



Hospitality's technology drive-thru

HOSPA CEO Carl Weldon reports on the next standards in hotel technology.

Are hotels similar to cars in that what starts in the luxury section ends up as the industry standard? Take ABS brakes, which started on very upscale cars (and only as an option at that) and now pretty much everyone can be assured that when they slam their foot down the next time a cat with a death wish runs past the car is going to stay stuck to the road.

Satellite navigation is another luxury product, which moves into the mid-market courtesy of products such as Tom Tom. Indeed, now anyone with a smartphone (and coverage) can claim to have personal sat nav. As this issue was going to press a product was launched at Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas (the annual showcase of technological innovation) which combines sat nav and priceline.com to allow customers to book hotels while on the road.

And talking of connecting to the internet, that hotel bugbear: Wi-Fi. Wi-Fi started with its origins in dial-up modems (I remember installing "Patch panels" and extra lines in the switch board in a three star hotel in the 1990's so guests could choose to dial up from their hotel). Remember your first broadband at home? Then your first wireless-free experience... And then finally it arrived in your hotel, albeit charged for. Free Wi-Fi is increasingly a point of differentiation for hotel brands and consumers are starting to appreciate that it is often budget hotels which offer free, decent, Wi-Fi, while the upper end of the market still views it as a revenue stream. (See: "Why do more expensive Hotels charge for Wifi and Cheaper hotels don't?" <http://www.ibtimes.com/why-do-expensive-hotels-charge-wi-fi-when-cheaper-hotels-dont-1705568>).

The Internet of Things is now in the ABS category. Samsung recently announced their commitment to this at CES and said that all of the devices in its product line would be connected within the next five years. This includes mobile computing technology, but also home appliances like laundry machines and air conditioners. (<http://appleinsider.com/articles/15/01/05/samsung-touts-open-internet-of-things-push-says-all-products-to-be-connected-in-5-years>).

Hilton Worldwide has recently announced mobile check-in using smartphones for door-opening in 'most hotels by 2016' and the new Whitbread Premier Hub brand has just started delivering this as part of the standard for the new brand. Starwood Hotels & Resorts, which has also introduced mobile check-in, including check-in using the Apple Watch (when it's launched) has also recently announced an App for Google Glass. The Montcalm Hotel in London is using Google Glass for customer service already.

A recent article focused mainly on upscale hotels in Asia talks a fair amount about lighting and robots. Large brands appear to be investing in these areas to supplement their services. I love the idea of a R2D2 type robot (A.L.O.. The Botlr - robot butler) being available for certain simple hotel services 24/7. Terence Ronson, who is working on some of these projects in Asia Pacific

feels all these advancements are great, as both hotel employees and guests benefit from increased efficiency and better levels of service; he nevertheless felt the hospitality industry should not get too carried away. "We must not lose sight of the fact that the hotel business is a traditional business and delivering service for the most part has to be done with real people," he said. ("The tech is an aide, a tool to achieve this - and not necessarily a replacement." See more on <http://m.todayonline.com/lifestyle/travel/hi-tech-hotels-new-age-hospitality>). Indeed, Starwood Hotels & Resorts angered hospitality unions when it offered robot room service.

The question is not whether you should invest but when and to what degree?

That should depend upon:

- * what you are (and what brand you may be buying into)
- * where you are
- * what your competition or market are doing

and what type of guests you have - and those guests have different personalities and requirements depending upon whether they are business or leisure.

The new Uniform System for Hotel Accounting now demands that all technology and telephony is combined into one department on the P&L identifying this area as an important cost and investment. It will be very interesting to see what the average percentage of sales that the benchmark surveys say the hotel industry is operating on once (nearly) everybody adopts the new standard.

Hotels are traditional. But guests still see connectivity as a high priority at the very least now. Conference attendees (as we well know from HOSPACE!) demand it especially if there is some inter-action or voting expected. Connectivity really should be treated as a utility. Decent flat screen TVs at a minimum. Content of course is debatable depending on the questions above. But the industry really does need to match what guests have at home, at the very least.

Join us at the Hospitality Show for some discussions one these kind of areas on 19-21 January - see http://www.hospitalityshow.co.uk/Content/HOSPACE-Hub-1-2/2_10/

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