

# today's hotelier

The Official Publication of AAHOA

**Keith Pierce**  
*EVP, President  
of Franchise  
& Development  
Sonesta + RLH*

*Addressing a  
Labor  
Shortage*

*Democratizing the  
Owner-Brand  
Relationship*

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# contents

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## 22

**Make your move**  
Marketing your property  
during a downturn  
*by IAIN SHAW*

## 28

**Help wanted**  
Attracting and retaining workers  
*by ZOHREEN ISMAIL*

## 32

**Digging into the data**  
Taking a closer look at the  
economic impact of AAHOA  
*by CARTER DAVIS*  
*with data from OXFORD ECONOMICS*

## departments

- 8 5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT AAHOA THIS MONTH
- 10 LETTER FROM THE CHAIR
- 12 LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT & CEO
- 14 GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS
- 44 AAHOA MEMBERS IN ACTION
- 46 AAHOA CLUB BLUE, PLATINUM & SILVER MEMBERS
- 48 PRODUCT WATCH
- 49 CLASSIFIEDS
- 50 ADVERTISERS INDEX

## columns

- COMMON GROUND:**  
General Services Administration freezes the per diem rate ..... **17**  
*by SEAN GROSSNICKLE*
- THE C-SUITE:**  
The franchise platform of the future ..... **18**  
*by KEITH PIERCE*
- PERSPECTIVES:**  
Raising awareness of franchisee challenges amid uncertainty ..... **21**  
*by VIMAL PATEL*
- FINANCE:**  
With the current inflation environment, is it time to refinance or sell? ..... **34**  
*by RUSHI SHAH*
- DESIGN:**  
The importance of outdoor spaces in a post-pandemic world ..... **36**  
*by ERICA KENNEDY*
- TECHNOLOGY:**  
A great guest experience requires digital transformation ..... **38**  
*by DEREK PACQUÉ*
- LEGAL CORNER:**  
Mandatory COVID-19 vaccines - the elephant in the room ..... **40**  
*by DEEPA N. SUBRAMANIAN*
- FRANCHISING:**  
When the going gets tough ..... **42**  
*by RUBEN REYES*

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1100 Abernathy Road, Suite 725  
Atlanta, GA 30328  
P: (404) 816-5759  
[info@aahoa.com](mailto:info@aahoa.com)  
[www.aahoa.com](http://www.aahoa.com)

### AAHOA STAFF CONTRIBUTORS

**Lisa Brown**, Content Coordinator, Copywriter & Copy Editor  
**Heather Carnes**, VP, Marketing & Communications  
**Peter Clerkin**, Director, Communications  
**Ken Greene**, President & CEO  
**Sean Grossnickle**, Government Affairs Coordinator  
**Dean Heyl**, VP, Government Affairs  
**Kati Siconolfi**, Director, State & Local Government Affairs  
**Melissa Stern**, Director, Executive Communications  
**Robert Stuckey**, VP, Business Development

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1430 Spring Hill Road, Sixth Floor  
McLean, VA 22102  
T: (800) 369-6220  
[www.naylor.com](http://www.naylor.com)  
[todayshotelier@naylor.com](mailto:todayshotelier@naylor.com)

### NAYLOR STAFF CONTRIBUTORS

**Carter Davis**, Managing Editor  
**Austin Dunn**, Marketing Specialist  
**Heather Greyling**, Publisher  
**Gord Klassen**, Design/Layout  
**Adam Ligenfelter**, Project Manager  
**Hope Swindler**, Project Coordinator

**Chris Zabel**, Advertising Director  
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# 5 Things To Know About AAHOA This Month

## 1 IG APPLE HERALDS THE RETURN OF HX.

HX: The Hotel Experience Powered by AAHOA is returning to New York City's Javits Center on November 14-15. HX serves as a community for hospitality professionals, offering unparalleled access to market-leading operators who are committed to sharing education, solutions, creativity, and innovation to deliver extraordinary guest experiences and improved industry profitability. And don't miss the AAHOA Young Professional Hoteliers Reception, which gives the next generation of hospitality professionals the chance to connect with like-minded peers as they move the industry forward into the future. Don't miss it! [TheHotelExperience.com](https://www.thehotelexperience.com)

**HX: THE HOTEL EXPERIENCE**  
POWERED BY AAHOA  
 November 14-15, 2021 | Javits Center | NYC

## 2 VISIT BALTIMORE

### SAVE THE DATE FOR AAHOACON22!

Fresh off the heels of a spectacular AAHOACON21 in Dallas, TX, in August, we're already gearing up to do it all over again! The 2022 AAHOA Convention & Trade Show is set for April 12-15 in Baltimore, MD, and registration will be opening soon, so mark your calendars. We look forward to coming together at the hospitality industry's largest gathering of hotel owners for a week of timely education, inspiration, networking, and a one-of-a-kind Trade Show.

## 3 JOIN THE AAHOA OFFICERS IN NEW YORK.

Chair Vinay Patel, Vice Chairman Nishant (Neal) Patel, and Treasurer Bharat Patel will be on hand for the 43rd Annual NYU International Hospitality Industry Investment Conference November 7-9 at the New York Marriott Marquis. The conference convenes top industry executives who discuss the latest trends, economic influences, and projections. From strategically focused general sessions to breakout sessions that explore timely topics, this conference offers something for professionals at every phase of their career.



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## 4 KEN GREENE NAMED PRESIDENT & CEO.

AAHOA Interim President & CEO Ken Greene is officially dropping the "Interim" title and the timing couldn't be better, as AAHOA installed its new Officers and 12 new Board members for the 2021-2022 year in August at AAHOACON21. Ken and the new Board are ready, willing, and eager to usher in a new era of prosperity for the Association as AAHOA continues its mission to be the foremost advocate and resource for America's hotel owners.



## 5 GET INVOLVED THROUGH THE AAHOA ACTION CENTER.

While much has been accomplished during the past year and a half since the pandemic hit, we still have more work to do. The AAHOA Action Center makes it easy to contact your elected officials to make your voice heard. It is imperative that lawmakers are kept apprised and updated on the continuing impact COVID-19 is having on you, your business, and your employees. Get involved in AAHOA's grassroots advocacy campaigns by visiting [AAHOA.com/advocacy](https://www.aahoa.com/advocacy) to learn about all of our active calls to action.



## 'WFH' ALSO MEANS 'WORK FROM HOTEL'



Article by  
Matt Carter,  
Division Lead  
- Hotels

After months of pandemic-imposed exile from our offices, many of us were finding that working from home doesn't work for everyone. We began looking for ways to shake up our routines and restore much-needed work-life balance; we wanted quiet, private spots in which to concentrate, and neutral spaces in which to meet with clients and colleagues.

Our company watched with interest as hotels pivoted to meet these needs, transforming 'WFH' from 'Work from Home' into 'Work from Hotel.' In many respects, it was a logical shift. After all, guest rooms are already equipped with workplace amenities such as chairs, desks and internet access, and these spaces also have a lot to offer from the perspective of health and safety—each has its own restroom, coffee/tea and snack bar and, in some cases, in-room fitness equipment.

Several brands have now launched day-pass programs that not only allow guests to book their 'office' from 9 to 5, but to easily move between properties as needed. Some hotels have also moved beds out and extra seating in to ensure that their guests will feel even more 'at work' in their rooms.

### QUIET IS KEY TO SUCCESS

But we knew that many properties were still missing a key element of the WFH equation. As noted above, one of the main draws for people to work in hotels is the need for *quiet*, a characteristic that—whether due to location, space limitations, other work-at-home family members or children—is often sorely lacking in residential environments, leaving their occupants struggling to concentrate.

Many mistakenly believe that hotel rooms are acoustically well-designed to ensure that guests won't be disturbed by noise. Unfortunately, even when sparsely occupied, noise problems persist due to people in neighboring rooms and hallways, in-room entertainment systems, telephones, elevators, plumbing and mechanical equipment, as well as exterior sources like traffic and construction.



*By reducing noise disruptions,  
MODIO creates a more effective working  
environment for guests.*

So, although our company originally launched MODIO Guestroom Acoustic Control to help guests *sleep* better, as hotels moved to optimize their assets in order to meet WFH requirements and began marketing this offering to companies and individual corporate clients, we found ourselves returning to our roots: helping people *work* better. Indeed, for the majority of our 43-year history, our industry-leading sound masking solutions have primarily been used to increase speech privacy, improve noise control and boost overall acoustic comfort in commercial offices.

### OFFER GUESTS IMPROVED FOCUS

By reducing noise disruptions, MODIO creates a more effective working environment for guests. And if they stay overnight, they also benefit from the greatly improved sleeping conditions.

Although 'workspitality' hasn't made up for all of the business the hospitality industry has lost due to the pandemic, it's one of the areas where hotels are starting to see an increase in use. And as the 'work-from-anywhere' movement—which sees employees adopting nomadic lifestyles—rises in popularity, it may very well continue in a post-COVID world.

Of course, there's absolutely no doubt that a good night's sleep will always remain a top priority for guests!





VINAY PATEL  
AAHOA CHAIR (2021-2022)

“  
Our prospects  
for a full  
recovery from  
the ongoing  
pandemic  
during the  
next five years  
depend on  
the adoption  
of industry  
best practices  
and utilization  
of digital  
technologies.”

## Deploy the power of marketing

**WE OPERATE, AS NEVER BEFORE, IN A HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY DRIVEN BY** digital technologies. Hotels compete in a digital marketplace flush with short-term rentals, online travel agencies, and of course, other hotels. As hoteliers, we are no strangers to healthy competition. Certainly, competition encourages innovation. Our prospects for a full recovery from the ongoing pandemic during the next five years depend on the adoption of industry best practices and utilization of digital technologies.

In this competitive landscape, hoteliers must be adept at deploying the power of marketing. Marketing and communications are key to creating efficient internal operations and impactful public engagement. Effective communications in the back of house ensure not only that hotel staff have a culture of collaboration but also the applicable resources and channels to navigate the workplace and execute responsibilities. This has become even more critical during the pandemic. Hotel teams must be up to date on the latest state and local public health guidelines, sanitation protocols, and company policies.

The technologies and methods of communication are numerous and quite varied. Internet tools, social media, cloud storage, and data analytics software form a suite of digitized hotel technology. Indeed, this array of technologies can pose challenges to hoteliers looking to capitalize on its many benefits. The upfront cost alone is reason enough to neglect the latest rollout of cutting-edge tech. Work with what is accessible and get creative. Hoteliers don't just sell rooms, we provide a full hospitality experience. The guest experience starts online, so meet customers where they are. A strategic digital marketing plan is a great tool for engaging with customers online, from booking to checkout.

AAHOA is, and will continue to be, the foremost resource and advocate for America's hotel owners. This issue of *Today's Hotelier* features industry-leading experts writing on the marketing topics, trends, and strategies relevant to the guest experience, labor market, health and safety protocols, and much more. AAHOA is proud to collaborate with these experts to shine a light on the latest news, advice, and resources relevant to America's hoteliers.

Even as we acknowledge the early signs of recovery in the hospitality industry shown during the summer, we can expect a downward shift in demand on the horizon because of the rapidly spreading COVID-19 Delta variant. Attempting to predict the future and jump ahead of budding trends may at times seem futile, especially in an age of unparalleled uncertainty. However, the data, processes, and practices we use today can better prepare us to realize our full potential tomorrow. We look forward to the contributions of every AAHOA Member to ensure the success of our future endeavors. ■

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**KEN GREENE**  
AAHOA INTERIM  
PRESIDENT & CEO

## Change is coming

“To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often” – Winston Churchill

“  
We are Team  
AAHOA:  
One Mission,  
One Vision,  
One Voice.  
We have so  
much more  
to accomplish  
together.”

**T**HERE HAVE BEEN A LOT OF CHANGES IN THE WORLD, IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY, and here at AAHOA. Whether the changes were derived from the pandemic or something else beyond our control, it's what moves us forward.

The 2021 AAHOA Convention & Trade Show brought thousands of people together for the first time since the pandemic began. It also brought a change in leadership at AAHOA. I'm up to the challenge, as AAHOA's new President and CEO, to lead AAHOA as we grow accustomed to these transitions. During this pivotal period, AAHOA's mission and values remain constant in our commitment to being the foremost member resource and advocate. Our strength is being Team AAHOA: One Mission, One Vision, One Voice.

AAHOA's enhanced advocacy and education efforts are continuing to help AAHOA Members and the industry get back on track. Our voices have been heard. We asked for help and we're getting it.

The Economic Injury Disaster Loans program provides economic relief to small businesses and nonprofit organizations that are currently experiencing a temporary loss of revenue. These loans help businesses meet financial obligations and operating expenses that could have been met had the disaster not occurred.

For months, AAHOA has urged lawmakers for more relief when it comes to the loan amount and waiver of affiliation rules. AAHOA applauds the Biden Administration and welcomes the Small Business Administration's (SBA) announcement of a much-needed expansion of the Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) program. Since the start of the pandemic, AAHOA worked with the SBA, key congressional committees, and individual Members of Congress to advocate for more relief when it comes to an increase in EIDL caps and parity between the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and EIDL with regards to a waiver of the affiliation rules.

Some of the EIDL enhancements include raising the threshold up to \$2 million per property, raising the aggregate loan cap up to \$10 million, and a waiver of affiliation rules (permits assistance at multiple properties).

On top of that, AAHOA recently announced the results of a new study conducted in partnership with Oxford Economics, a global leader in forecasting and quantitative analysis, on the economic impact and industry influence of the association's members. Be sure to check out some of the excerpts from the report on pgs. 32-33.

Among the study's impressive conclusions, the 34,260 AAHOA Member-owned hotels account for 60% of all hotels in the U.S., 3.1 million guestrooms, and 2.2 million direct-impact jobs.

Having this data at our fingertips will allow AAHOA to advocate more effectively on behalf of our members. Our significant contributions, not only to the industry but to the entire economic landscape in the U.S., is impressive. That AAHOA-owned hotels contribute \$368.4 billion to the U.S. GDP (or 1.7% of the total U.S. GDP) underscores our impact on the overall economy and allows us to have even more meaningful conversations with lawmakers at the federal, state, and local levels.

So, as we're navigating these changes, some more desirable than others, and lead AAHOA into its next chapter, I am confident our new leadership's commitment and enthusiasm will play a pivotal role in AAHOA's future success. We are Team AAHOA: One Mission, One Vision, One Voice. We have so much more to accomplish together. ■

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# The Small Business Administration releases major enhancements to the Economic Injury Disaster Loan program

by SEAN GROSSNICKLE

**T**HE SMALL BUSINESS Administration has authorization to administer Economic Injury Disaster Loans (EIDL) to small businesses and nonprofit organizations located in disaster zones. These loans provide recipients working capital loans to offset loss of revenue caused by a declared disaster. An EIDL can help businesses meet necessary financial obligations they could have met had the disaster not occurred.

In March 2020, Congress designated the COVID-19 pandemic as a national disaster in the Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2020. Weeks later, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act increased the EIDL program's funding and gave the SBA authority to expand eligibility requirements and streamline the application process.

Numerous small businesses nationwide have experienced economic hardship due to government mandates put in place to

mitigate the spread of the virus. Given the pandemic's devastating impact, the demand for EIDLs and other relief options like the Paycheck Protection Program has been high. As of September 2, nearly four million EIDLs have been approved, totaling more than \$262 billion in small business loans. Since the EIDL program launched, Congress has approved several bills to provide the program with additional funding, extended application windows, and further modified lending terms.

This loan program has been a vital lifeline for small businesses impacted by the pandemic and maintains continued importance for businesses as the economy faces potential drawbacks considering the COVID-19 Delta variant. AAHOA has advocated with the SBA and the White House to enact crucial reforms and increase hoteliers' access to EIDLs.

## THE LATEST ENHANCEMENTS

During the past few months, AAHOA worked closely with the SBA to push

for expansion and improvement of the EIDL program. In early September, SBA Administrator Isabella Casillas Guzman announced several major enhancements to the EIDL program, including:

- ▶ **Increasing the loan cap to \$2 million**
- ▶ **Raising the aggregate loan cap to \$10 million**
- ▶ **Extending the deferred payment period to 24 months after loan origination**
- ▶ **Simplifying affiliation standards to mirror the Restaurant Revitalization Fund**
- ▶ **Establishing a 30-year fixed amortization period with a low 3.75% interest rate for private businesses**
- ▶ **Authorizing the use of funds to pay down prior commercial debt and make monthly payments toward federal debt (including principal and interest payments)**

"We applaud President Biden and SBA Administrator Guzman for taking these critical steps to strengthen small businesses and protect the foundations of our economy," AAHOA President & CEO Ken Greene said. "From the jobs they create to the businesses they support, hotels are economic engines in communities across the nation. These EIDL enhancements will ensure hoteliers can keep the lights on and continue to welcome guests as we work toward recovery."

With more than \$150 billion in funds still available, prospective applicants are highly encouraged to apply on the SBA's official website. The full list of enhancements is available in full detail on the EIDL program's landing page on the SBA website. ■



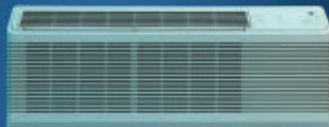
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# General Services Administration freezes the per diem rate

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

by SEAN GROSSNICKLE

## THE ISSUE

The General Services Administration sets the per diem rates for the lower 48 Continental United States (CONUS). The per diem rates establish an allowance for federal employees to cover lodging, meals, and incidental expenses incurred while on official travel. In the CONUS, the per diem rates for the fiscal year (FY) are based on the average daily rate (ADR) reported by local contractors within a county, ZIP code, or locality. The standard rate for per diem reimbursements applies to 85% of counties in the CONUS. Federal travelers account for a substantial portion of business in many hotel markets. Given the negative impact of stay-at-home orders and other government mandates during the past year and a half, fair and adequate federal stipends are integral to the industry's recovery.

## COMMON GROUND

In March, U.S. Representatives Bill Posey (R-FL-8) and Charlie Crist (D-FL-3) reintroduced H.R. 2104., the Restored, Equitable, Coronavirus Adjusted Lodging (RECAL) Act of 2021, which would require the GSA

to take into consideration the economic impact of the coronavirus when setting future per diem rates for federal travel. Later in June, U.S. Senators Jerry Moran (R-KS) and Tim Kaine (D-VA) introduced companion legislation in the Senate. In total, both bills are co-sponsored by 20 members. These bipartisan pieces of legislation would require the GSA to stabilize future per diem rates to account for the pandemic's impact.

AAHOA has extensively advocated in Congress, the White House, and federal agencies to support the stabilization of per diem rates at pre-pandemic levels. When America's hoteliers speak, Congress listens. Democratic and Republican members in both chambers of Congress have rallied to assist the travel and tourism industry during the past year and we thank them for their bipartisan support. In early August, the GSA announced that it will maintain the per diem rates at current levels in FY2022 beginning October 1. The standard per diem rate of \$155 includes \$96 for lodging and \$59 for meals and incidental expenses. ■

“

These bipartisan pieces of legislation would require the GSA to stabilize future per diem rates to account for the pandemic's impact.”



JÖRG RÖSE-OBERREICH/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

### Sen. Jerry Moran (R-KS), Co-sponsor of the RECAL Act

*“Federal travelers are a significant part of the hotel industry's customer base, and federal travel allowances should reflect a fair price for both travelers and hotels. Oftentimes, the federal per diem rate influences private sector rates. Freezing these allowances so they are based off lodging prices before the pandemic will provide much-needed certainty to help the hotel industry's recovery, while also providing a fair price for their services.”*

### Sen. Tim Kaine (D-VA), Co-sponsor of the RECAL Act

*“The travel industry was among the hardest hit by the pandemic, and we must help this critical part of our economy and workforce recover from economic hardship. I'm proud to introduce this legislation, which will help ensure that federal employees receive a fair rate when they travel and that hotels receive fair compensation for their services.”*

# The franchise platform of

# THE FUTURE

## democratizing the owner-brand relationship

Longtime industry veteran Keith Pierce, Executive Vice President, President of Franchise & Development with Sonesta + RLHC, weighs in on the increasing importance of brand standards in an age where everyone is a critic with an audience.

by KEITH PIERCE

**W**E LIVE IN AN AGE OF “democratized everything.” Thanks to the internet, public opinion has more sway in politics than ever before. In many areas of business, more actors have more access to data, corporate decision-making, and information dissemination than ever. It can feel like when a disgruntled consumer somewhere sneezes, big companies can catch a cold.

What are the implications of the “age of democratization” for hotel owners and operators? The answer seems to be the emergence of a new kind of owner-brand relationship, which one could call the franchise platform of the future.

### WHERE THE INDUSTRY HAS BEEN

Let’s start with standards. Everyone can agree that compliance with a system of standards is an essential component of a franchised system. Standards define what a brand is, how it’s perceived by the consumer, and with whom it competes.

But where do standards come from? The answer, typically, has been the corporate boardroom. But in the era of modern hotel

operations, the locus of standards formation has shifted: More than ever, guests are telling hoteliers what they want and need in hotels, and owners are listening. Think of the near-universal adoption of free WiFi, the expansion of public areas, and more sustainable cleaning practices on property.

At the same time, franchise owners have gotten closer to guests than the brands ever could. The days of anonymous comment cards collected and forwarded to a manager in the corporate office have long passed. The era of posting real-time reviews and complaints on Facebook, TripAdvisor, and Instagram are here to stay.

What this should tell hotel owners, large and small, is simple: The value chain begins with the consumer, extends through the franchisee, and ends with the corporate office. The smartest brands are listening carefully to the input of franchisees in formulating brandwide standards, relying heavily on the advice of franchise advisory boards and frequent surveys, formal and informal, of their customers' needs.

The democratization of today's hotel industry begins with the standards that govern it. And the formation of those standards should be a two-way street.

### COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE

If exchanging information is important, the lynchpin for doing so successfully is effective communication. This sounds like a trite observation, but it couldn't be more true. The successful brand-owner relationship depends decisively on effective, two-way communication.

When was the last time a regional manager called to check in on your business or followed up to ensure that recently adopted protocols have proven successful? When was the last time you called an executive at the office of a franchised brand and got through on the first try? As there is no substitute for listening in a healthy marriage, there is no more critical component in a successful franchisee-franchisor relationship.

The franchise platform of the future is built on constant, open, and effective communication. It must be a continuous dialogue that shares best practices, iterates solutions to problems, and builds future successes together.



**THE PROFIT FACTOR –  
THE ADDED FLEXIBILITY OF  
A FLAT FEE STRUCTURE**

Let’s concede the obvious truth that profitability drives business. In hotel franchising, the traditional road to profitability ran through a gauntlet of fees – franchise fees, royalty fees, marketing fees – all based on a property’s gross revenue number.

This has become unacceptable to some franchise owners in the economy segment for quite some time, never more so than in

today’s post-pandemic operating environment. With the spiraling cost of labor, materials, and other costs of doing business, who can afford a litany of fees? Is it prudent to sacrifice revenue at the altar of brand management? The answer is that it need – and should – not be.

A better path forward is a flat per-room, per-month fee, disclosed to the franchisee up front and based on unchanging operating metrics. Generally, such a formula enables a franchisee to retain more

profits and operate a property’s finances more efficiently with a more predictable view of costs and profitability thresholds. Ultimately, this enables the franchisee to invest more in the property and guest service over time, which leads to a sounder and more profitable business.

The industry needs to recognize the mutual benefits of a flat per-room monthly fee in the economy segment and the time to do so is now.

**QUALITY, SERVICE AND  
COMMITMENTS DELIVERED –  
THE BEST MARKETING TOOLS  
AROUND**

The final element for franchise success in the future draws on the wisdom of the past. There simply is no substitute for running a clean, quiet, customer-focused property that offers the guest a clear value proposition and delivers on the promise, time after time.

This brings us back full circle to the question of standards. Quality, integrity, and service are foundational elements of hotel operations that cannot be compromised under any circumstance. Those are immutable standards. And they are the best marketing tools you can find. In marketing parlance, it’s called “CX,” which means producing the optimum customer experience.

Often, the best systemwide purveyors of that level of service have been in business the longest, operate a diverse collection of hotels across market segments, and, in the best of circumstances, have the financial wherewithal to tack and toggle with changing consumer preferences, adapting product to the needs of today’s fast-evolving consumer.

When considering a franchise partner, think about their history of service, to the community as well as guests, their commitment to training and maintaining the highest standards of excellence, and, as suggested above, their willingness to adapt standards and practices to the needs of today’s franchisees.

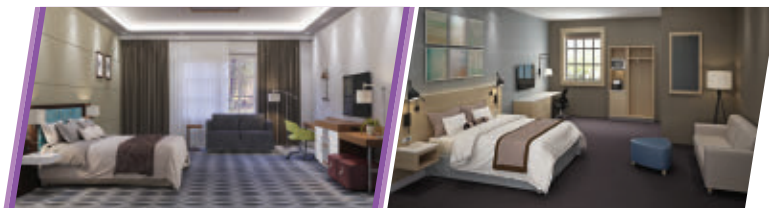
In partnership with that kind of franchisor, you will be participating in creating the more democratized, franchise platform of the future, for your own benefit and the benefit of your guests. ■

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# Raising awareness of franchisee challenges amid uncertainty

## Something's gotta give

by VIMAL PATEL

**A** S I THINK BACK to the beginning of the pandemic, I remember seeing the long lines of cars at food bank distribution sites on the news, as they waited for food to feed their families. Help was on the way.

As I closed the doors to my Hampton Inn for weeks, then months, I found myself wondering what the equivalent would look like for business owners. Where would we get our sustenance to survive?

While the pandemic is far from over, we've seen those lines dwindle, as people are getting back to work and businesses are back open. But for hotel owners, a helping hand and short-term relief isn't sustainable. I'm grateful to remain in business thus far, but I'm frustrated and concerned about the future, and I know I'm not alone.

I run a family-owned branded property in LaPlace, LA, about 30 minutes from New Orleans. As I try to run my hotel and keep the doors open, I'm faced with a million and one problems as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to ravage the hotel industry. Labor costs are rising, guest expectations are increasing, and profit margins for hoteliers are

shrinking—rapidly. So, what do we do? Do we hire fewer staff members at a higher rate? Do we cut out other guest services? Risk lowering brand standards because there's not enough money to invest in the hotel?

Again, a million and one questions and no right answer. We can't predict the future, and we simply don't know what will happen.

The franchisee-franchisor business model needs to be reviewed and changed, as it's obviously not working in our new reality. If all stakeholders aren't profitable, the model collapses. What's most frustrating is that the industry seems to forget the primary investor is the franchisees.

I don't have all the answers, but I know that when decisions are made, they can't come at the expense of franchisees, whose margins are

already paper thin. These decisions have ramifications well beyond the hotel owner's business as they also deplete money from the local communities in which we operate.

As a hotel owner, I'm striving to lead broader discussions in the industry, to create open dialogue, and bring awareness to the bigger issues we're facing at a time when there's so much uncertainty. Franchisees need a seat at the table as stakeholders in the brands in which we choose to invest.

If we don't advocate for ourselves, who will? I want my children to grow up knowing their father fought for what he believed in. If we can't be vocal about our fundamental beliefs and what we believe to be right and just, then what are we teaching our children? What are we teaching the next generation of hotel owners who will come after us?

The entire industry is suffering, and everyone needs to work together to find a solution. We need continued communication with brands and we need to form better relationships as equals coming to the table together for the betterment of our business.

As hotel owners, we need to look inward to also hold ourselves accountable for leading the change and the open dialogue that will lead to the betterment of the industry we love so much. As we know, not everything is one-sided.

There is no guidebook on post-pandemic recovery. If we don't start working together as we face the issues plaguing our industry, the industry will be decimated. ■



*Vimal Patel has been in the hospitality industry for more than 22 years. He's a portfolio*

*manager for Q Hotels Management, a Louisiana hotel management company, which consists of nine owned and 11 managed hotels. Navigating his family while simultaneously working new deals and developing proprietary software is all in a day's work. Patel is proof that the American Dream is tangible if you work hard enough to achieve your dreams.*



FEATURE

# Make your move



# Marketing your property during a downturn

by IAIN SHAW

**M**ARKETING BUDGETS ARE OFTEN AMONG THE FIRST TO COME UNDER PRESSURE DURING A DOWNTURN, AND yet marketing is more critical than ever in an unforgiving market. The challenge is knowing what to prioritize and where to spend those precious marketing dollars in times like these. In this article, you'll hear from hoteliers from around the country who offer their thoughts on the marketing strategies they're deploying in this most unpredictable of climates.

First, maintain your ability to respond nimbly. "In our case, that meant protecting the budget, and not necessarily cutting the budget but protecting it," said Lisa Checchio, chief marketing officer at Wyndham Hotels & Resorts. That meant pulling money out of areas like network TV and out-of-home

media and reassigning it to channels that offered maximum value and optimized targeting. "What we wanted to do was be able to deploy any marketing dollars into media and marketing channels where we had the most flexibility, which was direct-response, paid, digital media," she added.

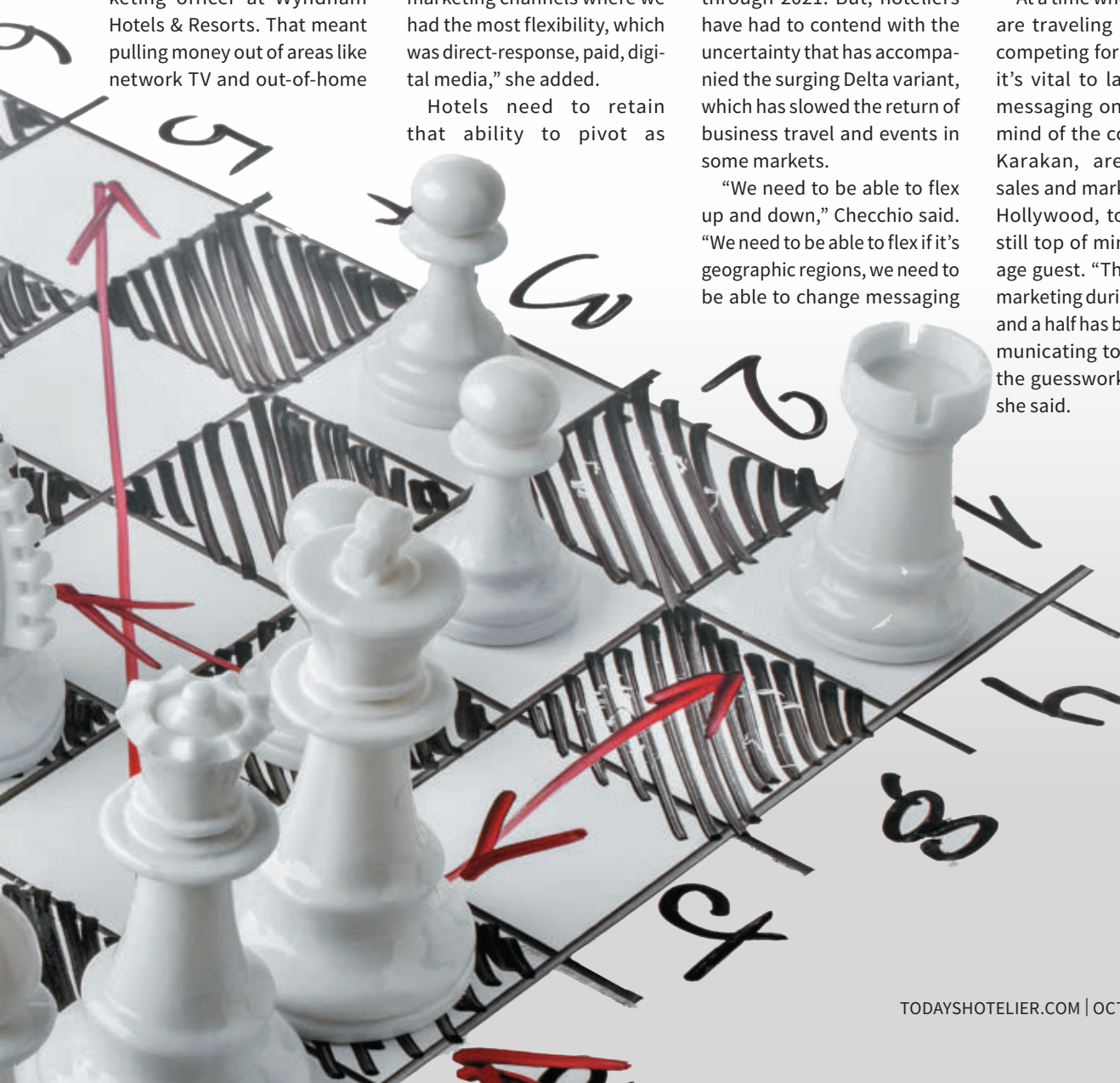
Hotels need to retain that ability to pivot as

circumstances change through a downturn. That's been particularly true of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it remained so even as the picture started to look a little brighter midway through 2021. But, hoteliers have had to contend with the uncertainty that has accompanied the surging Delta variant, which has slowed the return of business travel and events in some markets.

"We need to be able to flex up and down," Checchio said. "We need to be able to flex if it's geographic regions, we need to be able to change messaging

out that's most relevant for guests based on the time that it's being served, and we need to be ready. We need to be proactive. This is an ever-changing situation."

At a time when fewer people are traveling and hotels are competing for every booking, it's vital to laser-focus your messaging on what's on the mind of the consumer. Rosie Karakan, area director of sales and marketing at Dream Hollywood, told us safety is still top of mind for the average guest. "The main goal for marketing during this past year and a half has been overly communicating to guests to take the guesswork out of travel," she said.



# Best practices

## for marketing new safety protocols

It looks like the COVID-19 pandemic is going to wax and wane for at least the rest of 2021, and that means hotels need to continue building their marketing campaigns around the message that safety is the No. 1 priority.

“If it’s important to our guests, and it’s important to our franchisees, then it’s important to us,” said Lisa Checchio, chief marketing officer at Wyndham Hotels & Resorts.

By now, every property and hotel group should have a safety hub on their website, but that messaging must be brought to life with a long-term campaign. For example, Wyndham’s “Count On Us” campaign distills the group’s safety protocols into an overarching promise that also appeals to guests to trust the brand to get it right.

Hoteliers also can introduce an element of fun or awe in introducing and highlighting new tech-powered approaches to safety. Rosie Karakan, area director of sales and marketing at Dream Hollywood, said the hotel’s touch-free services and delivery robot, Alfred, exemplify this. “If guests forgot a toothbrush or if they need extra towels, they don’t have to interact with our staff, they can just call up and we’ll have the robot deliver them,” Karakan said.

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Marketing and programming also can emphasize fun and enjoyment that’s grounded in an uncompromising approach to safety. “There’s just a lot of programming that still can be considered very safe,” said Paul Mensi, Unscripted Durham’s general manager. The hotel has brought back a number of reimagined, safety-conscious events for guests, such as cocktail classes that have been scaled down from around 50 to 60 guests to no more than 15 to 20. “Make it more intimate, to where we have people that are learning how to make these cocktails from our mixologist who is masked behind the bar,” Mensi said.

---

While hotels obviously need to tailor their policies and their messaging to align with local regulations and circumstances, remember you’re not alone. Lean on your peers locally and regionally to share best practices, and seek out the latest advice from national industry associations and tourism bureaus. “This is where our partnership and the industry’s partnership with AHLA and AAHOA is so important, because they can help to guide us and to guide us as an industry,” Checchio said.

### BE AGGRESSIVE

One of the golden rules of marketing through a downturn is to resist the temptation to cut rates. Hoteliers have learned from bitter experience, and this time is no different. What you can do is use marketing initiatives to support rates. Wyndham Hotels & Resorts helped its franchisees to retain rates by offering deals like an extra night’s stay in return for booking a room for a certain number of nights. “By holding the rate over the last year, we’re now able to be back at 2019 levels or even, in some markets, at a premium,” Checchio said.

Hotels also can use these deals to secure the benefits that come with direct bookings. “The added benefit to these offers is that [guests] can only receive them if they’re coming through our direct channels, our lowest acquisition customer cost channels for our franchisees,” Checchio added.

At Dream Hollywood, Karakan said moving the needle on traffic to the hotel’s website has been a top priority. That could mean optimizing clickthrough rates and measuring how well social partnerships are performing. Capturing and leveraging customer data is also increasingly important, and an effective customer data platform can be used to deliver highly targeted and personalized messages through email and text.

All of the hoteliers represented here stressed the importance of “backyard business” during the past year and a half. Every hotel may have a different definition of what that means, but it could include staycation guests, local businesses, or guests driving in from within a few hours’ radius of the property. Checchio said those “backyard” customers have helped support midweek business for Wyndham properties, but Unscripted Durham General Manager Paul Mensi said staycationers can also be the difference that pushes weekend bookings up toward 100%.

Maximizing backyard business takes creativity and tenacity on the part of the individual property, as well as corporate support from the regional or head office level. Communication is critical. “This is really where the strong partnership comes in between our franchisees, our owners, and the brand,” Checchio said. “It’s a top-down, bottom-up approach to ensure that we’re capturing as many guests as we can.”

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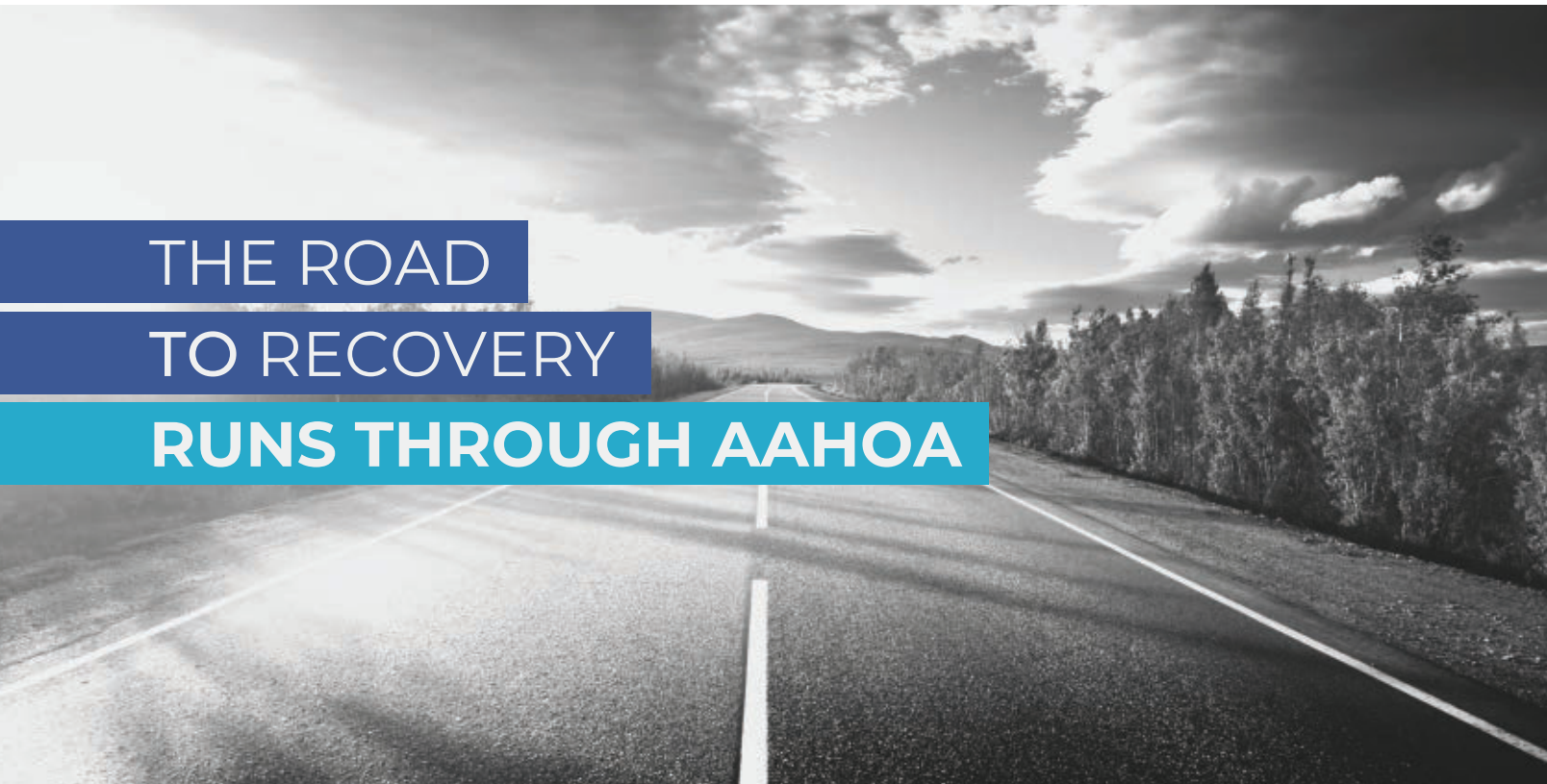
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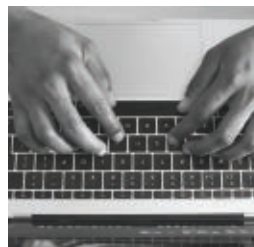
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### **ADVOCACY**

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.



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For sales and marketing leaders at the property level, a downturn is an opportunity to double down on your local network. If your database is looking thin, now's the time to bolster it. Keep in touch with those contacts and make sure they're up to speed on everything that's happening at the hotel.

**GET RIGHT OR GET LEFT**

Mensi said the team at Unscripted Durham was prepared to hit the ground running when the current downturn hit. "I built up a database of about 500 different clients and prospects in the area," he said. "Based on what's happening or what that particular push is, whether there's activations or safety measures, I'll push those out myself, but it really comes from corporate, myself, and then getting together with our marketing manager to determine where we are."

Creativity often thrives in a downturn out of necessity, so experts advise leaning into a test-and-learn mindset. Last winter, Unscripted Durham built private "igloos" amid a winter wonderland at the hotel's open-air venue, The Patio. This was something we saw in other cities, but it was new for Durham, and local interest was so high that the hotel eventually used the igloos to drive room bookings. Mensi said the initiative had compounding benefits, as the hotel saw Instagram engagements soar during the period. "We put them up in November, took them down March 1, and had some of the best revenues we've ever seen," Mensi said.

Keep a close eye on social media and listen to spot any potential markets that you're not currently marketing to. Brands are dipping their toes into TikTok, by far the favorite platform among gen Z. Dream

Hollywood scored an unexpected success when the hotel's delivery robot, Alfred, was featured in a user-generated TikTok video that received more than a million views. Karakan said the hotel is exploring the possibility of using TikTok more intentionally in the future after seeing the results of this organic traction.

Above all, the consensus among the experts here is to

keep your ears open for what your guests and business clients want and need in this moment. "Just because we have XYZ ideas doesn't necessarily mean that we have it all," Mensi said. "Our clients really need to be the ones that are guiding us, too."

It seems as if the industry will spend at least the rest of 2021 responding to the continuing

effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, with inflation also on the rise. These are uncertain times for sure, but after the past year and a half, America's hoteliers can at least be certain of their own capacity for invention and resilience. "I will say this," Mensi said, "regarding 2020 vs. 2021, and even where we are right now with the Delta variant, we feel very confident." ■

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# Help wanted

# As the industry grapples with a labor shortage, here's how hoteliers can attract and retain workers

by ZOHREEN ISMAIL

**T**HE COMPETITIVENESS OF THE LABOR MARKET IS A CRITICAL CHALLENGE FOR MANY industries and is especially hitting hard on the hospitality industry. While hotel owners are no longer struggling nearly as much as they did during the pandemic to fill rooms, they're instead scrambling to fill open staffing positions. A 2018 research study found turnover in the hotel industry is double the national average compared to all other industries, and some experts are saying those numbers ballooned during the pandemic.

So, as business travel and family vacations start to fill up calendars, where does that leave an industry in dire need of a workforce? Specifically, what can hoteliers do to attract and retain good people? There are multiple factors that play a role in answering this question, and anyone claiming to have a simple answer is either selling something or lying. "This is unlike anything we have experienced in the past," said Tristan Haas, general manager of the Kimpton Sylvan Hotel. "This trend is and continues to be incredibly difficult."

Despite businesses slowly starting to reopen across the country, the pandemic continues to be a challenge for hotel owners. "I believe some individuals are still concerned about their health and rightfully so," Haas said. "We are asking [employees] to be in a very public position with constant

interactions with people from all over the world."

## ONE FOR ALL

Hotel owners and managers are constantly putting the safety of their staff and guests as their top priority, whether that means investing in PPE for staff, implementing more frequent cleanings, sanitizing the property, or simply widening the lines of communication between everyone. "The macroeconomic considerations are well known, and factors like individual health concerns, vaccine access across the America region, and child care availability, among other factors, all contribute to whether team members are able to return to work," said Rachel Russell, Hilton's senior vice president of HR operations.

Industry recruiters are sharing insights into what important skills to look for when replenishing

“

A 2018 research study found turnover in the hotel industry is double the national average compared to all other industries, and some experts are saying those numbers ballooned during the pandemic.”

a depleted hotel workforce. Findings revealed that hospitality recruiters believe communication, leadership, and being team oriented are all skills that are essential for hospitality workers. Candidates who demonstrated passion and self-drive also were predicted to enjoy a long-term stay in the industry.

“Like the behavior of the workforce, speed is key and hiring patterns are immediate,” Russell shared. “Candidates are eager to work now and want a streamlined hiring process.” She added that immediacy is important during the hiring process, especially pertaining to important topics such as flexibility of scheduling, onboarding, and training.

Hospitality is far from the only industry to be facing a labor shortage, which places

hotels in direct competition with other industries for workers. “The current labor issue continues to be a complex challenge for us, but it’s not one that is exclusive to our industry,” Russell explained. As workforce shortages persist, hotel owners are becoming more familiar with having to turn down reservations simply due to being short staffed. And hospitality employees furloughed during the pandemic found jobs in other industries, so finding ways to bring former workers back can feel insurmountable at times, especially when other industries that were less affected by the pandemic can offer more pay.

“There often is a perception that the hospitality industry doesn’t pay well,” said Brian McFarland, general manager of restaurants and bars at Kimpton Hotels.

## Hiring strategies that work

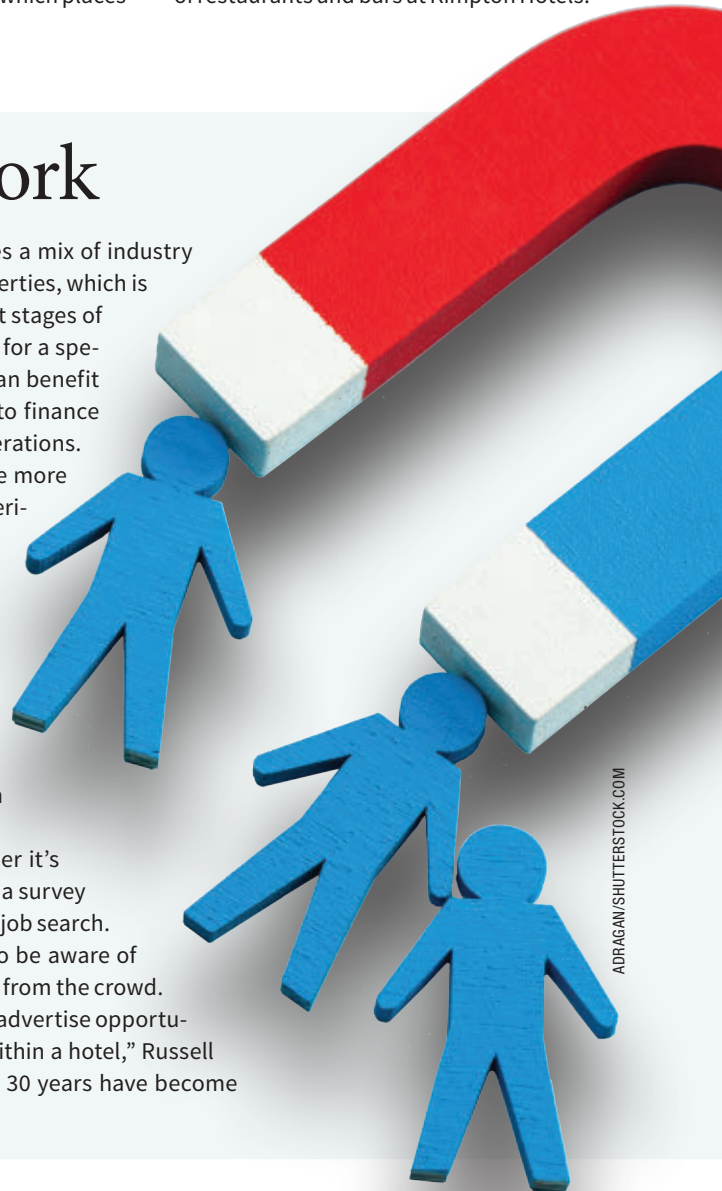
The hospitality industry at large, and AAHOA Members especially, includes a mix of industry professionals who work with or own small hotel properties and larger properties, which is why this industry continually attracts a diverse group of people in different stages of their careers. “In our larger hotels, we have found that candidates looking for a specific discipline, career path, or who have certain specialty certifications, can benefit from access to various career tracks, anywhere from food and beverage to finance to operations,” said Rachel Russell, Hilton’s senior vice president of HR operations.

Smaller hotel properties, on the other hand, attract candidates who are more exploratory in their interest in hospitality and are looking for hands-on experience. “The common thread is that candidates who want to be a part of the hospitality industry truly believe in being in a business of people serving people,” she added.

One strategy Russell shares that has worked in terms of the hiring process is one of time and speed. Applicants expect to move through the hiring process quickly and may even have competing offers. So being flexible with your candidates is extremely important. Whether that means contacting applicants at times that fit their schedules, quick responses, virtual interviews, and property tours. Being flexible is a requirement in today’s hiring process.

The hospitality industry has continued to embrace technology, whether it’s contactless room keys, smart TVs in guestrooms, or mobile check-ins. And a survey by Glassdoor found that 79% of people use social media when conducting a job search. So, when it comes to the hiring process, hotel owners need to continue to be aware of those habits and make themselves present in the digital realm to stand out from the crowd.

“We have leveraged technology in different ways, including QR codes, to advertise opportunities, job fairs, and virtual reality immersions to showcase various jobs within a hotel,” Russell shared. Hotel owners that have been in the industry for more than 20 or 30 years have become accustomed to moving at a fast pace and this is no time to slow down.



ADRAGAN/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

“However, wages have been increasing across the industry as of late.” Hotel owners and operators are trying to offer competitive pay and benefits as people are slowly beginning to rejoin the workforce. And some hotels are finding success in attracting workers by simply hanging a banner outside their properties with clearly posted pay rates for starting and experienced workers. Put your cards on the table, but don’t get hung up on just getting warm bodies in the door. As renowned speaker and author Simon Sinek said, “If you hire people just because they can do a job, they’ll work for your money. But if you hire people who believe what you believe, they’ll work for you with blood and sweat and tears.”

**ALL FOR ONE**

One component many millennials look for when job hunting is working for a company or industry that makes an effort to give back to communities and make a positive impact in the world. According to a study conducted by Georgetown University, 90% of millennials would switch brands to one associated with a cause. That’s why it’s vital to highlight and share to potential candidates the values of the industry as a whole. “An award-winning culture and commitment to make the world a better place through the delivery of exceptional guest experiences is what ultimately attracts and retains team members,” Russell said.

For example, Hilton continuously made efforts of support throughout the pandemic through their one million room nights donation for frontline medical professionals and a commitment to help communities around the world through a commitment to environmental and social governance.

The hospitality industry has been resilient and at the forefront fighting through the pandemic. “In our hotels, there is a sense of community and family and everyone helps each other out,”

Russell said. “Our workers are learning new skills, and the collective spirit and commitment to serve guests is palatable and exciting.”

The impact the pandemic had on people’s sense of community is clearly visible, Russell explained. “The past 18 months has brought people together as a global community as we’ve navigated the pandemic, social unrest, and a desire

to keep pursuing an inclusive society.” With this said, one thing that makes the hospitality industry stand out is the commitment and high standard of care for not only guests but employees as well. “Hospitality could be a bridge for peace and understanding,” she added, reflecting on the habits of an industry that has long stood by strong values and a vision for bringing people together. ■



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# Digging into the data

Taking a closer look at the economic impact of AAHOA

by CARTER DAVIS with data from OXFORD ECONOMICS

**T**HAT AAHOA MEMBERS MAKE UP A LARGE PART of the hospitality industry is an indisputable fact. An association with nearly 20,000 members is bound to represent a large portion of the market, but the exact scope of that impact isn't one that's easily defined through anecdotal evidence or membership statistics. With the goal of better quantifying members' reach in the market, AAHOA commissioned Oxford Economics, a well-respected research firm based in the UK, to conduct a comprehensive economic impact analysis. As part of this research, the firm analyzed a sample set of U.S. hotels, as well as industry-specific economic statistics. The resulting analysis reflects the full scope of AAHOA's U.S. economic impact in 2019.

Much like a time capsule that's buried out of sight, once the report was commissioned, there was little for AAHOA to do but wait for the results. But, once the time capsule was unearthed and those results became available, it was immediately clear that AAHOA's reach is far beyond what was originally assumed. What follows are just a few highlights of the report, which was officially unveiled at AAHOACON21.

To dig in deeper, be sure to access the full report on the AAHOA homepage at AAHOA.com.

As part of this analysis, Oxford analyzed:

- Share of U.S. hotels and rooms owned by AAHOA Members based on a large sample of properties
- Hotel operations based on information on the size and characteristics of AAHOA hotels as well as industry-specific statistics
- Hotel guest ancillary spending based on consumer survey data by state
- Capital investment based on data on new hotel construction and renovations
- Indirect and induced impacts supported by AAHOA hotels in other parts of the U.S. economy based on an economic impact model

Lastly, the researchers defined an "AAHOA hotel" as "hotels at which an AAHOA Member has an ownership interest, or in the case of hotels under corporate ownership, a senior executive role that employs staff in all 50 states, paying billions in wages, salaries, and taxes." Once the research had been collected, Oxford reported that "AAHOA hotels in the U.S. account for 60% of all hotels, and guests at AAHOA hotels bring billions of dollars of spending to local economies."

Let's dig in! ■

AAHOA supports a total economic impact of:

**\$680.6 billion**  
in business sales  
(representing revenue plus sales and lodging taxes, also referred to as output)

**4.2 million jobs**  
with \$214.6 billion  
in wages,  
salaries, and other  
compensation

**\$368.4 billion**  
of GDP  
representing contribution to U.S. gross domestic product; and,

**\$96.8 billion**  
in federal, state,  
and local taxes

In 2019,  
AAHOA  
hotels  
consisted of  
**33,000-plus**  
properties  
with more  
than **3.1**  
million  
guestrooms.

### Spending habits and economic impact

For each **\$1** of spending on lodging (room revenue plus taxes on lodging, AAHOA guests spend another **\$1.63** during their trip

**AAHOA** hotel guests spend **\$275.4 billion** annually  
Hotel guest ancillary spending totaled **\$136.5 billion**

Of their total travel spend, guests spend **38%** on lodging during their stay, and a combined **62%** on transportation, food and beverage, recreation, and retail and other expenses

The highest AAHOA member share occurs in **Arkansas**, where 9 in 10 hotels are AAHOA hotels

The 4,974 AAHOA hotels in **Texas** account for 14.5% of AAHOA hotels overall

### AAHOA hotels supported \$96.8 billion of total taxes in 2019.

The total tax impact per household was \$789. This tax offset represents the federal, state, and local taxes that would otherwise need to be paid per U.S. household to compensate for the absence of AAHOA hotel guest activity. The state and local tax impact per household was \$402.

The total tax impact per AAHOA hotel guestroom was \$31,052, of which \$15,828 represented state and local taxes.

Tax impacts of AAHOA hotels include \$11.6 billion of state and local taxes on lodging. The total impact of hotel guest spending support \$49.3 billion of state and local sales taxes, including \$15.0 billion of property taxes.

### Economic investment

**Direct taxes** supported by AAHOA hotel operations (i.e., on site hotel revenue excluding hotel guest ancillary spending, and corporate offices) totaled **\$29.7 billion**

A representative AAHOA property with **100 occupied rooms** supports 204 total jobs, including **108 direct jobs** and 80 indirect and induced jobs

### Direct capital investment

(through new construction and renovation efforts) totalled **\$24.2 billion** which supported **165,000 jobs**

## Additional facts for 2019:

Hotel sales of **\$138.9 billion** (revenue, plus certain taxes)

AAHOA hotels support **\$214.6 billion** of wages, salaries, and other compensation, including **\$47.5 billion** at hotel operations.

AAHOA hotels support **\$96.8 billion in federal, state, and local taxes.** This is equivalent to \$789 per U.S. household annually.

Guests staying at AAHOA hotels spent **\$275.4 billion at hotels and local businesses, and on transportation.**

AAHOA hotels purchased **\$50 billion in inputs from other businesses.**

### THE TOP 10 STATES BY AAHOA SHARE OF HOTEL PROPERTIES

Rank	State	Properties	Amount
1	Arkansas	691	89.6%
2	Oklahoma	849	89.3%
3	Texas	4,974	89.1%
4	Louisiana	848	88.7%
5	West Virginia	240	69.9%
6	Georgia	1,458	68.3%
7	Kentucky	563	68.2%
8	Mississippi	495	68.2%
9	Alabama	650	68.2%
10	North Carolina	1,252	67.7%

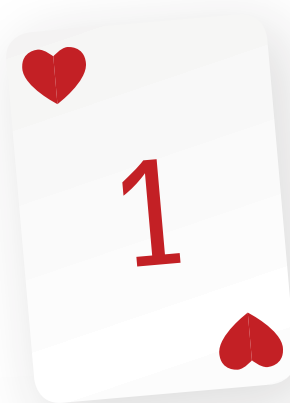
Oxford Economics was founded in 1981 as a commercial venture with Oxford University's business college to provide economic forecasting and modelling to UK companies and financial institutions expanding abroad. Since then, the firm has become one of the world's foremost independent global advisory firms, providing reports, forecasts, and analytical tools on 200 countries, 100 industrial sectors, and more than 3,000 cities.

# Know when to fold 'em...

With the current inflation environment, is it time to refinance or sell?

by RUSHI SHAH

**T**HE MONEY SUPPLY is one of the primary tools used to measure market liquidity and right now it's at an all-time high. One of the main drivers behind this increase is the monetary policy the Federal Reserve enacted to combat the widespread pandemic-caused disruption. It's interesting to note there isn't anything structurally wrong with the economy. Rather, the majority of the business interruption was caused by government-led or behavioral closures that for the most part turned out to be temporary. This massive increase in money supply has led to both transitory and permanent inflation. Let's look at the causes and effects of these two types of inflation and what they mean for commercial real estate owners.



## TRANSITORY VS. PERMANENT INFLATION

Many economists and other experts believe the rising, more temporary, transitory inflation, is caused by the supply chain breakdown during the widespread shutdown. They expect the pent-up demand and lack of supply will self-correct during the next few quarters. Permanent inflation, on the other hand, is structural inflation triggered by additional liquidity flowing into a system where there are no real changes in supply or demand. We've witnessed this slowdown in new supply in many industries, including commercial real estate. This environment has the potential to create a perfect scenario where we will see permanent rent and price increases across multiple industries, particularly in commercial real estate. Asset classes and sectors that have the ability to adjust rents quickly to meet changing conditions, including hospitality and multifamily, are likely to perform well.

## ASSET INFLATION

In addition to the massive increase in money supply, the Fed has adopted a strict policy to keep interest rates low, hoping to use this strategy to moderate inflation, which it feels will ensure a healthy economy. Adding to this accommodative monetary stance, the government's aggressive fiscal spending policy sets us up for a classic asset inflation scenario. When there is asset inflation, real estate asset prices increase in value, even without corresponding consumer price inflation. In this situation, while rents may rise by 20%, property values may actually jump by 40%. Or as another example, the price of a gallon of milk might go up by 10% yet the value of the factory that produces that gallon of milk increases by 20%. This additional increase in the asset prices is largely caused by the availability of cheap leverage and the need for investors to put liquidity to work. The best way to play the inflation game, therefore, is to maintain or even increase exposure to commercial real estate while prudently using leverage and properly managing interest rate, recourse, and operational risk.





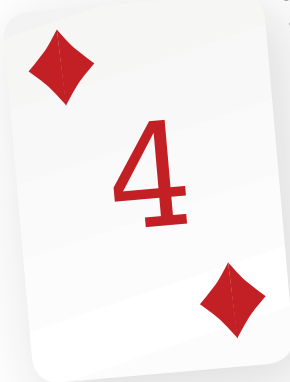
**RISE IN INFLATION + LOW INTEREST RATES**

As inflation takes root in the average American’s life, taking advantage of the combination of asset price inflation and low interest rates can position hotel and other commercial

real estate owners’ portfolios for success. One of the many ways to take advantage of this is to refinance or recapitalize owned assets and lock in long-term low interest rates wherever and whenever possible.

**REFINANCE OR SELL**

Another way to benefit from asset inflation is to sell. Before putting a property on the market, however, consider the tax consequences in an increasing tax environment, as well as the pressure to replace the gains in a 1031 exchange (while available) or put the cash to



work in an inflating environment. As classic economic principals suggest, being in cash in an inflationary environment could stunt portfolio growth. Conversely, using leverage essentially creates a negative cash position, which could be rewarding if executed with proper caution. Yes, putting a long-term life insurance company loan or a CMBS loan

definitely comes with caveats, because of course there are no free lunches. However, when all is said and done, a properly capitalized asset with prudent leverage and maximized tax benefits is the most efficient way to own and grow commercial real estate portfolios. ■



*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 highleverage, 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.*



It’s interesting to note there isn’t anything structurally wrong with the economy. Rather, the majority of the business interruption was caused by government-led or behavioral closures that for the most part turned out to be temporary.”



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# Finding inner peace in the outside world

The importance of outdoor spaces  
in a post-pandemic world

by ERICA KENNEDY

**P**EOPLE CRAVE THE OUTDOORS and love to travel. And although the pandemic put the brakes on travel in 2020, the hospitality industry is quickly rebounding.

As many hotels reopen with new health and safety procedures in place, there is a need to rethink how we design hotel spaces. There also is an opportunity for new and existing properties to incorporate practices to meet healthy building standards as outlined in the International WELL Building Institute as well as strengthen a hotel's marketing capabilities.

Unique outdoor amenities can add value to a hotel, creating a destination for out-of-town visitors and the local community. In March 2021, *Forbes* claimed 2021 to be the "Year of the Yard" as more homeowners plan to improve their outdoor spaces. A 2021 Trend Report stated, "Outdoor Living Space is more valuable than ever before" with 90% of Americans agreeing that their outdoor living space is more valuable than

ever, with 78% making outside upgrades during COVID-19. As a hotelier, the optimum way to accomplish this is creating serene courtyards, vibrant rooftops, and bringing nature to the interior of the hotel. The modern hotel guest also is demanding memorable experiences during their stay. Creating healthy exterior spaces helps craft these guest experiences.

A courtyard is an enclosure adjacent to a building or within the building. It can be prominent or hidden, fully enclosed or open. It can be the perfect place for gathering or socializing for an event. Hidden at the dual-brand Residence Inn and SpringHill Suites in Greenville, SC, Auro Hotels created a hidden urban oasis that can be a peaceful courtyard or an active event space. The outdoor lounge includes several relaxed seating options, fire pits, a pool, and a BBQ area. It's a wonderful place to rest, relax, and recharge for the next adventure. Outdoor spaces often create surprise when not seen from the street, causing a sense of intrigue, and

they can promote the health of the hotel guests. Courtyards help market a hotel as a meeting space for small groups, such as pre-function wine and cheese, or for larger events like family reunions and weddings.

If your hotel footprint is challenged for an outdoor space or courtyard, go vertical! Juniper is a restaurant and bar located at the top of the AC by Marriott in Greenville and designed by ASD|SKY. This is the epitome of a great rooftop environment. There are different zones to accommodate many types of gatherings than can be open to outside, covered, or inside. Venues within the rooftop include a secret cocktail garden, greenhouse space and fire box. Equinox roof systems, shades, and firepits allow for year-round usability of the space. Giving the illusion of bringing the outside in with movable doors and windows is healthy and appealing to guests.

Hotels are embracing biophilic design in the post-pandemic world by including landscaping, natural materials, abundant daylighting, water features, and fresh air.

# When is a rooftop terrace appropriate?

Not incidentally, biophilia is the human tendency to interact or be closely associated with other forms of life in nature, and good biophilic design appeals to all senses.

From the upbeat music in the elevator to the firepits on the roof, a hotel should entice all senses creating a memorable experience. Sights, sounds, smells, textures, and taste can all evoke emotionally charged memories. Having different finishes on the floor can help us navigate spaces. Changing from carpet to tile easily transitions the user to another space. Vision allows us to see brightness, contrast, shape, color, distance, etc. The mountain or river views in the distance can be a draw for guests while enjoying a rooftop space. Scenes are often created by using sound and lighting. Have you ever been in a space when the lights dim and the music gets louder? Last but certainly not least, smell and taste go hand in hand. Do you remember the aroma of your grandmother's kitchen? That is one of those emotionally charged memories often duplicated in outdoor hotel spaces.

Hotel design entails creating great guest experiences. The guest wants to feel that the hotel is healthy and designed to protect their health, safety, and welfare. If this has been achieved through wonderfully experiential exterior spaces that celebrate the natural environment, guests are willing to invest more in this experience. They will also recommend your hotel to their peers and book their next events in your courtyard or rooftop terrace. ■



*Erica Kennedy is Principal, Hospitality Studio with Charlotte, NC-based ODA Architecture, a firm that provides architectural expertise developing office*

*spaces, hotels and hospitality projects, lifestyle storage facilities, mixed-use developments, and multi-family and interior spaces.*

- 1** The building use warrants a public space on the roof to serve the inhabitants of the building or for a public use.
- 2** The view is worth enjoying. Mountains, oceans, rivers, and urban skylines create exciting backdrops to rooftop terraces.
- 3** The budget will support a rooftop terrace. They add considerable cost to the budget but help create a healthier environment adding fresh air and sunlight.
- 4** The building maintains active uses on the street level such as lobbies, restaurants, bars, swimming pools, and meeting spaces. Rooftop terraces often pull activity and energy from the street presence.
- 5** The rooftop terrace is a revenue generator. With appropriate signage and branding, rooftop terraces can accommodate various-sized groups.



# Feeling

# Stuck?

A great guest experience requires digital transformation

by DEREK PACQUÉ

**H**OSPITALITY'S DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION WAS A TOP PRIORITY BEFORE COVID-19 BUT THE PAN-  
demic accelerated the adoption of automated tools. We saw hospitality organizations begin using updated technologies such as machine learning and replacing outdated and siloed legacy systems with cloud-based tools. The pandemic also led to many transformations in how the hospitality industry collaborates, leverages data, and shares information. As digital technologies transform the hospitality industry, here's how digital transformation is reshaping the guest experience.

## 1 A MOBILE-FIRST APPROACH

Mobile phones and tablets support a wide variety of communication channels – from email and voice to chat and text – creating a sea of opportunities for hotels to provide guests with an exceptional guest experience. Hotels can benefit from allowing guests to use personal smartphones and hotel-supplied bedside tablets for more than customer service, bookings, and mobile check-in. Integrated mobile-first hospitality-management software can enable guests to use their phone to unlock their hotel room, order room service, make payments, retrieve luggage or bags, and request housekeeping items such as extra towels. Algorithms can even make recommendations based on a guest's browsing history offering nearby restaurants and entertainment





Digital transformation allows hoteliers to understand guests in new ways, using that information to identify

opportunities, optimize products and services, and automate solutions.”

suggestions and showing QR code pop-up messages to provide exclusive discounts and coupons. It’s also the ideal solution for guests who dread calling the front desk, where it will ring 20 times before they’re quickly placed on hold for easy-to-answer questions.

Hotels also are improving the mobile app user experience. In addition to booking options, remote check-in and checkout, room key functionality, and guest services, hotels are adding new benefits like offering live chat with hotel staff, hotel maps and resort activities. Some are taking it a step further by providing personalized and timely information such as flight schedules, ticket availability for local entertainment and sporting events, and restaurant reservations all within their app.

## 2 RAPID BUSINESS INSIGHTS

Data governance plays a critical role in a hotel’s ability to leverage data to make informed decisions. Data becomes worthless when a hotel doesn’t know where it came from or how it was collected, not to mention the absence of a solid data-management plan. Poor data undermines critical business initiatives, leading to operational inefficiencies and bad insights, and jeopardizes the guest experience. Hospitality organizations need to implement a data-governance program that integrates data quality and data management. Not only will a formal program align people, processes, and

technology, thus helping them to understand data and transform it into an enterprise asset, but it helps users gain data visibility. As a result, business users are empowered to quickly find, understand, and apply the right data sources for analytics and make the right decisions to drive revenue, marketing, distribution, and hotel management.

## 3 PRIORITIZING PERSONALIZATION

Guests today demand personalization, whether automatically being assigned a room on a high floor and away from the elevator or ensuring that a feather-free pillow provides extra comfort on the bed.

Like the retail industry, the average transaction value and conversion rate increases when offering guests personalized recommendations that are relevant and meaningful. It makes a guest feel recognized and valued while increasing brand loyalty. As data governance takes priority and data silos come down, increasing cross-collaboration between departments, personalization will become more effective. Hotels can micro-segment audiences, develop multi-channel strategies, and further leverage artificial intelligence (AI) for consistency. Hotels can respond quickly to changing guest expectations, enhance communications across all channels, provide a stellar guest experience, and integrate data between all touchpoints to identify guest trends and preferences. The result is more revenue, increased guest retention, and differentiation from the competition.

## 4 THE GROWTH OF AI

AI solutions with machine learning algorithms offer several solutions in the hospitality industry, including revenue predictions, driving down guest acquisition costs, and perfecting guest-retention strategies. After all, loyal guests are the backbone of any hospitality business. AI also is actively leveraged in the hospitality industry using virtual concierges, natural language processing (NLP), and chatbots. In AI, data is collected from websites, guest interactions via the hotel app, chatbots, purchase history, food preferences, stored payment options, spa and amenity usage, and more. The software and algorithms automatically learn from the guest’s patterns to connect and derive meaning from the information, resulting in a more personalized guest experience.

## 5 REPLACING MANUAL TASKS

Many traditional hotel roles and processes are time consuming, error prone, cost more, and cause bottlenecks to other services. With many conventional methods no longer applicable to the modern hotel, how is the hospitality industry automating these tasks to streamline workflows, improve productivity, and grow revenue? What guest hasn’t faced a long line checking their luggage upon arrival, a hearty bowl of cold soup because of a room-service delay, or stayed awake waiting for maintenance to come by and adjust the room temperature? Many of us are probably three for three.

By replacing traditional luggage check services with mobile apps, bell staff can quickly associate guest reservations to belongings without writing on paper, saving guests and staff time. Guests continue on their way while the bellman scans reusable tags to capture pictures of the belongings for secure, contactless luggage storage. Once completed, the guest receives a branded and personalized text confirmation with their claim number as their digital claim ticket. When they’re ready to check-out, guests just text their claim numbers to the bell team. Bags are waiting as guests depart the property. No lines, waiting, lost items, or delays.

Digital transformation allows hoteliers to understand guests in new ways, using that information to identify opportunities, optimize products and services, and automate solutions. By embracing digital transformation, hotels can empower employees, make data-informed decisions, and improve their bottom line by better serving guests. ■

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*Derek Pacqué is the Founder and CEO of Chexology (builders of CoatChex), the Shark Tank-featured company that pushed for digital change in the coat checking industry.*

# The elephant in the room

## Is a mandatory COVID-19 vaccination policy right for your workplace?

by DEEPA N. SUBRAMANIAN

**O**N AUGUST 23, 2021, THE FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION (FDA) FULLY APPROVED THE FIRST COVID-19 VACCINE – the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. As a result, more employers are considering mandatory vaccination programs for their employees. While some employers implemented vaccination programs even with only emergency approval, others are feeling more comfortable now with the FDA’s full approval. The FDA’s approval is for those ages 16 and up and the vaccine is otherwise available with “emergency use authorization” (EUA) for those aged 12-15. Until now, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson (J&J), and Pfizer had EUA status in the U.S. as the pharmaceutical companies moved through the official approval process. Moderna and J&J are continuing to go through those processes.

With Pfizer’s approval and the resurgence of COVID-19, along with the Delta variant, employers are considering mandatory COVID-19 vaccination programs, wherein employees must be vaccinated or risk losing employment. Particularly in hospitality, where employees are constantly in contact with the public, this has become a topic of serious consideration. Some employers have also implemented a hybrid approach, where an employee must either be vaccinated or submit to weekly testing while taking other safety precautions (e.g. masking, social distancing, etc.).

### DISABILITY ACCOMMODATION

The Equal Employment Opportunity Committee (EEOC) has weighed in and provided guidance, stating an employer may require all employees to be vaccinated, assuming the requirement is job related and consistent with business necessity. However, the EEOC reminds employers they cannot throw the Americans with

Disabilities Act (ADA) out the window. Employers cannot require a disabled employee to get the vaccine (assuming they state they cannot get the vaccine due to the disability) unless the employer can demonstrate the disabled employee would be a “direct threat” to the health or safety of him/herself or others in the workplace without receiving the vaccine. An employer also must determine if there is a reasonable accommodation available that would reduce or eliminate the threat.

If an employer implements a mandatory vaccination program and an employee requests an accommodation, the employer must engage in an interactive dialogue to find a solution that will allow the employee to perform essential job functions, while at the same time not creating an undue hardship for the employer. Employers should train their managers, supervisors, and HR employees regarding the ADA process before implementing a mandatory vaccination program. Depending on the job in

question, the accommodation may include working from home, masking, distancing, COVID testing on a weekly basis, etc.

COVID-19 vaccination information is confidential medical information and should be securely stored with limited access. Employers should keep ADA information confidential and not disclose it beyond the core group who needs to know. Employees receiving accommodations should not be retaliated against.

### RELIGIOUS ACCOMMODATION

In addition to disability related accommodations, employees may seek religious accommodations, pursuant to Title VII. Similar to the disability discussion, employers must determine if they can grant the accommodation request unless it would post an undue hardship. The EEOC states, “the definition of religion is broad and protects beliefs, practices, and observances with which the employer may be unfamiliar. Therefore, the employer

should ordinarily assume that an employee's request for religious accommodation is based on a sincerely held religious belief, practice, or observance." While the EEOC does not encourage a lot of questioning of religious beliefs, employers may consider having an employee sign an attestation of beliefs when requesting an accommodation. If the employer has an objective basis for questioning the religious nature or sincerity of the belief, they can request additional supporting information.

**PROCEED WITH CAUTION**

Employers should consider the "soft" factors, such as employee attitudes towards the vaccine, transmission in the local community, how the mandate might affect business, public relations, etc.

Employers should review their state and local laws before implementing a mandatory vaccination policy. Montana, for example, has a law that prohibits discrimination based on vaccination status and also states that individuals cannot be required to receive a vaccine that only has EUA approval. It is unclear what changes may be made to that law and others based on the FDA's approval of the Pfizer vaccine.

While there are a host of issues to consider with respect to mandatory COVID vaccination programs, employers should review their state and local laws, keep abreast of what the CDC is recommending, and make the best decision for their employees and customers. ■



*Deepa N. Subramanian, Esq., is a shareholder with Ogletree Deakins in the firm's Atlanta office. She represents employers in all aspects of employment law,*

*including employment litigation and counseling, and she advises and defends clients in federal and state employment-related lawsuits, including actions alleging discrimination, harassment, retaliation, violations of wage and hour law, and breach of contract.*



“Employers should keep ADA information confidential and not disclose it beyond the core group who needs to know. Employees receiving accommodations should not be retaliated against.”

# When the going gets tough

The effort to drive bookings in a tough economy doesn't have to feel like a tug of war

by RUBEN REYES

**T**HE LODGING INDUSTRY has been greatly impacted by the current state of the economy due to the pandemic. Ours has been on the front lines of this challenge since the outset and may be among the last to fully recover. At the start of the pandemic, our industry saw a loss of more than 4.8 billion jobs, so hoteliers looked to cut costs and reached out to lending institutions for support. This was the best course of action that many seasoned hoteliers took to help secure their properties'

best interests, as many lenders set in play plans to not only support the hotelier but looked to the government for support in the form of economic relief, such as the Paycheck Protection Program that helped hoteliers during this economic downturn. Hoteliers also reached out to their brands for support, fee relief, and advice about the best course of action to take. Many scrambled to find new and innovative ways to look for alternative sources of revenue and effective ways to keep costs down.

In a conversation with a franchisee who has a large portfolio, the relevance of working with online travel agencies came into question. He felt that during the downturn he saw very little revenue and support come in from OTAs, stating that many had laid off staff and were more difficult to work with than in the past. He sees OTAs as a monopoly on reservations

that he must pay for at a ridiculous margin, and the financial burden on the cost of working with OTAs isn't worth his time. He questioned their effectiveness in the current state of the economy and expressed worry that the new variant will continue to have a negative impact on his properties.

These views on OTAs aren't unique within our industry, but working with them could increase a hotel's bookings and improve a property's online presence.

## DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

Simply put, guests are highly likely to use an OTA, especially since the Delta variant came into play as OTAs have spent a great deal of time rescheduling bookings and updating guests of current travel policies and restrictions. A bonus that goes along with working with an OTA is that a listing would not only attach to the OTA



but also to other affiliate sites. Many OTAs have affiliate marketing programs that are designed to increase a hotel's reach to channel more bookings. Generally, affiliate programs produce 15% to 30% of all advertised sales, which is designed to target other markets travelers otherwise might not have seen. But, this passive income of boosted business comes with a price, as many sites collect commissions on the sales they generate.

To understand how affiliate marketing works, you must understand that this type of marketing isn't isolated to businesses that deal strictly within the lodging industry. The elements of affiliate marketing start with the advertiser (i.e., the hotelier), then will involve the publisher. This may include an OTA affiliate site, a blogger, a cost-per-action payout site that advertises your property to gain exposure through banners or widgets but generates revenue per click.

Affiliate marketing is built on the idea of creating large-scale impressions to reach as many potential guests as possible. Obviously, OTA sites such as Booking.com, for example, can hold their own but use affiliate programs to target a larger audience by reaching out to a more diverse group of potential guests. Bloggers and YouTubers who already have a large following, equal to high website traffic, will take

advantage of their already-loyal followers to help them generate more revenue by helping you sell rooms at your hotel.

So why would you want to pursue this, and how can you go about it on your own? Simply put, you can generate more direct bookings by expanding to a wider, more diverse audience. By networking with other companies, you may be able to generate passive revenue by becoming an affiliate yourself, as 81% of brands and 84% of publishers leverage the power of affiliate marketing in the U.S. The trend has been increasing steadily by 10.1% annually, bringing affiliate-marketing revenue to \$6.8 billion by 2020.

If, for example, your hotel is in a primary market and spring break is a busy time of year for you, partnering with a spring break blogger who can add a backlink to your hotel for booking under a special rate in exchange for a commission can help you drive more direct bookings. If you have your own site that supports a booking engine and has a good ranking, you may reach out to other businesses in your area

that may include a backlink for guests that visit your site to patronize their business in exchange for a margin of the cost of their services.

As mentioned earlier in this article, there is much debate about the financial implications of the current hotel-OTA relationship, and that's more than understandable. However, don't be too eager to wash your hands of the process, especially as those partnerships can drive business in ways that a hotel cannot accomplish alone. ■



Ruben Reyes is the franchise development director and assurance & marketing program director for Hospitality International, Inc., and he can be reached at [rreyes@hifranchise.com](mailto:rreyes@hifranchise.com) or 210-490-8490.

“

These views on OTAs aren't unique within our industry, but working with them could increase a hotel's bookings and improve a property's online presence.”

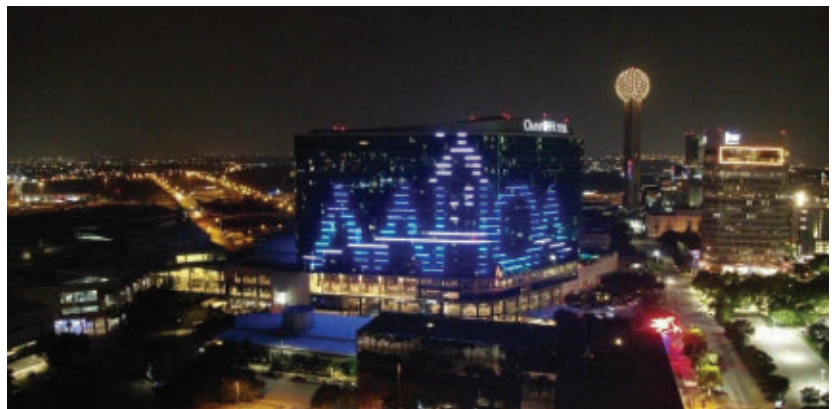
# AAHOA MEMBERS IN ACTION



Female Director Eastern Division Lina Patel introduced speakers at the first two Education Sessions of the day at AAHOACON21 in Dallas in August. The discussion focused on prepping F&B offerings for a post-pandemic future, and the Future of Franchising.



President & CEO Ken Greene congratulates Director of Marketing Heather Carnes after she was named AAHOA Staff Member of the Year at AAHOACON21.



The host Omni Hotel in Dallas welcomed AAHOA Members in style for AAHOACON21.



Vinay Patel was officially installed as the 2021-22 Chairman of the Board of Directors.

Greater Los Angeles Area Regional Director Naresh (ND) Bhakta (from left), South Pacific Regional Director Mike Riverside, North Pacific Regional Director Kamallesh (KP) Patel, Director at Large Prashant Patel, and "Hotel Impossible" host Anthony Melchiorri live it up at AAHOACON21.



AAHOA welcomed the 2021-22 Board of Directors at AAHOACON21.



The Welcome Reception at AAHOACON21 was in full effect!



AAHOA said a big thank you and farewell to the 2020-2021 AAHOA Board of Directors during AAHOACON21 in Dallas in August.



Congrats to the 2020 AAHOA award winners: Nanda Patel, Priti Patel, Saajan Patel, Mitesh Jivan, Masudur Khan, Bijal Patel, and Hotel Lexen.



AAHOA Members took over *Texas Live!* during our wildly popular Block Party during AAHOACON21. The energy was electrifying!

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1. Title of publication: *Today's Hotelier*
2. Publication no.: 2417-4062
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7. Complete mailing address of known office of publication: Asian American Hotel Owners Association, Inc., 1100 Abernathy Road, Suite 725, Atlanta, Georgia 30328
8. Complete mailing address of headquarters or general business offices of the publisher: Naylor LLC, 1430 Spring Hill Road, 6th Floor, McLean, VA 22102
9. Full names and complete mailing address of publisher, editor and managing editor:  
 Publisher: Heather Greyling, 5950 NW 1st Place, Gainesville, FL 32607  
 Editor: Sarah Sain, 5950 NW 1st Place, Gainesville, FL 32607  
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10. Owner is Asian American Hotel Owners Association, Inc., 1100 Abernathy Road, Suite 1100, Atlanta, Georgia 30328
11. Known bondholders, mortgagees and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities: None
12. Has Not Changed During Preceding 12 Months
13. Publication title: *Today's Hotelier*
14. Issue date for circulation data below: December
15. Extent and nature of circulation:

	Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date
a. Total no. copies (Net press run)	7,962	4,352
b. Paid circulation (By Mail and Outside the Mail)		
(1) Mailed Outside County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541		
(2) Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541	7,144	3,701
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(1) Free or Nominal Rate Outside-County Copies Included on PS Form 3541	0	0
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e. Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution	799	635
f. Total Distribution	7,973	4,336
g. Copies Not Distributed	19	16
h. Total	7,962	4,352
i. Percent Paid	100	100
16. Electronic Copy Circulation		
a. Paid Electronic Copies		
b. Total Paid Print Copies (Line 15c) + Paid Electronic Copies (Line 16a)	7,177	3,701
c. Total Print Distribution (Line 15f) + Paid Electronic Copies (Line 16a)	7,973	4,336
d. Percent Paid (Both Print & Electronic Copies (16b divided by 16c x 100)	90	85
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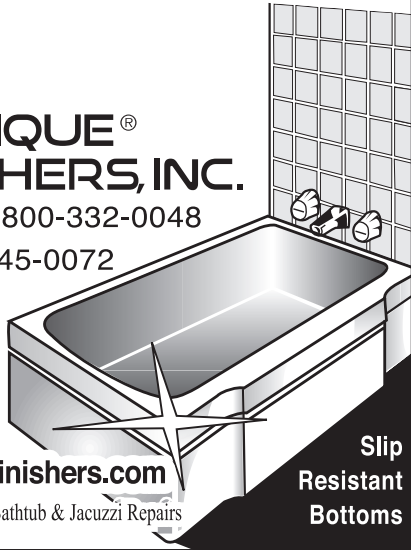
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Bizgrouplink LLC..... 50 bizgrouplink.com	Matrix Hospitality Furniture Inc..... 20 www.matrixhospitalityinc.com	Red Lion Hotel Corp - Sonesta ..... 48, Inside Back Cover www.sonesta.com
Chase Merchant Services..... 7, 48 merchants.chasepaymentech.com	Matrix Telecom ..... 49 www.matrixhotelpbx.com	Red Roof Inn ..... 13 www.redrooffranchising.com
Dish Business Group.... Inside Front Cover, Gatefold Cover www.dish.com		Rinnai ..... 3, 4, 48 www.rinnai.us
		Saltzman Law Group, LLC..... 49 www.saltzmanlawgroup.com
		SleepNest Beds ..... 27 www.sleepnestbeds.com
		Unique Refinishers ..... 49 www.uniquefinishers.com
		Vanities International..... 50 www.vanitiesinternational.com
		Watco Manufacturing Company..... 31 www.watcomfg.com
		Watco Manufacturing Company..... 48 www.wcmind.com

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