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WHAT WILL DOMINATE 2021 HOSPITALITY TECH TRENDS? DIGITIZATION AND DATA

OPINION (/OPINION) / TECHNOLOGY (/TECHNOLOGY)

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As the hospitality industry enters the new year, there are two key trends that emerged in 2020 worth noting.

Both trends - digitization and the use of data - have been driven, by the most part, by the advance of the coronavirus pandemic.

However, as the industry seeks to work towards recovery, I expect each will continue to accelerate at pace.

Much of this acceleration will be led by not only the increased need to prioritize a different mix of revenue streams, but also the need to continue to enhance the guest experience as the way to meet the marked shift in guest expectations - another significant and seemingly enduring consequence of the pandemic.

Faster and broader digitization across the industry

The need for urgent hygiene and process changes to prevent the spread of the coronavirus meant 2020 saw a big surge in technological change, accelerating many years of adaptation alongside other physical space concessions such as perspex screens.

The need for social distancing has meant many spaces have had to meet the requirements of a restricted capacity, which in turn has helped speed up more of the administration of hotel stays (food ordering, invoice retrieval, for example) to go online. I see no reason why this will slow in 2021.

Many guests who may have been reluctant to adopt mobile check-in, for example, have not only grown used to it - they now demand it. I expect this sudden increase in adoption will in turn lead to a number of further adaptations:

Booking platforms - Hotel websites are integral to showcasing new service and package offers, and bolstering the booking engine side of its content and operation again will become even more important.

Much hotel website content is brochure-themed with imagery and key information. However, hoteliers have a real opportunity to utilize digitization and leverage their websites to ensure that all aspects of their inventory and experience are included and supported by a direct booking function that goes beyond bedrooms.

Making the brochure more integrated with the new digitized processes will become more urgent.

Consistent branding and promotions being available at every relevant customer interaction can also pay real dividends in terms of bookings and revenue. For example, seeing a restaurant promotion solely at the time of booking - and staff not even being aware it existed - will start to become more of an issue and an annoyance to guests. Therefore, consistency across all booking platforms is key.

Integrated payments - Integration will be the theme that dominates this increased digitization to ensure it really delivers. In the case of payments, there is now a real focus on how to better streamline payments to make them seamless and easier to process both for the guest and the hotelier.

Certainly, payment before arrival benefits both the guest who can then enjoy a much easier checkout experience and the hotelier by supporting cashflow. The domino effect of this increased efficiency can then be felt throughout all operations.

Lastly, an erroneous key stroke around a payment balance through a lack of automation is the fastest way to erode trust in your digital experiences, so getting it right all the time and not relying on conversations at reception will be a priority.

Data is set to take center stage

As an industry, we have been overhauling all of our reporting gradually over the last three years and will continue to add more and more information and tools to analyze performance; however we have one request this year that we hope is a one-off: "Can you remove 2020 from our data comparisons?"

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We created that exception, but it highlights the different challenge of using data in the coming year. Couple this shock with the need to be ready to adapt to the new trends, many are seeing more local travelers, less business travelers, shorter lead times.

Understanding how this will evolve as we come out of the pandemic will be at the forefront in 2021 and probably last for a few years to come.

Short-term data analysis – When you are faced with so many unknowns and instant changes to lockdown policies, the need to have a clear view of the current bookings, markets and rates becomes even more important. Short-term decisions by the market mean you need to be looking more frequently at your immediate positions.

This is multidimensional across food and beverage, bedrooms, events and other operations likely to be affected such as spa and golf.

If you can see all are suffering, you can react quickly with packages to attract locals rather than those further afield, or close and take advantage of furlough.

If your data is across 15 systems, this becomes a lot harder. Bringing things closer together and looking at other data points such as payments in and out can be more immediately useful rather than long-term trends.

Holistic approach - In short, for any data analysis to really deliver for hoteliers in the future, it must synchronize and have touch points across all operations.

Existing metrics more closely tied to bedroom revenues are already recognized as not the only thing be aware of. Guests are often more local, or certainly traveling with a different purpose compared to 18 months ago.

The result of this is the need to look more broadly to make sure overall revenue targets are hit. I also think new performance data, detailing how well our recently digitized offerings are working, will be something to start tracking.

We will also need to keep an eye on planning for 2022 and the likely bounce in areas like events, particularly weddings and similar, and to make sure this rapid switch in mix is something hotels are ready for.

The increased adoption of both data analysis and digitization will be driven by not only the need to manage operations correctly, but also the need to manage operations more efficiently.

To do that, hoteliers need a clearer understanding of the facts and figures that drive their operations and the technology available (such as contactless payments) to digitize and deliver a first-class guest experience.

I am certain both will have key roles to play in the recovery of the hospitality industry in 2021 and beyond.

About the author...

Andrew Metcalfe is chief technical officer for Guestline (<https://guestline.com>).

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