

Do 'High Tech' and Hospitality Belong in the Same Sentence? - By Rob Rush

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Twenty years after hanging out our shingle, my partner and I have built a business that has grown from its roots providing quality assurance audit programs to the hotel industry, to a consultancy supporting a variety of industries in a niche that we have helped define - Customer Experience Management, or CEM.

One of the foremost elements of our point of view on the customer experience is that in any organization, people, process and technology must be aligned around a shared vision and delivery of the optimal customer experience. With this message as a linchpin, we've secured clients in financial services, healthcare, manufacturing and a number of other different industries where the proper way of making the "Heavenly Bed" is hardly relevant.

Why the appeal of our "customer experience" message? Those deeply-anchored roots in the hospitality industry. Our prospective clients recognize that while everyone else was hung-up on TQM, JIT or the latest management fad, the hospitality industry was mindful of "customer experience" long before it became a fashionable acronym. While other industries go to great lengths to apply the lessons learned from the hospitality industry to their own businesses, it seems that those of us in hospitality may be going too far down the road the other way, integrating people, process and technology to the point where the "technology" has, in some instances, usurped the "people."

Do "High Tech" and "High Touch" even belong in the same sentence, let alone the same hotel lobby? By definition, can customer-facing technology actually provide "hospitality," as we understand the term? Hmm... let's check.

hos .pi .tal .i .ty - noun

1. the friendly reception and treatment of guests or strangers.
2. the quality or disposition of receiving and treating guests and strangers in a warm, friendly, generous way.

Disposition. Warm. Generous. Do any of these words sound like the capabilities or characteristics of a machine? I know that there have been significant advances in "smart" technology and that Microsoft Office has that great little paper clip with eyes to help you out when you are in a bind, but can you tell me the last time you felt a surge of warmth or generosity from your PC. Granted, some would argue that the technology in their life does have a definite disposition... but would never use the term "friendly" to describe it.

So why, in an industry that demands a personal, human touch by definition, that others are emulating for its ability to make that personal, human touch meaningful, are we constantly looking for ways to replace a genuine touch...with an automated touchpad? In an industry that demands humanity, is there a fear that serving up pure, unvarnished human interaction is somehow... unsophisticated?

At many hotel properties, a guest can place a reservation, check-in and order room service simply by moving from website to kiosk to television screen. Is this efficient? Perhaps. Cost-effective? Probably. Innovative? Sure. Is it hospitable. Uh... no. At no point did the website, kiosk or television screen (even if it was a wide-screen, high-def plasma!) exude warmth, generosity or friendliness. And as these scenarios become more common, the hospitality industry, by definition, becomes a bit less hospitable.

So who is clamoring for this evolution from interaction to interface? Why, the business traveler, of course. These hardened travel warriors have neither the time nor patience to tolerate the inefficiencies of the human touch. The notion of hospitality is wasted on these single-minded, focused automatons, who want nothing more than high-speed internet, an in-room coffee pot and an orthopedic down pillow. The act of providing or receiving "hospitality" is wasted energy, and wasted energy... is a waste.

Or so the conventional wisdom goes.

Not so fast. As the largest hotel company in Latin America, Grupo Posadas operates more than 90 hotels in Mexico, South America and the United States, including several oriented for the business traveler under the Fiesta Inn brand. For the first ten years of its existence, Fiesta Inn focused on price and efficiency as the twin pillars of the brand, and succeeded in winning the minds of many a business traveler. So what was missing while they were winning minds? Hearts, of course. It turns out Fiesta Inn customers who professed to like the brand for all of the conventional valued attributes of a business class hotel weren't prepared to make a full commitment and profess their love.

In a series of research studies (profiled in the White Paper authored by LRA titled "Building a Hotel Brand: How a Business Class Hotel Discovered its Brand DNA"), Posadas discovered that not only did business travelers miss the elements of "hospitality" that were slowly disappearing from their travel experiences... they craved them. In fact, when Posadas attempted to "personify" the role of the hotel for the typical business traveler, they kept arriving at... caregiver. The hardened road warrior was hoping his or her hotel would serve as mother, personal assistant and nurse, all wrapped up in one.

I don't know about you, but my mother never asked me what I wanted for lunch via touch pad.

As the study explained further:

[The business traveler] has an objective, his responsibilities continue even if he's out of the office. The emotional implications of this reality are that his... "safety net" has been altered and needs to be rebuilt under new conditions, making him vulnerable, dependent and tense. What does he value? Efficiency, attention and a sense that "they understand."

Not so much the flinty-eyed road warrior anymore, huh? More so a lost baby bird, navigating a strange, unfamiliar landscape in need of a surrogate caretaker. In need of hospitality... i.e., the disposition of warmth, generosity and kindness.

So do you think this fragile being wants to trust his or her wakeup call to a machine? Not with their sense of security and well-being, emotionally and financially, at stake. Think about it - if the electronic voice at the other end of the phone line botches the wake up call of a hotel guest on vacation, what might be at stake? Breakfast at the pool instead of at the buffet? For the business traveler it might be much more... and that extra personal touch - the very definition of hospitality - provides that needed level of comfort and security.

The last thing that the hospitality industry wants to do is cede ownership of "hospitality" to... banking. Or healthcare. Or any other industry that is beginning to reframe the way it thinks about its business around the attributes of warmth, generosity and friendliness. Please don't mistake this article for an anti-technology screed, the proper intersection of people, process and technology is still necessary to deliver the desired customer experience, even within the hospitality industry.

In my mind, however, the experience is more valued - for any type of hotel guest - if the technology stays behind the scenes and the most meaningful touch is a human one.

Just ask your mom.

Rob loves feedback! Contact Rob Rush via email at rob.rush@lraworldwide.com.

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