goals of the National Association of Black Hotel Owners, Operators & Developers to the forefront of corporate America’s action plan.

At the core of our mission, NABHOOD seeks to increase minority employment at the executive level and highlight diversity issues affecting the hospitality industry with the goal of positively impacting the economy. Approximately 1,000 of the approximately 59,000 hotels

Andy Ingraham,  
President, CEO &  
Founder of National  
Association  
of Black Hotel  
Owners, Operators  
& Developers  
(NABHOOD)



To keep pace with evolving consumer preferences and habits, we must use technology to remain data driven as intelligence market research allows NABHOOD to identify needs and behaviors of underrepresented communities like the African-American market. That that end, NABHOOD partnered with MMGY to conduct the U.S. Black Traveler Study, which revealed in 2019:

➔ **44%** of all U.S. travel spend is accounted for by multicultural travelers

➔ **275 million overnight trips** were taken by **Asian Americans**

➔ **458.2 million overnight trips** were taken by **LGBTQ+ Americans**

➔ **444.6 million overnight** trips were taken by **LatinX Americans**

➔ **458.2 million overnight trips** were taken by **African-Americans**

**The U.S. Black Traveler Study also found that African-Americans spent \$129.6 billion on domestic and international leisure travel in 2019, and Black organizations spent an average of \$800,000 on meetings, conferences, and conventions pre-pandemic.**



[L-R]: Raoul Thomas (CEO, CGI Merchant Group), Diana Sanchez (wife of Raoul Thomas), Christopher J. Nassetta (President/CEO, Hilton), and Andy Ingraham (President/CEO/Founder, NABHOOD). CGI Merchant Group is in the process of acquiring Trump International Hotel in Washington, D.C., and recently opened The Gabriel South Beach Miami.

in the U.S. are Black owned, and NABHOOD is working diligently to increase this number. AAHOA represents nearly 34,000 member-owned hotels with more than 1 million employees in the U.S. economy, making the partnership between NABHOOD and AAHOA necessary and exciting as we are pursuing similar goals. When we look at AAHOA and the deals we've made together, we realize we can both thrive and truly make a difference.

#### MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

NABHOOD's 2022 outlook is bright. On the heels of the 25th annual International African-American Hotel Ownership and Investment Summit, held in October 2021 and attended by hundreds of hoteliers and global tourism organizations, the pandemic continues to compel organizations like NABHOOD to focus on technological innovation, succession planning, and generational wealth creation. I'm faithfully committed to educating individuals on how to become hotel owners and investors, and I remain dedicated to forging relationships with major brands, sharing minority investment trends, and exploring supplier opportunities.

As part of these efforts and based on the changing needs of today, NABHOOD continues to take advantage of hybrid programming with a cadre of webinars. And though NABHOOD Summit went virtual in 2020, we found no true substitute for in-person events with an uptick in prospective hotel owners and investors

desirous of connecting with major brands in the conference format.

By keeping NABHOOD intimate, we've seen monumental opportunities emerge. The pandemic has created an economic crisis that devastated our industry, which is why we continue offerings such as our annual Investment and Hotel Ownership Summit in addition to hosting "The ABCs of Hotel Ownership" in major U.S. cities while transitioning the curriculum to online platforms.

#### WHAT'S NEXT

The 2022 travel forecast shows that business-travel bookings and meetings remain down, but leisure travel is on the rise. Thus, NABHOOD continues its marketing campaign to patronize Black-owned hotels, an ongoing effort since the 2012 launch of the first, comprehensive online Black-owned hotel directory.

We have also upgraded our Career Portal as another important step toward Black hotel ownership for our members. The first of its kind, the portal allows students, recent graduates, and hotel employees to match with jobs in the industry, allowing them to attain positions at various brands and travel organizations, and realize the dream of becoming hotel owners.

These efforts, and many others, all work in tandem to help us achieve our primary goal of increasing the number of African-Americans developing, managing, operating and owning hotels. We hope you'll join us on this journey, because there is much work to be done and together, we rise. ■

# Risky

**H**OTELS AREN'T TYPICALLY known as hotbeds of technological innovation. As a whole, the industry can be described

as “technology hesitant,” according to John Burns, president of Hotel Technology Consulting. Not that there isn’t a culture of innovation in the industry, said Diane Estner, president of DANNI Enterprises, “but there’s also a culture around avoiding innovation.”

“The majority of our industry, nobody wants to be first,” Estner explained. “They want to know that it’s been tested and tried and proven before they actually sign up.”

Burns said that slowness to adopt technology stems from hospitality’s fundamental debate of high tech vs. high touch. Previously, a common belief was that embracing technology would jeopardize a hotel’s customer relationship. However, Burns said hotels increasingly see new tech tools as a way to gain a competitive advantage and differentiate themselves in their guest services.

Burns said the changing preferences of guests and the workforce make new technology a necessity for most hotels.

“Our guests live in a world where they expect recognition. They expect efficient, detailed digital dialogue. And they expect the contactless ability to do things without necessarily [working with] a person,” Burns said. “So,

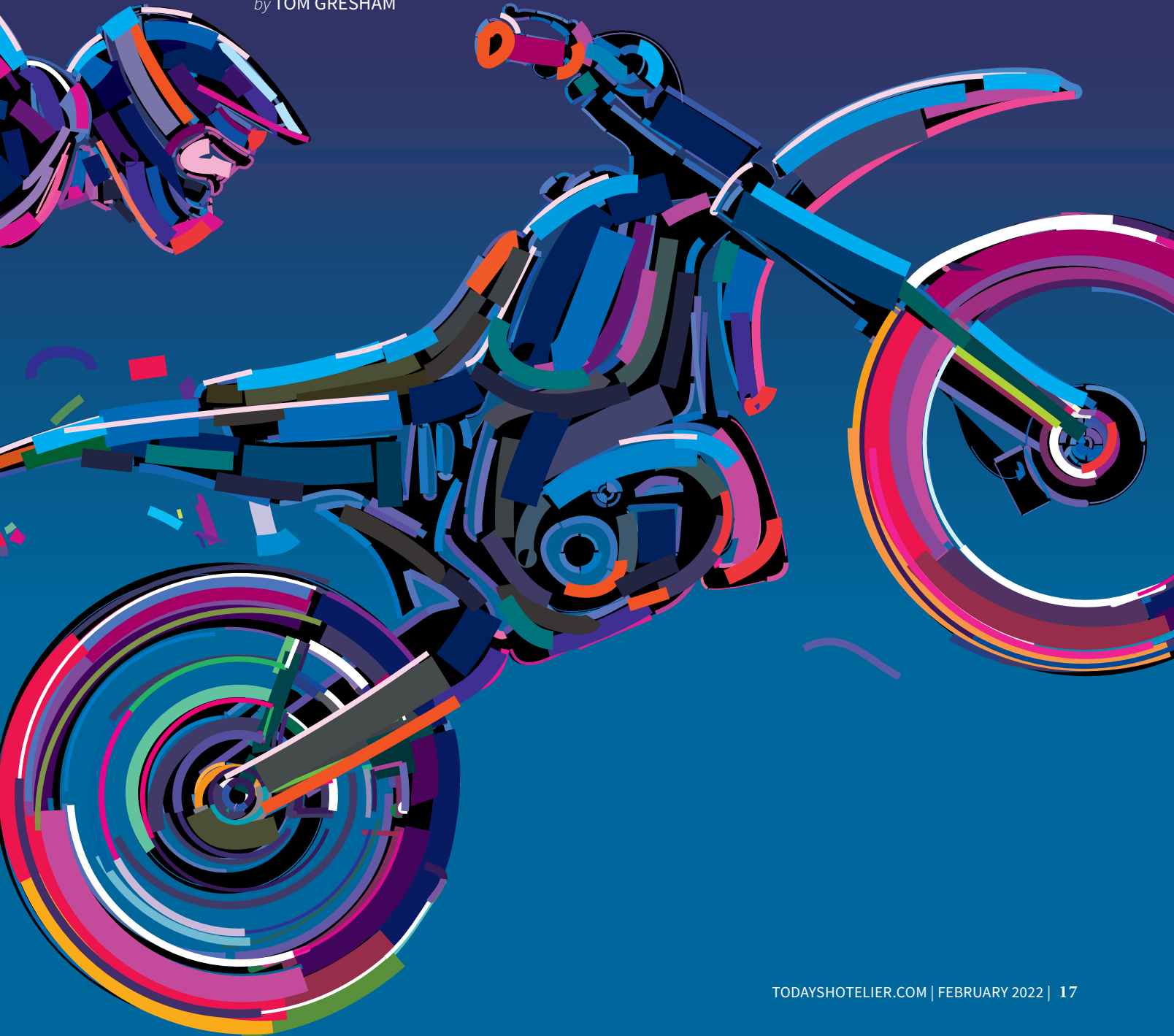
wherever we are on the technology adoption spectrum, our guests are telling us to get on board. Our workforce itself also is changing. We have a traditional challenge in the hotel business where we have high turnover, especially among line staff. And the new line staff, the 20somethings who are working our front desk, are digital nomads. They’re certainly digitally proficient, and they’re looking to us as employers to have systems that are in line with what they have in their hands, which are remarkable devices. So, we’re being forced to be more technologically literate, technologically adept, and equipped. Whether we like it or not, we’re being pulled into the 21st century.”

The question becomes how ambitious a hotel should be in adopting technology, weighing the benefits, costs, and risks associated with one of two approaches: pursuing the newest, bleeding-edge tools or taking a more deliberate approach.

# Business

Is it better for a hotel to be on the bleeding edge of technology adoption or wait and see what works elsewhere first?

by TOM GRESHAM



# *Pursuing the bleeding edge*



For some companies, innovation is essential to the corporate culture, said Mark Haley, managing partner of Prism Hospitality Consulting, “not just in technology, but in architecture, business models, [food and beverage], and other aspects of the art.” For those companies, a tech-rich experience is essential to their brand, and that means being aggressive about integrating the newest technology in the marketplace.

“This posture of across-the-board innovation can be a powerful attraction for guests and also for employees,” Haley said. “And we all know what a challenge attracting desirable employees to the hotel industry is right now.”

Haley said the drawbacks to being ambitious with new technology are obvious to anyone who has had an IT project “blow up in their face.” Risks to the flow of revenue or the guest experience can cause particularly powerful problems, Haley elaborated.

“Adopting a new technology is risky,” Haley said. “Embracing an unproven vendor partner can be risky. The risks and consequences of a failure impact your colleagues, your guests, your [profit and loss], and your boss. Not to mention your career.”

The primary danger of a hotel being an early adopter of technology is that “all the bugs won’t be ironed out,” Burns said, creating operational problems during an adjustment period and affecting the guest experience.

“I’ve had experiences as a guest where the technology isn’t consistent,” Estner said. “It’s really frustrating when it doesn’t work.”

For hotels looking to generate revenue outside of room bookings, such as through dining or spa services, Burns said there is clear value in using sophisticated technology to promote those services to guests and make it simple for them to make reservations and use those services.

“It’s an ongoing program of assessment,” Burns said. “It’s asking, ‘What could I be doing? What are my competitors doing? What do I need to do?’”

# *The wait-and-see approach*



For a more conservative company, a technology-heavy strategy might focus on operational excellence rather than innovation, Haley said.

“Instead of jumping on 5G services, [internet of things], and beacons, they zero in on offering the greatest possible Wi-Fi experience with mature technologies,” Haley said. “Maybe instead of buying the newest system out there because it’s new, the strategy might be to train your people as highly skilled users of the systems you have now.”

Organizations that favor a more deliberate approach to adopting technology avoid getting caught up in trends that may not have staying power and could prove costly for those who jump onboard early.

“When evaluating new tech, it has to really fundamentally address core initiatives and values and the goals they want to achieve,” Estner said. “Because, otherwise, it’s just a waste of time and money. You can’t do new tech just for new tech’s sake. It must be built around elevating the guest experience, reducing costs, streamlining things, and having more insight.”

Those particularly slow to adopt technology risk

failing to meet their guests’ expectations and turning off their staff. For those who attempt to take a wait-and-see approach, Burns warns against complacency.

“You can’t say, ‘I’m going to be in the middle. I’m just going to stand here and watch it happen,’ because you’ll be moving backwards,” Burns said. “You need to have a constant plan for evolution. You can evolve slowly or quickly, but you must evolve.”

### KEYS TO ADOPTION

For companies considering new technology, whether it's leading edge or something safer, J2 Hospitality Solutions President Jennifer Jones said hotels need to weigh whether they have enough resources to support the new tools, particularly in the area of staffing. The question of timing also is crucial.

"Not only do we want the implementation to be invisible to our guests, we also have to consider how we make this as least disruptive as possible for our staff," Jones said. "Depending on what kind of technology project you are implementing, stakeholders may want to implement when occupancies are low in the hotel, or it may be better to implement when your booking period is lower. Therefore, it's important to gather information from all of your operational team members to understand critical dates that are happening in each one."

Strategies to reduce project risk include testing for performance and data integrity in a lab environment, structuring a pilot implementation that allows the user to learn how the technology will behave at scale, and potentially running the old system in parallel with the new system for an adjustment period, Haley said.

"When being the 'beta' for a new technology project with a vendor, I always recommend that we spend a little more money setting up a lab environment and schedule extra implementation time for testing of integrations, if applicable, as well as user acceptance testing. This helps give the lead users comfort before we roll out the project

to the immediate user base," Jones said.

Estner said all stakeholders involved need to be invested in the adoption, and Jones said hotels should set goals and metrics before implementing

any new technology, making the purpose of the project clear.

"Stakeholders want to understand their return on investment, so any team implementing a project should be in alignment with what

stakeholders are expecting from the outcome of the implementation," Jones said. "If you are embarking on a technology project without acknowledging your goals, then people's time and money will be wasted." ■

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What's on your

# TECH RADAR?

As the world continues to change quickly, here are the pieces of tech you should pay attention to and how they can impact your bottom line.

by ALICIA HOISINGTON

**B**ECAUSE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC upended how people approach mostly every part of a business, it's no wonder innovative technology solutions have entered the market to solve the pain points either created or exacerbated by the crisis.

"The pandemic, coupled with an evolving labor landscape, has forced owners and operators to take a new look at how they run their hotels that will likely last forever. Many roles and departments have been centralized, and reduced staff sizes on property will lead to employees operating more efficiently," says Rod Jimenez, CEO of SHR. "Fortunately, owners and operators were able to turn to technology to help overcome these challenges."

But what tech should hoteliers focus on as we continue to deal with what feels like an unending pandemic? Continue reading to learn about several key pieces of tech that have helped hoteliers adapt during the crisis and will help them continue to innovate as we navigate new COVID variants and the travel-recovery stage.

Here are some important pieces of tech all hoteliers should have on their radar and how each one can impact a property's bottom line.



# SPOTTING the right tech

There's so much tech out there. How can you ensure you're picking the right solutions for your business? The bottom line is that any tech that solves a problem and ultimately saves costs and/or resources is a good choice. Rod Jimenez, CEO of SHR, provides three tips:

# 1

**Focus on your needs.** Don't be distracted by shiny new toys. Look at areas where you are falling short and where investment would have significant impact. Evaluate what guests are expecting now from their lodging experience and use technology that helps meet those needs.

# 2

**Ask three questions:** Will it save me money? Will it help drive revenue? Will it improve the guest experience? If the solution can do at least two of those, it's definitely worth taking a closer look.

# 3

**Weigh the short and long term.** In today's environment, digital adoption is affecting nearly every part of our lives. If you choose to ignore it, or take baby steps, it won't be long before competitors have passed you by. Choose partners who are in it for the long run and are excited to build and innovate alongside you.

## THE TECH ▲ CONTACTLESS CHECK-IN

Contactless check-in, while not new to the industry, has certainly evolved and become top of mind for guests, and that means hoteliers need to meet these new demands. "The COVID pandemic shifted contactless check-in experiences from a nice-to-have to a must-have," said Virdee Co-Founder Nadav Cornberg. "Hoteliers who aren't allowing their guests to check in on their preferred device and bypass the front desk are now disappointing guests right at the onset of their experience with your property."

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Cornberg said that contactless check-in tools, such as via a mobile app or a lobby kiosk, provide an opportunity to trim labor costs by allowing operating staff to work more efficiently. It can give team members the ability to multitask and provide a value-added guest experience because staff is freed up from completing the mundane tasks that are easily automated.

"Tools that can help automate tasks at the property level will save labor hours and, therefore, reduce expenses. At the front desk, instead of staffing two agents, you could now schedule one, and that employee should no longer be stuck behind a desk punching a keyboard. And some properties will consider removing the front desk completely," Cornberg said.

In a similar vein, Jill Dean Rigsbee, CEO and founder of iDeal Hospitality Partners, said that self-checkout kiosks for retail outlets, such as a grab-and-go center, that tie into the property management system can keep labor resources at the front desk. Meanwhile, guests are happy they don't have to wait in line for a bottle of water or snack, and it can lead to more sales because it eliminates a purchasing barrier for guests.

# ““

The COVID pandemic shifted contactless check-in experiences from a nice-to-have to a must-have.”



## THE TECH

# MOBILE TOOLS THAT ELEVATE THE GUEST EXPERIENCE

The industry has long talked about providing a great guest experience while on property, but experts say the discussion needs to shift to the digital guest experience. After all, the pandemic has caused the majority of consumers to think “digital first.” That means digital tools – such as mobile apps, two-way messaging tools, mobile payment options like digital wallets, mobile-friendly websites, virtual assistants, and more – can help amplify and personalize a digital guest experience.

“Improving your digital interactions with your guests along their journey is critical to future-proofing your business,” Cornberg said. He points to other areas of the travel industry as leaders, such as airlines that implement digital tools like kiosks, digital boarding passes, and new innovations like CLEAR, which uses biometric scanning technology to let travelers skip through airport security and identification procedures for a streamlined experience. Cornberg also cited Uber as an example for its ease of use and how it revolutionized how many people use transportation.

“Then, once the traveler walks into the hotel lobby, they put away their phone and stand in line behind a desk,” Cornberg added. “Mobile is redefining the way we travel, and, once again, the lodging industry is slow to adapt.”



““  
Mobile is redefining the way we travel, and, once again, the lodging industry is slow to adapt.”

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Being slow to adopt mobile technology could mean hoteliers are leaving money on the table.

“We are just at the tip of the iceberg of ways we can improve guests’ digital experience while also driving revenue,” Cornberg said. “‘Unbundling’ has a negative connotation, but there are many instances where guests would gladly pay to personalize their experience at your property, whether that’s by choosing their room, adding F&B options, extending their stay, adding reservations or tickets to local attractions, etc.”

By leveraging mobile tools that create a seamless digital guest experience that takes the friction out of the equation, hoteliers can create upsell and ancillary-spend opportunities.

# THE TECH CENTRALIZED COMMAND CENTER POWERED BY AI

“

In the end, it's not necessarily that one piece of tech is more important than the other; it's that hoteliers can now use technology in a more integrated, holistic way to respond to a rapidly evolving environment.”

It's no secret that tech for the hotel industry is highly fragmented, and data silos can lead to blind spots that bottleneck the best decision-making. Simply put, connectivity is key to success. Experts point to solutions that help hoteliers connect all their systems and data, from integration of the central reservation system to a guest-management system, revenue-management system and more.

“We envision a less fragmented tech stack where hoteliers have one place to go – a centralized command center – where they can track traveler behavior and truly present the right individual offer to each guest,” Jimenez said. “A key prerequisite is the interoperability between systems. Just as the organizational structure within hotel teams has become less siloed, applications are now more connected, and the automation of workflows and processes that involve data from multiple systems is now a reality.”

But, as the labor shortage continues to be a top challenge for hotels, artificial intelligence (AI) becomes all the more important. AI can help take much of the human element out of the equation, meaning more operations can be centralized, Jimenez added.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Hoteliers have so much data at their fingertips, but it doesn't drive revenue unless they can extract the key insights that lead to better business decisions.

“As recovery starts to take shape, hoteliers are relying on data more than ever to understand new traveler behavior patterns and present their properties to new sets of customers. As historical data is less relevant and new sources of data are available for their forecasting, tools that help operators forecast demand and market to the right segments of guests using the most profitable channels will continue to be invaluable,” Jimenez said.

And, when tech tools are powered by AI, automation becomes a competitive advantage. “Leaders can now oversee more properties and shift their focus to broader, holistic profit strategies, and return to the job of hospitality and creating memorable experiences for their guests,” Jimenez says.

“In the end, it's not necessarily that one piece of tech is more important than the other; it's that hoteliers can now use technology in a more integrated, holistic way to respond to a rapidly evolving environment,” he added.

Rigsbee agrees. “Make sure you're working with a company that truly understands how the hotel business operates and offers an ROI, and/or solves problems specific to hotels,” she said. “Understand what your guests' needs truly are in today's environment.” ■





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# Blast off



# Three tech-savvy ways to boost revenue

by MELANIE CALCAGNO

**I**N HOSPITALITY, AS IN OTHER industries, little operates the same way it did 10 years ago, or even two years ago. Plenty of people bemoan the loss of personal connection as technology takes over more of our daily lives. It can seem like everyone is distracted, with much of their attention locked on their own devices. How do you reach customers through this distraction? How do you build relationships that build your business? The secret is in finding ways to use technology to make, rather than replace, a personal connection.

But what if it was possible to lean into technology to improve your connection with guests and prospects? Spoiler alert: It's totally possible. The hotels that are succeeding now and setting themselves up for long-term growth are the ones harnessing the benefits of today's technology.

Here are some tips you can implement now to improve revenue-producing connections for your hotel.



## Creative places and ways to use QR codes

- Name tags
- Business cards
- Welcome letters at check-in
- Elevator signage
- Guestrooms: Menus, cleanliness protocols, special amenities, operating hours
- Marketing collateral



### MAKE YOUR ONLINE PRESENCE FRIENDLIER

Being friendly and accommodating is key to being hospitable. That means we need to accommodate the way people like to get information and reach out to them there.

Most people begin their quest for a hotel by doing an internet search, so your hotel's website is often the first impression you can make. Is it attention-grabbing and regularly updated? Does it offer visitors the opportunity to sign up for newsletters so you can notify them of upcoming specials, packages, and events? Is it well organized and informative to allow potential clients to research your property independently?

A "frequently asked questions" page on your website is a friendly way to help visitors get basic questions answered before they contact you directly. It's a win for the customer to avoid having to make a call, potentially wait on hold, and then ask what may seem like a "stupid question." And it's a win for the hotel, especially one that is short-staffed, to reserve valuable person-to-person time for specific conversations that close the deal.

Social media is a great way to increase visibility, promote offerings, and improve brand awareness. Customers that didn't consider your hotel before may do so today based on hotel options, how hotels are marketing themselves, reviews they receive, and ways the hotel exceeds customer expectations.

Creating an active social media presence can draw potential customers in. Known as social selling, 78% of business employing this method – according to *LinkedIn Sales Solutions* internal data – outsell business that don't use social media at all. Most customers are already engaged in social buying. Is your property engaged with them?



### "TALK" TO GUESTS MORE WITH QR CODES

You see them at restaurants, in retail stores, and on real estate signs. Now more than ever, QR codes are an accessible way to provide audiences with quick access to valuable information. Through a simple scan, you can share just about anything with no contact.

QR codes are easy to create, simple for the guest to use, and versatile. You can use them to link to your website, provide service details, or engage with your guests. They can turn a brief touch into an ongoing conversation, helping to build the guest experiences that result in repeat business and referrals.

QR codes help keep signs short, sweet, and easy to read. Why? Because you're not trying to say everything up front. You can get the main point across quickly and then invite the customer to engage further by offering more detail at their fingertips.

There are plenty of free websites you can use to create a QR code to implement at your hotel, and be sure to check out the tips in the sidebars for more guidance.

### 3

#### THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX FOR SALES CALLS

With so many ways to communicate with prospective clients these days, generic marketing materials no longer cut through the noise. People tend to skim over mass emails and click "delete" without reading or even opening them. How can you overcome that tendency?

It used to be easy to walk into an office bringing cookies, visit briefly with a potential client, and give them an idea of your

property's amenities and offerings. These traditional sales tactics are largely ineffective in today's environment, especially during a pandemic. Even in offices that have reopened, many of today's decision-makers have grown to prefer mainly digital communication.

Instead of a drop-in visit, you might reach a prospect with an email that includes a personalized video message you record. You might send a \$5 coffee gift card and ask to schedule a virtual face-to-face meeting to visit with the client over coffee about your hotel. You might follow up a virtual meeting with a delivery of treats and a thank-you card.

Although you may not shake hands with anyone, you can still make good impressions by adding a personal touch to emails, digital advertising, phone calls, virtual meetings, and interacting with prospects via social media.

#### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES WITH REMOTE SALES SERVICE

In addition to the examples cited above, back-end technology also provides powerful benefits for boosting sales. Technology now powers lead generation, effective sales-channel management, and methods of communication with potential and current clients.

Not every hotelier has the time or resources to leverage technology effectively. Remote hotel sales service can give you access to the latest technology and the know-how to use it without having to invest in infrastructure, constant technology updates, and training.

In late 2021, *Travel + Leisure* reported that travel would be even busier in 2022 than pre-pandemic and is projected to generate almost \$2 trillion in the U.S. To capitalize on these opportunities, hotel sales efforts must be proactive, even as the ways we communicate and interact continue to change. Hotels using an effective combination of data analysis, software, and digital platforms are gaining an advantage.

Whether you own a small hotel in a quiet town or properties in several cities, all hotel owners have one thing in common: You need sales for your hotel to thrive. In times like these, your sales and marketing efforts are the key to generating demand. ■



*Melanie Calcagno's real-life, in-the-trenches business experience includes more than 15 years in the hotel and lodging industry. As VP of Sales for Jacaruso*

*Enterprises, an AAHOA Silver Industry Partner, she rocks her sales and management skills to deliver incredible results for clients, all while championing Jacaruso's culture of innovation and diversity. Her passion for professional development in others is rivaled only by her passion for Texas barbecue.*

## Pro tips to make QR codes even *more* effective



- **Location, location, location.** QR codes should be easily accessible to be safely scanned. Do not place them too high, too low, or in a high-paced-traffic area.
- **Check Wi-Fi accessibility.** Wherever you opt to place your QR code, ensure it can be accessed easily by all.
- **Provide useful information.** The content you want to share needs to be valuable and relevant for your guests.
- **Size matters.** QR codes should be big and clear enough that even a lower quality phone can scan them easily.

# The best defense is a good offense

Using technology to combat the hospitality industry staff shortage

by AMY JEFFS

**A**S COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS CONTINUE TO lift, the hospitality industry is only going to get busier, putting pressure on an already-struggling workforce. According to Joblists' Q3 2021 United States Market Report, "Job satisfaction in the hospitality industry has declined substantially due to the COVID-19 pandemic. One-third of current hospitality workers report being "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" with their jobs, compared to 15% prior to the pandemic. In addition, 58% of hospitality workers planned on leaving their jobs by the end of the year, which left hotels in a dire situation. To combat these ongoing challenges, the hospitality industry should implement solutions that directly address the needs and concerns of their employees. Here are three quick technological solutions being implemented by savvy hoteliers to simultaneously improve guest satisfaction and their own bottom lines.

TONY BOWLER/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



## AUTOMATION

With COVID-19, staff and guests both have concerns about increased exposure, especially with new variants such as Omicron continuing to spread. To address these worries, hotels can implement self-service technology that helps to limit direct contact. A great solution is a check-in kiosk, where guests can check themselves into the hotel, answer health surveys or COVID-19-related questions, and continue to their room without the need to interact with another party. Not only is this beneficial for limiting direct contact, but it also helps free up staff members' time to work on other important tasks.

## IN-ROOM PORTALS

A similar self-service solution that can improve staff's work environment as well as guests' stays is an in-room portal. With an in-room portal, guests are able to access a variety of services, such as food service, amenity requests, concierge services, housekeeping, and more. When a request is made, staff members automatically receive an alert to a mobile or desktop device containing detailed information, allowing them to complete the task quickly and efficiently. This cuts down on the time that guests spend trying to obtain information and services by calling or walking down to the lobby or even interrupting an employee who is already working another task. By automating much of this interaction, more time is made available for staff members and guests to receive quicker service.

An in-room portal also can be used by guests to check out of the hotel. At the end of their stay, guests can select the check-out option from their in-room portal, leave their keys in their room, and then be on their way. This keeps guests from congregating in the lobby, and it's also great for expediting housekeeping to get the room ready for the next guest. Cleanliness has always been one of the most important priorities in the hospitality industry, but this has become even more vital since the start of the pandemic. To allow housekeeping to have the most time to clean a room, they can receive an alert any time a guest uses their in-room portal to check out.



When the hospitality industry implements solutions that streamline communication, improve workflow, and enhance guest satisfaction, staff retention and job satisfaction improve.”

This alert would contain the room number and other important information, allowing housekeeping to prioritize which rooms they attend to first and improve their overall workflow.

## ENVIRONMENTAL MONITORING

Implementing environmental monitoring technologies is another great way to improve staff workflow. For example, with temperature and door sensors, a hotel can monitor the status of their refrigerators and freezers. If a door is left open for a certain amount of time or if a temperature rises above a specified degree, a staff member can be automatically made aware of the problem. This allows staff members to be proactive rather than reactive, which can keep minor problems from becoming major emergencies. Not only can this save time and money, but it keeps many potential issues from escalating to where it can disturb the convenience and comfort of the guests.

When the hospitality industry implements solutions that streamline communication, improve workflow, and enhance guest satisfaction, staff retention and job satisfaction improve.

COVID-19 has accelerated many changes in the industry, but a lot of these changes should be welcomed, because not only will they create a better experience for staff members, they will bring hotels up to a new technological standard that benefits everyone. ■

*Amy Jeffs is Vice President of Status Solutions, a risk-management and situational-awareness technology company.*

# IMMEDIA

Using data and research to find the line between healthy competition and market oversaturation

by ERIN CONWAY JOHNSEN

**H**AVE YOU EVER received a letter from your franchisor about a potential new franchisee in your area? Do you wish your franchisor had consulted you regarding a new franchisee before they opened a new property so close to your location? When a potential new hotel within a franchise system could draw business away from an existing franchise, often the best way to ensure the playing field remains level for everyone is through the use of impact studies. These can help all parties determine whether both businesses can thrive in the market.

## BACK TO BASICS

For these purposes, the most basic definition of “impact” is business that one hotel loses to another. When analyzing this impact, one can break it down into two types: base impact (not brand-specific) and incremental impact (brand-specific). Incremental impact is particularly important for a franchisee concerned about a new hotel operating under the same flag.

An impact study is a review conducted to determine whether, and how much, a new hotel in a given market will affect the business of an existing hotel in that market. Franchisors or franchisees request these studies when

the proposed new hotel will be operating under the same brand and marks as the existing franchisee.

Generally, a third-party independent consultant will conduct the impact study. The consultant performs a number of interviews, with the owners and/or managers of the existing and proposed businesses and potentially others such as local market participants and local government officials. A consultant also will analyze reservation and operating statistics, as well as economic and demographic information. The consultant obtains this information from sources such as the franchisor, franchisee, proposed new franchisee,

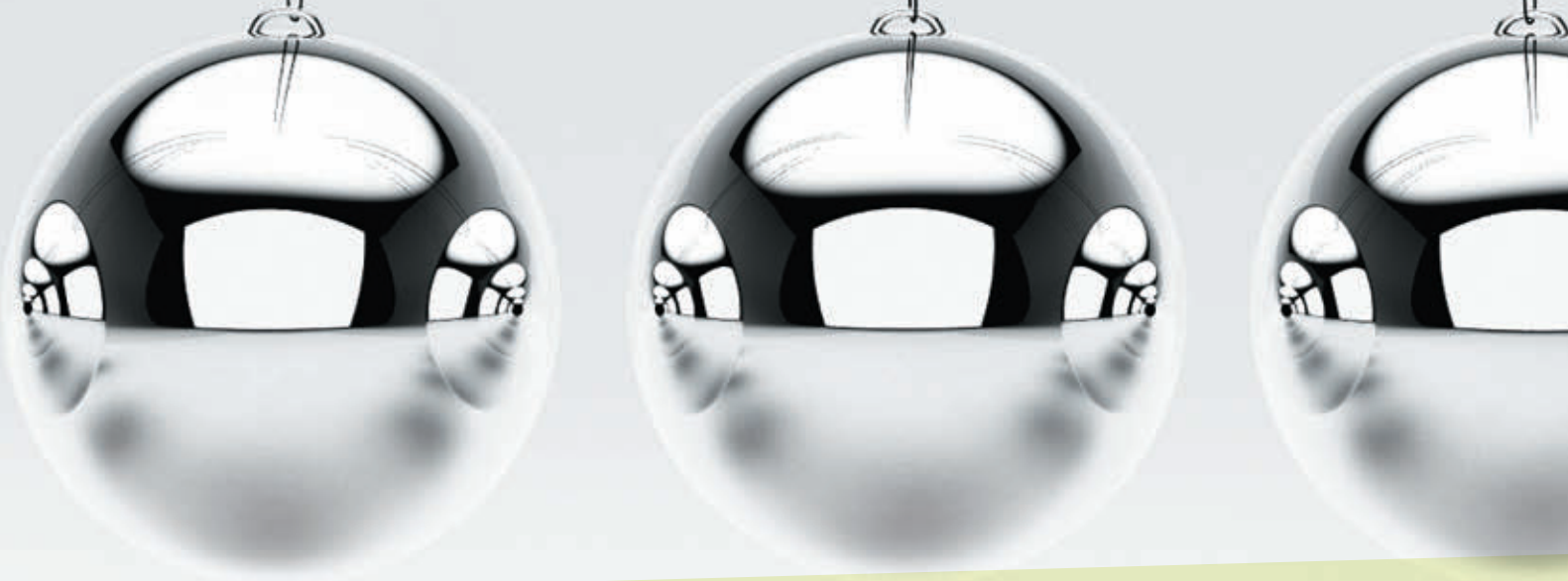
chamber of commerce, and other government agencies.

To be as accurate as possible, a consultant should consider how the brand’s reservation systems and loyalty programs operate, as well as the franchisor’s national advertising programs. Given how these details can differ greatly from system to system, franchisees should inquire as to the consultant’s experience with and knowledge of their particular brand.

## WHAT’S A FRANCHISEE TO DO?

A franchisee concerned about a potential new hotel under the same brand should pay close attention to any communications from their franchisor

# THE IMPACT



about the new property and respond to all requests for information or input. Most hotel franchisors have specific policies and procedures for evaluating impact, so the franchisee should check their franchisor's manuals or policies and speak with their brand contacts about their concerns promptly.

The existing franchisee should begin by conducting their own fact-gathering campaign to be sure there is sufficient concern to warrant objecting to the new property and to provide the most helpful information to a consultant. The franchisee take the following steps:

**1** Gather information on the relevant market (e.g. sources of business, seasonality, timing of business).

**2** Understand the proposed operations of the new business compared to their own (price points, property type, target demographics).

**3** Be able to explain why the new business could affect their hotel, being specific about same-brand competition issues. While it's important to move quickly to comply with the franchisor's impact policy, a concerned franchisee

should also take the time to fully understand the issue and be reasonably certain there is an issue with the proposed new property before diving head first into an impact study.

An impact study can provide helpful information for both the franchisee and franchisor regarding how a new property in the same brand may affect the business of an existing franchisee. However, to obtain the most useful data, the franchisee should be prepared in advance to cooperate with the consultant conducting the study. Working with experienced advisors familiar with the industry will aid a franchisee

in navigating an impact study, as well as in using these studies to argue their position to the franchisor. ■

*Erin Conway Johnsen is a partner and shareholder with Garner, Ginsburg & Johnsen, P.A., a firm that specializes in issues specifically related to franchising and has recovered more cash for franchisees – \$240 million – than any other law firm in the country. She can be reached at [ecjohnsen@yourfranchiselawyer.com](mailto:ecjohnsen@yourfranchiselawyer.com).*

# The **POWER** of partnership

A hand is shown holding a glowing blue circuit board. The board is covered in white lines representing circuit traces and numerous small white dots that appear to be light trails or data points. The background is a dark blue gradient.

# How to maximize the value you get out of your hospitality technology in 2022 and beyond

by CARTER DAVIS

**A**AHOA IS PROUD TO PARTNER with some of our industry's very best, from the biggest players to the small independent operators, and we are thankful for the support we consistently receive from them all. AAHOA and *Today's Hotelier* would not exist without the support of AAHOA Members and Industry Partners alike, so we always like to take time whenever we can to give a bit of insight into how AAHOA and its partners work hand in hand to improve the industry for everyone. A rising tide lifts all boats, and when the industry prospers, AAHOA and its members are better off.

What follows here is a conversation with DISH Senior Vice President of Sales Amir Ahmed, an industry veteran who has held progressive sales roles in both DISH Business and sister company Echostar since joining in 1993. He was instrumental in building DISH's indirect sales channels, including its nationwide independent retailer network, and his lengthy tenure with the company is a steady presence in an often-challenging industry.

## Tell us about your relationship with AAHOA

DISH Business has been a longtime partner of AAHOA, and the association truly is the gold standard of hospitality associations and a model for facilitating important connections between vendors and hoteliers. Furthermore, we recognize and appreciate the efforts AAHOA has made to

support our industry through some of the toughest challenges we have faced. It has been a focus of the DISH Business team throughout the COVID and COVID-recovery eras to lighten the load placed on hoteliers, and we're proud to work with organizations like AAHOA that are doing such important work.

## Tell us a little bit about your business.

DISH Business delivers premium hotel entertainment experiences informed by years of innovation in the industry. Our future-forward technology is designed to evolve with guest needs while providing the best value to hoteliers. In addition to our personal efforts, our business is a collaborative one, and we would not be able to offer the level of service we do without the hard work of our excellent integrator partners – including MVM, PureHD, Enseio, World Cinema, and so many more. The value and added services our partners are able to add are unmatched in the industry, and we couldn't be more proud of what they each bring to the table.

Living in this era of continued recovery from COVID-19, what are your expectations related to amenities, technology, and how guest expectations are evolving?

The COVID era has been a period of high engagement with the in-room entertainment experience as guests spent more time than ever in their rooms. We feel the lasting effects of this phenomenon will be an increased level of guest focus and expectation surrounding in-room entertainment. It's more important than ever to provide an in-room experience that will leave guests with a lasting positive impression.

In your opinion, what are the most significant changes to in-room technologies currently taking place in hospitality?

Guests want to bring the combination of linear TV and streaming they have

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become accustomed to in their own homes on the road with them. DISH Business is proud of its future-forward products that allow hotels to offer their guests the wide range of entertainment options they desire.

## What is the future of guest entertainment?

The future of guest entertainment is not actually limited to in-room. We see the future of hospitality entertainment as being a comprehensive entertainment experience accessible on any device throughout the property. From televisions to tablets to mobile devices, guests want access to entertainment through all avenues at all times, and we are working to provide them just that.

## As an organization, how are you best positioned to help hoteliers meet ever-evolving guest expectations?

We are well positioned to help hoteliers meet and exceed guest expectations because we're listening to them. We're listening to their needs, evaluating market trends, and then responding with innovative solutions. This is in the DNA of DISH, and we're always seeking to identify and address the everyday pain points for

consumers at home or in the hotel. We know the entertainment experience is important and want to lead the industry by delivering the best experience possible.

## Can you tell us about some of your hospitality solutions?

DISH Business has an unmatched portfolio of technology products designed to meet the needs of hoteliers today and in the future.

SMARTBOX2 is our game-changing headend solution that can put up to 192 HD channels in all of your rooms, all while saving on energy and requiring less space than a standard microwave. Gone are the days of technology closets jammed full of server walls. SMARTBOX2 is an affordable and versatile solution for hotels of all shapes and sizes. We know not all hotels are large enough to justify the development and deployment of custom solutions and that concern was top of mind while we designed the SMARTBOX2.

EVOLVE is our set-top box solution that provides guests with an intuitive user experience. Guests can easily navigate the EVOLVE platform to access television guides, casting, and all of their favorite streaming services and apps. EVOLVE, like SMARTBOX2, was designed with the intention of making a premium experience available to hotels of all sizes.

OnStream allows guests to watch live TV anywhere on the property on their personal devices. Guests can enjoy the finest in entertainment from the gym or the pool without being limited to where hotels have installed televisions.

## Anything else you'd like AAHOA Members to know about?

We would like to reiterate that we are listening. We want to engage with AAHOA Members and understand what they see as important issues that need to be addressed. We are excited to expand our relationship with AAHOA in 2022 and are looking forward to seeing everyone at the regional events and AAHOACON22! ■

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# Breaking barriers

How technological innovations allow hoteliers to better connect with guests

by ROY FRIEDMAN

**B**USINESSES SPENT MUCH of the pandemic, especially during the early weeks and months, scrambling to communicate with their customers. With expansive databases and expensive email programs in place, email communication saw a resurgence. Yet, as the pandemic continued, companies realized that successfully delivering an email to a customer's inbox was no guarantee it would be read.

For hoteliers, often needing to inform guests of service changes as a result of COVID-19, the ability to engage with guests was essential. To better connect with guests, hotels looked to other sectors such as government, health care,

and e-commerce. By looking across different industries, it became clear that the key to engagement is to be where your guests are, making it easy for them to see and engage with your communications.

To reach people quickly, businesses turned to text messages. During the pandemic, text messages sent by businesses surged 400%. In today's mobile-first world, smart messaging delivered to pocket-held devices is 35 times more likely to be opened compared to emails. Simply put, people want short, easily digestible communication.

Short messages also are more likely to spur recipients into action, as the average response time for instant cell phone messages is 90 seconds vs. 90 minutes for emails. For service industries such as hospitality, this delay can be the difference between a happy or a disgruntled customer.

“

In today's mobile-first world, smart messaging delivered to pocket-held devices is 35 times more likely to be opened compared to emails.”

### THE TIES THAT BIND

Smartphones have become indispensable tools for nearly everyone across society. These tools double as offices and provide a vital connection to faraway family and friends. For hotel guests, cell phones are used throughout the guest journey from researching and booking travel to sharing experiences through social media and review sites.

The way guests use their cell phones, however, is unique to them. Some prefer making calls, some prefer promotional communications via email, and others prefer the more-immediate engagement of instant messaging. With the

ever-increasing number of messaging channels, consumers have their own preferences on how they engage. Some are instant messaging devotees, peppering their messages with emojis, while others prefer to engage with a business's Instagram page with queries about the best local restaurants.

According to research and anecdotal observations, a majority of us use our phones most for checking, sending, and answering text messages throughout our day. This represents an opportunity for hoteliers to bridge any disconnect with guests, as technology can help hotels automate messages and scale communication across a number of existing platforms and even translate messages into other languages.

### USE YOUR WORDS

Communicating with your guests on their preferred channel is the best way to connect with them. Communicating with them in their native language is even more efficient. But with hoteliers already short-staffed and under-resourced, how can your team communicate across hundreds of channels and languages? That's where technology comes in, with smart messaging systems able to consolidate communication channels into one platform and translate language in real time. This makes connecting with guests easier and more effective for hoteliers.

Technology can go even further and analyze guest sentiment, incorporating changes to automated messages you may have set up to empathize with the guest's emotional state.

Smart messaging not only helps build meaningful relationships with guests, but it can save your staff time and shape intelligent guest profiles. Technology has already driven refinement in operations and improving the customer experience. Recent innovations can deliver personalized services and interactions at scale, meeting specific needs of each individual guest.

The first text message was sent in 1992. It's taken many businesses 30 years to find value in this low-touch channel. Post-pandemic, consumers expect more from the brands they interact with. Guests traveling in 2022 will demand more information, better digital services, and a two-way communication channel. Smart messaging presents hoteliers with an easy-to-use, low-cost, and high-return option to meet these demands. ■



*Roy Friedman is an entrepreneur at heart. He is the founder and CEO of EasyWay, the leading Customer Experience (CX) platform in the hospitality sector. Roy founded EasyWay in 2017 while he was still studying engineering at Tel Aviv University, investing his life savings to start the company. Roy is a specialist in contactless communications and smart-messaging systems, providing the industry with insights on how to maximize digital engagement with guests to improve the direct relationship and guest services. Before EasyWay, Roy served as a commander in the IDF Special Forces and traveled the world for a year.*

# The digital domain

How is the commercial real estate industry using technology and how is it benefiting borrowers?

by RUSHI SHAH

**T**HE COMMERCIAL REAL estate industry continues to recalibrate toward a more normal environment but must still navigate the ebb and flow of the pandemic. As a result, practitioners are approaching investment choices with a renewed focus on efficiency, better decision-making, controlling operating margins, and realistic financial outcome, and they're looking to technology to lead the way. We've already seen advanced technology become mainstream in the form of the electric vehicle, blockchain, digital tokens, and cryptocurrency, and now there is an influx of capital investing in commercial real estate-related sectors that historically have been slow to innovate.

## THE POWER OF DATA

One of the main reasons commercial real estate has lagged behind other industries in pursuing technology is because the risk-reward of every real estate deal is unique. The high cost and amount of resources needed to develop technology that could overcome this lack of standardization have been an obstacle. In recent years, however, we've seen the advent of artificial intelligence and machine learning. These developments have opened the floodgates for innovation in the commercial real estate space. By leveraging these new technologies, companies are able to merge structured and unstructured data to make better credit and investment decisions. As information flows in and out, the subsequent decisions train the models, improving their intelligence and predictability. Over time, the end result is a powerful mechanism that will empower

“By leveraging these new technologies, companies are able to merge structured and unstructured data to make better credit and investment decisions.”

the next generation of commercial real estate entrepreneurs, developers, investors, capital providers, and capital seekers with smarter decision-making.

A laundry list of data points is used to feed the models and is tracked at the national, state, city, ZIP code, neighborhood, block, street, and even a particular door of an office building level. These inputs include behaviors such as spending and traffic patterns, key fob door entries, credit-card spending data trends, Uber and ride-sharing service data, public transportation usage, airport arrivals and departures, and national and state park visitors. Also going into the mix are demographics data such as number of job postings in the area, high school and college graduation rates, and crime and police activity rates for a particular block. In the past, harvesting granular data inputs was too labor intensive and cost prohibitive. With the entrance of application programming interface (API), an intermediary technology that allows two applications to talk to each other, combined with the increasing availability of data through both private and public sources, it is now easier to aggregate information and layer it with machine learning. The end result is a new ability to create sophisticated rating algorithms and signals that can accurately predict whether an asset is worth the investment or not.

Technology's muscle also can be used to highlight an arbitrage between an investment's bid and ask prices to ensure investors don't overpay. This is accomplished by aggregating the pricing and cap rate data for all transactions and filtering by asset class, geography, property quality, and a host of other attributes. Armed with this powerful insight, brokers, service

providers, developers, and owners can make sounder investment decisions.

Capital markets also are getting smarter and incorporating technology and data into their daily decision-making. Now, most investment banks, prominent rating agencies, and debt funds strengthen their risk and pricing models with actual closed and securitized loan data. As the historical data grows and these pricing models are refined and trained, we can expect a profound change in the commercial real estate industry. Each time a model spits out credit and pricing decisions, practitioners executing on those strategies will pour the learnings back into the model, making it smarter. With AI, the models also can track the loans' performance. If there is a negative result or loan default, the information immediately improves the model, ensuring the same mistake isn't made on the next deal.

What we've discussed is a rudimentary example of how artificial intelligence works for credit decision-making within the commercial real estate industry. Five years ago, all of this wouldn't have been possible without a supercomputer. Now, with the popularity and openness of Amazon's AWS and Microsoft's Azure platform, as well as improvements in Python

and other computer languages, these tools are readily available through AI and ML libraries from Silicon Valley juggernauts.

### MORE THAN SCIENCE

Yes, technology will make the commercial real estate industry more efficient, but it's most powerful when overlaid with human creativity and personal relationships. There is still an art and science to succeeding in commercial real estate. At the end of the day, deals are unique and there are still exceptions to every rule. An experienced investment banking intermediary with strong relationships will be able to view the data and effectively tell a story for the bespoke nature of each particular deal through both a quantitative and qualitative lens. This skill, combined with a personal track record and relationship with each particular capital source, gives the intermediary with access to data and technology an advantage over just a robot or technology alone when demonstrating the viability of a deal. ■



Rushi Shah is Principal and CEO of the commercial mortgage and real estate investment banking firm and AAHOA Allied Member Mag Mile Capital. As a leader in

hospitality financing, Shah specializes in structuring and placing high leverage, nonrecourse 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.

# GOING GREEN

## New technologies to increase energy efficiency in hotels

by CASEY SKY NOON

**G**OOD FOR THE PLANET, REDUCING ENERGY CONSUMPTION DECREASES DEPLETION OF OUR NATURAL RESOURCES and the impact of greenhouse gas emissions. It's also (really) good for your hotel's bottom line.

Concerned consumers increasingly expect "green" options, and hotels must become champions for climate mitigation to stay competitive in the market. The value of building efficiency goes beyond marketing as climbing energy costs cut into profitability. Energy represents the single fastest-growing operating cost in the lodging industry and EnergyStar estimates that the average hotel spends \$2,196 per room on energy each year. Luckily, technological advances in lighting, heating, cooling, and building controls are simultaneously improving visitor satisfaction and comfort as well as energy efficiency. Here are just four options, but there are scores of other choices out there for the conscientious, cost-conscious, and everyone in between.



### LED LIGHTING AND CONTROLS

The low-hanging fruit of going green, retailers can switch to LEDs and get the same amount of light for less electricity/money. In fact, according to the U.S. Department of Energy, LEDs use up to 90% less energy than incandescent bulbs! These high-efficiency lights also last up to 25 times longer than traditional bulbs, which means lower maintenance costs. Manufacturers have recently developed a broad range of LED products available for indoor and outdoor use, and many options include built-in controls, such as timers, dimmers, and occupancy/motion sensors. More affordable than ever, these can be used in guestrooms, bathrooms, meeting spaces, hallways, elevators, lobbies, restaurants, and everywhere in between.



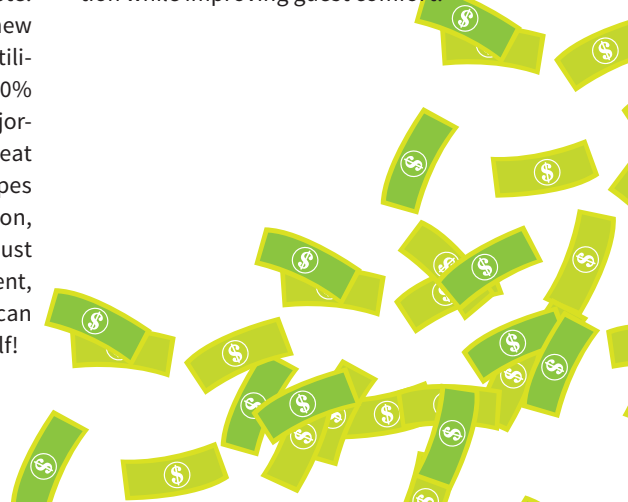
### HEATING UPGRADES

Traditional furnaces and boilers send a portion of the air they heat up the flue, wasting the energy that was used to heat that air. Today's equipment utilizes a sealed combustion system so the furnace or boiler will bring outside air directly into the burner and release exhaust gases (combustion products) directly to the outside without the need for a draft hood or damper. In other words, these sealed-combustion units eliminate that waste. Combined with other improvements, new furnaces/boilers have an annual fuel utilization efficiency (AFUE) of between 90% and 98.5%, which means the vast majority of the energy in the fuel becomes heat for the building. Only about 10% escapes up the flue or elsewhere. In comparison, older heating systems have an AFUE of just 56% to 70%. With that much improvement, upgrading to a high-efficiency boiler can potentially cut a hotel's fuel bills in half!



### AIR CONDITIONING UPGRADES

Innovations in air-conditioning technology are making cooling units substantially more energy efficient. Developments in heat exchangers with fewer joints, variable stage fans, multi-stage and variable compressors, better refrigerant blends that absorb and release heat better (and also are more environmentally conscious), geothermal systems, ductless options, and economizers all reduce energy consumption while improving guest comfort.





## BUILDING AUTOMATION SYSTEMS (BAS)

Building automation systems are smarter than ever, and hotel owners/property managers can significantly reduce their energy bills by installing and properly maintaining one. A BAS manages the heating, ventilation, air conditioning, lighting, security, and fire safety systems through one “brain” to optimize the overall performance of the building. Controllers take the data from sensors installed throughout the hotel (in air ducts, water valves, guestrooms, stairwells, etc.), decide how the building should respond, and send commands to the appropriate systems. These controls are designed to minimize energy waste and maximize operational performance by making subtle, yet cost-effective, adjustments based on data over time.

“We have made it our gold standard to incorporate BAS systems with all of our designs, no matter what type of building the project may be. Due to the impactful amount of energy saved vs. using conventional equipment controls, these systems have wonderfully short ROIs,” said Joseph Sigg, LEED AP, Refrigeration Engineering Department head at CoolSys Energy Design. “We have seen buildings save thousands of dollars every year by utilizing a BAS.”

Overall, scientific breakthroughs and technological advances in HVAC, lighting, and building automation are significantly and continuously improving the energy efficiency of properties around the world. The first step toward taking advantage of the latest and greatest systems available is to have a comprehensive energy audit performed by a qualified professional. Whether you own or run a small independent boutique hotel or world-class chain resort, now is the time to optimize your facility. Go green and save green this year. ■



Casey Sky Noon is a Business Development Coordinator at CoolSys Energy Design, a full-service mechanical, electrical, plumbing, refrigeration, and fire-protection engineering firm.

Championing climate mitigation and adaptation plans, she is especially interested in helping buildings become as energy efficient and environmentally conscious as possible while reducing operating costs and maximizing comfort.





Female Director Eastern Division Lina Patel and North Central Regional Director Bhavesh N. Patel celebrated Diwali with Ohio Sen. Niraj Antani.



# AAHOA MEMBERS IN ACTION

Vice Chairman Nishant (Neal) Patel (from left), Chair Vinay Patel, and then-President & CEO Ken Greene represented AAHOA at the 43rd annual NYU International Hospitality Industry Investment Conference.



AAHOA Chair Vinay Patel had the honor of introducing Virginia Governor-elect Glenn Youngkin at the 2021 VA1 Tourism Summit, held at The National Conference Center in Leesburg. Youngkin championed Virginia's strength as a tourist destination and highlighted ways tourism can contribute to Virginia's economic growth as the state emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic.



AAHOA Lifetime Members (from left) Devesh Patel, former Radisson Hotel Group Americas CEO Jim Alderman, Dr. Kiran Patel, AAHOA Treasurer Bharat Patel, Jiten Patel, and Shailesh Patel enjoyed a great day in the Florida sunshine at the Radisson Hotel Group Americas golf tournament.



Then-AAHOA President & CEO Ken Greene and Kati Siconolfi, AAHOA Director, State & Local Government Affairs, greeted Virginia Lt. Governor-Elect Winsome Sears at the ALEC States and Nation Policy Summit.

Regional Director Rahul Patel (bottom row, fifth from left) and a bevy of Women Hoteliers welcomed Chair Vinay Patel, Vice Chairman Nishant (Neal) Patel, and Treasurer Bharat Patel to the Florida Regional Conference & Trade Show.



Several fellow Regional Directors and other AAHOA Members (above, right), as well as the AAHOA Officers (above, left), came out in support of Regional Director Naresh (ND) Bhakta during the Greater Los Angeles Area 2021 Regional Conference & Trade Show.



Congressman Marc Veasey (D-TX) was one of several lawmakers AAHOA Chair Vinay Patel met with while on Capitol Hill to discuss key issues facing the hotel industry.



The Trade Show floor saw a lot of action at the Georgia Regional Conference & Trade Show.



AAHOA Young Professional's Generation NOW Leadership panel at HX: The Hotel Experience Powered by AAHOA featured some of the brightest young leaders in lodging for an engaging discussion on the benefits of fresh perspectives, while facing the challenges and opportunities of today's business environment. The panel included (from left) CHLA Chairman Bijal Patel, Kendra Plummer, AAHOA Secretary Miraj S. Patel, and Aaron Anderson.

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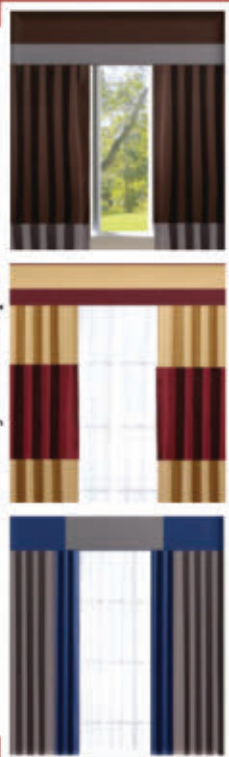
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