The Pursuit of Consumer Happiness: The School of Hospitality Leadership stays on trend with a constantly evolving industry

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The Pursuit of Consumer Happiness

The School of Hospitality Leadership stays on trend with a constantly evolving industry

by Jamie Sokolik | Portrait photography by Sandy Rosencrans
When a hotel stay goes well, it doesn't happen by accident. The people behind the scenes are working hard to ensure your visit is everything you expect and more. The students and alumni of DePaul’s School of Hospitality Leadership in the Driehaus College of Business are eager to employ the skills they’ve learned to provide the best service possible to travelers of every stripe.

Established in 2009 with a $7.5 million grant from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the school is growing quickly. One of the basics students learn is that part of creating an enjoyable hotel stay is meeting traveler expectations. Millennials and the influence of the shared economy are driving this evolution to redefine the hotel and travel experience. Nicholas Thomas, assistant professor and director of the J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott Center for Student Development and Engagement at DePaul, and some of the school’s alumni explore a few of the many new trends that hotels are adopting in both existing and new facilities to meet customer expectations.

**Lobby Tech**

Gone are the days of the dimly lit, cavernous lobby with ornate, bulky furniture. Millennials aren’t interested. Instead, they want technology. In response, the Hyatt Regency Chicago recently updated their lobby, which now features interactive LED screens with pertinent guest information. “If you’re in town for a meeting, and you’re not sure where it is, you don’t have to wait in line at the front desk, explain what you need, wait for the associate to look up the information and so on,” Thomas says. “You can go up to one of these flat screens, type in the name of the meeting, and not only will it immediately tell you where the meeting is, it will show you a 3-D map of how to get there.”

The check-in process is also changing. Many concierges now have iPads, so you can check in as you walk through the door rather than wait at the front desk. Not fast enough? Hotel apps have also become a popular way for guests to check in quickly and eliminate any waiting.

“I was on a trip recently, and I got on my Marriott app to check in on my way out of the airport,” Thomas says. “While en route, I got a push notification that my room was ready, and I could pick up my key at the front desk. It was seriously convenient.”

Apps have affected more than just the check-in process. Forgot your toothbrush? Need a new pillow? Craving chocolate cake? At an increasing number of hotels, there is no need to call down to the front desk. Grab your cellphone (or the iPad that more and more hotels are providing in each guest room), open the app and make the request. The item in question will be delivered to your door.

“Millennials aren’t just used to technology—they expect it,” Thomas says. “It’s a point of convenience. Not all hotels are making the transition, and they’re likely to suffer for it.”

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Room Renewal

Travelers have always expected comfort and quality, but the definition has changed. “In recent years, there’s been a greater emphasis on the bathroom,” Thomas says. “The bathtub is out, and there is an expectation for quality fixtures and a streamlined look, both in the bathroom and the rest of the room.” In addition to ousting the tub, you’ll also be hard-pressed to find a clunky desk in a modern hotel room. Today’s business travelers prefer to have extra space in their room and take their laptops to a café or other WiFi-enabled space. “The Chicago Marriott Downtown Magnificent Mile has undergone many renovations as of late, including replacing desks with a small table that can easily be moved around the room and used for a variety of purposes,” Thomas says.

Armoires and dressers are also becoming scarcer as millennials tend to live out of their suitcases while traveling. Ryan LeVeque (BUS ’12), revenue optimization manager for White Lodging Services Inc., agrees that the streamlined look is taking over. He points to the Aloft Chicago City Center, a boutique hotel that is part of the Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide Inc. portfolio, as an example of the simplified rooms more hotels now offer. “The dresser is very minimal, and the bathrooms are simple,” he says. “Travelers want a quality product, but they aren’t going to spend their vacation in their hotel rooms, so they’ve gone back to high-quality basics.”

Tech amenities have advanced beyond free WiFi. Some hotels, especially those that cater to international travelers, have begun to supply iPhones to their guests. At the Hotel Icon Hong Kong, the iPhone serves as more than just a replacement for the in-room landline; hotel staff will download appropriate apps and maps prior to your stay. You can leave your personal mobile device in your room and take the hotel’s iPhone with you anywhere—tourist outings, business meetings, restaurants—and save yourself money and data usage in the process. “It’s an incredibly simple thing, but also incredibly functional,” Thomas says.

“Travelers aren’t going to spend their vacation in their hotel rooms, so they’ve gone back to high-quality basics.”
Healthy Eats

Business travelers often dread the prospect of having to grab a packaged, preservative-filled sandwich for lunch during their 15-minute break between meetings. “The grab-and-go concept has been around for a long time, but the look of it is changing,” Thomas says. “Guests want healthier, fresher options, even when they’re in a rush.”

To accommodate such customers, the Chicago Marriott Downtown Magnificent Mile opened Rush Street Pantry, which provides quick and healthy food for guests on the go. The offerings are designed to be simplified and portable, but the quality is still top-notch—the hotel’s executive chef is in charge of planning the market’s daily menu and uses mostly locally sourced offerings. The Hilton Chicago, which has a large percentage of guests who travel for business, offers a similar concept with their version of grab-and-go at Herb N’ Kitchen. Described on the hotel’s website as an “on-the-go urban market,” The market offers guests the choice to take freshly prepared items with them or enjoy a leisurely lunch in the casual seating area nearby.

Kyle Harris (BUS ’15) is manager of restaurants and bars for the Sheraton Grand Chicago, where he helps manage seven on-site restaurants. He has observed the change in the grab-and-go model firsthand. “We definitely have had to change up our grab-and-go over the last several years,” he says. “The food was always made fresh daily, but now the guests expect a little pop of something more interesting, a little more gourmet.”

Harris also predicts that room service as a whole might be on its way out. “The larger five- and six-star hotels will likely always have room service, but I think other hotels will move toward a 24-hour fresh market model. The guests love it, and the food and labor costs are much lower for the hotel.”

Additionally, many mainstay hotel restaurants are also getting some healthy improvements. “In the food and beverage industry as a whole, you’re seeing more of a trend toward fresh, whole, organic and locally sourced,” Thomas says. “Many of the chain hotel restaurants are also following this trend. Again, consumer expectations drive this market. The guest eats a certain way at home and expects to be able to maintain this diet on the road.”
It’s Easy Bee-ing Green

As society becomes more environmentally conscious, many large hotels are retooling their operations to become more eco-friendly. “People define sustainability in the hotel industry differently,” Thomas says. “You can talk about it in terms of implementing creative ways to maximize resources, such as power; waste management; water; and heating, ventilation and air conditioning. Or, in some cases, it’s incentivizing the guest to behave in environmentally conscious ways.”

Many hotels have implemented guest incentives. For example, Starwood Hotels and Resorts has the Make a Green Choice program in which guests who opt to forgo housekeeping for up to three days in a row receive rewards points and beverage vouchers. The aforementioned Rush Street Pantry touts their eco-friendly and stylish disposable containers. Perhaps among the most intricate initiatives is the Fairmont Hotel and Resorts Bee Sustainable program. The chain is helping the globally faltering bee population by placing hives on-site at select locations. This initiative not only supports bee health, but also allows hotel chefs to incorporate the sustainable, fresh honey in their cooking.

“The jury is still out on whether sustainability practices affect whether a guest will book with a certain hotel, but it’s slowly becoming more important,” Thomas says.

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