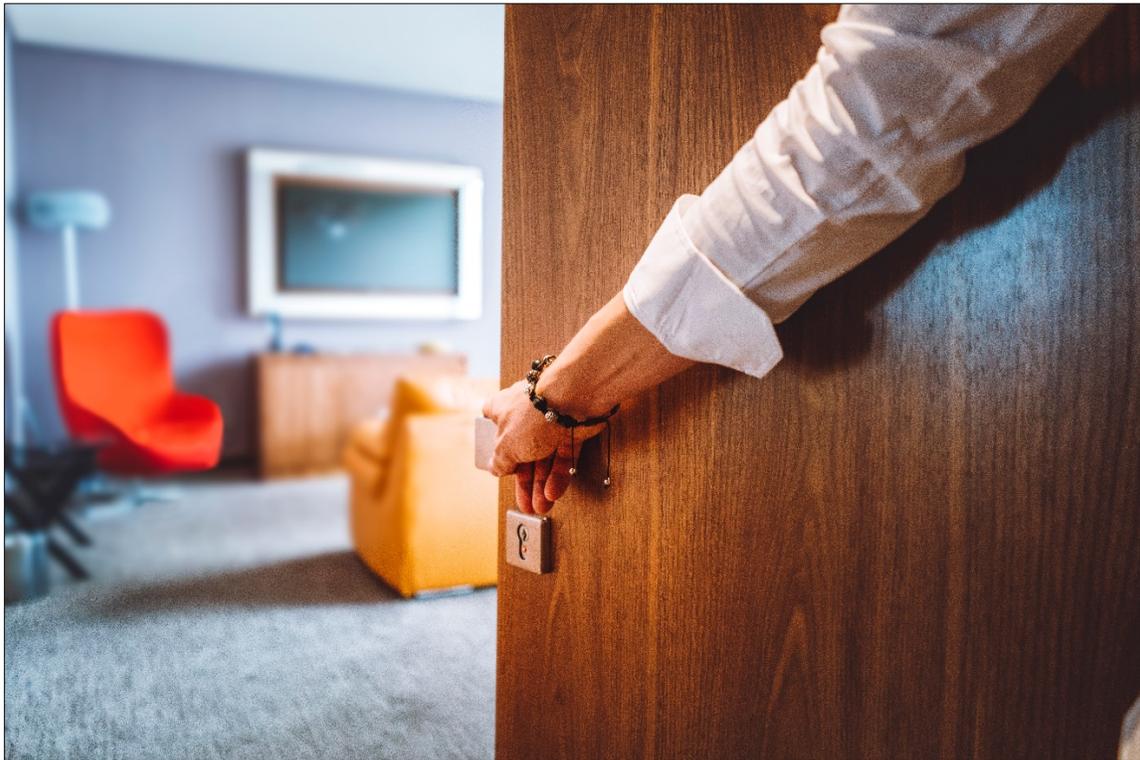


DO YOU KNOW YOUR GUESTS?

Throughout the pandemic, hotel companies adapted to the new dynamics of customer feedback. During recovery, they're applying the lessons they learned — and implementing solutions that are increasingly responsive, adaptive, and data-driven.



Do You Know Your Guests?

By Christopher Durso

Throughout the pandemic, hotel companies adapted to the new dynamics of customer feedback. During recovery, they're applying the lessons they learned — and implementing solutions that are increasingly responsive, adaptive, and data-driven.

Of all the things that the pandemic disrupted around the hospitality business, nothing has been affected so deeply as guest behavior. From how guests book and travel to hotels, to what they expect in terms of service and amenities, to how they define value or approach loyalty — everything is not just different, but different for each individual guest. Add to that mix the full range of potential guest responses to health and safety protocols, and you've got a customer-experience model that's been completely upended.

“Travel during the pandemic is a very personal choice,” said Eliot Hamlich, executive vice president of loyalty and revenue optimization for Wyndham Hotels & Resorts. “People are either going to be comfortable traveling or not. For

those guests that are ready to travel, we've found that we have been able to alleviate their concerns around cleanliness and safety because of our outsized focus on it. There are others that, irrespective of what you say and irrespective of what you do, are going to have hesitancy to travel until everybody has the vaccine.”

Throughout all of this, guests have continued to do what they do: Tell hotels what they think. In fact, collecting and responding to guest feedback during COVID was never more important to hotel companies — even as it became easier than ever for guests to share it, both directly with hotels, through surveys and other mechanisms, and publicly via online platforms and social media. But now that hospitality has moved into a post-

pandemic environment and is taking advantage of the recovery, how much weight should you give guest feedback? What lessons learned during the pandemic will continue to be relevant? How can you build strong relationships and maintain loyalty? How can you turn feedback from a necessary evil into a powerful advantage?

Through interviews with experts in hospitality loyalty and marketing, this white paper will explore the new realities of guest feedback — including how new platforms can help you

manage, leverage, and personalize the process. “It’s really all about having a great human connection and relationship with your guests,” said Rachel Dowling, vice president of product for TrustYou, a guest-feedback platform for hotels. “As you would treat a friend or a colleague, you want to be

transparent and honest and upfront about how you’re addressing the issue.”

COVID CHANGES EVERYTHING

Understanding guests’ feedback begins with understanding who

they are and what they want. In analyzing travel and booking patterns throughout the pandemic, our experts identified several key developments — some of

“It’s about having a great human connection with your guests. You want to be honest and upfront about how you’re addressing the issue.”

which have long-term implications for hotel companies, especially as it relates to the importance of adapting quickly to changing guest behavior:

Leisure first: “A much higher percentage of our guests are leisure guests,” said Elizabeth Schultz, vice



president of guest experience, strategy, and innovation for Hyatt Hotels Corporation. “They’re just a different makeup as it relates to not only what they’re looking for but also how they find us. They’re looking for value and they’re staying closer to home, so they’re more likely to drive. We did a survey asking people how far they were willing to drive pre-pandemic and post-pandemic. Pre-pandemic, it was somewhere in the neighborhood of two to four hours. Post-pandemic, guests were saying that they were willing to drive up to eight hours to go on a trip.”

Tighter booking: “We’ve seen a pretty significant shortening of the booking window,” Hamlich said. “Whereas customers used to be more interested in booking further out, just given the uncertainty of COVID spikes and pandemic-related trends more broadly, that booking window has shortened to a pretty great extent.”

Suburbs vs. cities: “The drive markets have continued to see more business than the markets that are dependent on airlift,” said David Fleuck, senior vice president of loyalty for Marriott International.

“And it’s also changed a little bit by brand tier. It’s not quite one size fits all, but typically, your suburban hotels are seeing more guests than your typical big box. Your big-box urban centers are most severely impacted.”

Cautious and savvy: “It was one thing before COVID-19 struck that maybe something was outdated or something was inaccurate on the website, but now, accuracy is key because the traveler really needs to trust in the hotel and what they’re providing,” said Valerie Castillo, vice president of marketing for TrustYou. “They need to know exactly what amenities will be open, what will be closed, what their COVID-19 procedures are. We were always dealing with savvy travelers in the past, but now this particular traveler is even more attuned to being careful and to carefully selecting their accommodations. I think we’ll see that not just during the pandemic but immediately afterward, too.”

Added Sabrina Lillew, vice president of loyalty programs – North and Central America for Accor: “While health, safety, and

wellbeing have always been important to guests, it’s something that they are placing further emphasis on. Guests are looking for assurances that the necessary cleaning and hygiene protocols are in place.”

CRISIS COMMUNICATION — AFTER THE CRISIS

While “pivot to virtual” has become a cliché of pandemic-era marketing and communication, there’s no denying that COVID only underscored the important role that digital plays in identifying and engaging guests, gathering their feedback, and cultivating their loyalty. Here’s how those dynamics shifted throughout the pandemic and have continued to evolve during recovery:

More of everything: Communication is happening more than it did pre-COVID, and in every direction — from guests to hotels, hotels to guests, brands to properties, brands to team members, team members to clients, and so on. And it’s happening via multiple channels, including email, hotel websites, social media, and consumer

platforms. “People are looking for more,” Schultz said. “They want to understand more. We’ve put more information into our pre-arrival and confirmation communications than we have before.

“Hotels have raised the red flag of ‘We’re getting so many inbound phone calls about what’s open, what our menus are, all that stuff,’ so we’ve tried to get more of that into our arrival communications.”

Added Gregor Schertler, chief operating officer for Flemings Hotels, who is based in Germany: “We’ve had much more internal communication during this time than we would have before the pandemic. We have a meeting twice a week to communicate with all our hotels, get their feedback, and discuss changing things in response to legal requirements.”

Not too negative: “We have not seen a tremendous amount of negative feedback,” Lillew said. “Our guests understand and appreciate that the protocols in place are being implemented for their safety and wellbeing.” Added Hamlisch: “It’s my general

experience that many of our guests are quite understanding of the current environment. In general, there’s an expectation that things like breakfast are going to look and feel a little

“We were always dealing with savvy travelers in the past, but this particular traveler is even more attuned to carefully selecting accommodations.”

different.”

Online over social: “There is some feedback from guests on Instagram,” Schertler said, “but most of the feedback is actually on TripAdvisor and Google. I call them the classic way of online feedback.”

But less online overall: “You’re



But less online overall: “You’re seeing a big decline in the online review volume,” Dowling said. “That actually started before the pandemic, in 2019 and 2020 — online review volume was already decelerating.”

LISTENING AND RESPONDING

With feedback from guests becoming ever more important even as communication with them has become increasingly decentralized — scattered across direct email, review platforms,

social media, and other sources — hotel companies have focused on how best to listen and respond. Here are some of the tools and practices they’ve found most effective when it comes to managing the feedback cycle, with their responses during the pandemic offering valuable lessons for the post-pandemic market:

Expectation setting: Beginning during the pandemic but lasting into recovery and the foreseeable future, preempting negative feedback often involves informing guests about your protocols before

they show up. “Weave that message of safety into every communication you have,” Schultz said. “But also, set those expectations: ‘You’re going to need to wear a mask, and all of our employees will be masked. We’re disinfecting every night, every morning. We are not going to come into your room unless you ask us to.’ Things like that.”

Then, after the stay, continue providing that context to guest interactions in a way that underlines the fact that you prioritize cleanliness and safety. “We added about eight questions to our satisfaction survey that really focus on COVID: Do the guests feel like the hotel is taking the right precautions? Were the staff wearing masks?” Schultz said. “We actually were able to monitor and understand how guest were feeling, not in real-time but almost, so we were able to make adjustments.”

Transparency: First, acknowledge when you’ve done something wrong or otherwise come up short. “Always be transparent, open, and honest in replying publicly,” Castillo said. “It’s just as important to respond to a negative review as it is

a positive one — maybe even more important. So, having a prompt reply and making sure that that’s seen on all of the channels that you’re receiving that review on.”

Accountability: As Castillo said, it’s particularly important to acknowledge negative feedback. “We do respond to negative reviews,” Schertler said, “more to show other guests who are on those online platforms that we are taking care of the complaints or the reason why they didn’t like the stay with us.”

Solutions, not rewards: Sometimes, transparency and accountability are enough; sometimes, people just want you to hear them out. Beyond that, focus your communications on fixing the problem. “We try to fix a situation, make it better, turn it around,” Schultz said. “We try not to offer things to turn it around. Typically, we’ve learned that people just want to be heard and have an effort made to fix the situation.”

Loyalty: Of course, with so much feedback coming in so quickly, it helps to have a way to prioritize your responses. Your loyalty

program is a good place to start. “We try to respond to everyone in a timely fashion, but certainly give priority to those guests that we know stayed with us,” Hamlich said. “We have found it to be very successful to leverage the power of our loyalty program in that regard — to the extent that somebody had a poor service experience, leveraging the power of Wyndham Rewards and the power of points for future travel to help support those challenging situations.”

Personal touch: If you can manage it, it’s never a bad idea to connect directly with a guest who has a problem. “It’s often easier if you can talk to them in person,” Fleuck said. “Most of our communication is done through email, but I will from time to time have calls or even video chats with loyalty members. And

they’re always extremely appreciative about the fact that we’ve taken the time to do that.”

Added Schertler: “When somebody complains, the most important part is to try and get the guest on the phone and have a conversation with them. My experience is that the guest doesn’t expect to have the hotel calling them, and it’s always first to understand the guest and then to find a solution.”

“We’re seeing a big trend toward guests wanting to have a warm, hospitable interaction with their hotelier, but maybe not face-to-face.”

Automated immediacy: But the personal approach isn’t always possible or practical — especially considering that *when* you respond to feedback often matters more than *how* you respond. “Technology actually can make it easier in some ways,” Castillo said. “Each barrier can be made a lot easier. Translation tools can make the



cross-cultural differences that occur a lot smoother, for example. That's one advantage. Another is the immediacy of the response and the ability to have very fast and contactless communication channels."

Indeed, technology can help you manage the guest experience in a way that avoids negative feedback. "We're seeing a big trend toward guests wanting to have a warm, hospitable interaction with their hotelier, but maybe not face-to-face," Castillo said. "Being able to text-message or WhatsApp or email

directly with someone at the front desk or someone working on the premises can provide a really nice experience for guests."

Added Hamlich: "I'm a big believer in responding to feedback in real-time. If you've got somebody in front of you, there's no better time to be able to communicate with them — one, to ask them how their stay was and what you could do better the next time around, but also to respond to that in real-time. If you've got somebody at the front desk, do everything you can to help resolve that on the first try, as

opposed to needing to follow up with a phone call or an email.”

THE FUTURE OF FEEDBACK

As the hospitality industry moves through recovery and business

continues to return, the dynamics of guest feedback will continue to evolve. Here’s how our experts are preparing for that:

On-site expertise: “From an operational perspective, we have on-property loyalty specialists and

One Integrated Guest Experience Platform

The industry leader in customer feedback management, TrustYou leverages the biggest guest review database in the world to provide destinations and properties with the contextual data they need to make the right decisions. TrustYou offers individually tailored hotel technology solutions with a holistic approach, allowing for a seamless guest and staff journey.

The full **TrustYou Guest Experience** solution starts where the travel decision begins: with effectively positioning online reviews to match guests’ travel needs. Contactless messaging and survey tools help build guest relationships via platforms such as SMS, WeChat, and WhatsApp, ensuring a positive guest experience before, during, and after their stay. Underneath it all, a scalable operations solution works as the fundamental operating system, collecting all communications in one inbox and ensuring hotels can take swift action even with limited staff resources — and still achieve the ultimate guest experience for everyone who walks through their lobby. Additionally, TrustYou’s platform includes in-depth semantic and competitor analysis that helps hotels and destinations reposition themselves for recovery while the playing field is still wide open.

“After 13 years, TrustYou is still working hand-in-hand with hoteliers to listen and adapt to the changing needs of guests by pioneering and evolving a diverse platform that helps hotels earn trust, make better decisions, and ultimately succeed,” said CEO Benjamin Jost. “We now offer a complete platform that unlocks the potential of guest feedback as an indicator of how to best respond to guests’ needs. We focus on what matters most: building strong contactless guest relationships at the speed of technology.”

guest-experience specialists — more so pre-pandemic, but also post-pandemic,” Schultz said. “They have been a good network of understanding what’s happening on the front lines in terms of delivering on the experience and the commitments we’ve made from a loyalty perspective. They have this open dialogue with our loyalty team, and can say, ‘Everybody wants bottled water, so members don’t feel like this is a benefit anymore. What else can we do?’ We probably wouldn’t hear that feedback from guests or from our colleague survey, but we are able to get it from that channel.”

In-the-moment feedback: “In the past, most hotels have prioritized getting a review after the guest has already left the hotel,” Castillo said. “What we realized in a test that we did of several properties pre-pandemic was that if you’re surveying your guests while they’re still onsite, you actually get a higher conversion. More people are reviewing your property because it’s something that they’re thinking about right now — they haven’t checked out, so they have feedback to give. So, you not only get more feedback, you also then have the

opportunity to prevent that negative online review from being posted later.”

Added Dowling: “We see up to 3.5 times higher volume of feedback if you combine a mid-stay survey and a post-stay survey. We saw that consistently before the pandemic and also during the pandemic — you can fill in the gaps in terms of your review volume and being able to listen to what guest feedback is saying by incorporating more real-time or mid-stay communication.”

Ongoing experimentation: During the pandemic, many hotel companies used flexible booking policies to help create positive guest experiences, especially for loyalty members. “We changed our cancellation policy to be very flexible in nature,” Hamlich said. “It was always very flexible, but we made it even more so. We extended the point expiration date, for example. We reduced our member level requirements — how many nights you need to stay to hit certain member levels.

“It wasn’t about ‘Take advantage of this promotion or that promotion,’”

Hamlisch said, “but rather, ‘We understand you can’t travel right now, and here are all the things that we’re doing to help support you during this difficult time.’”

Hotels were also driven to try lots of new things. “We put together extended-stay packages — relocating the parents and kids to work remotely in our hotels,” Schultz said. “What’s better than to do a whole workday in a hotel with separate office space and separate space for the kids?”

“That was part of the packaging: laundry service, food-and-beverage credit,” Schultz said. “Then to have a mini vacation in the evenings or during your free time. When we think about pivoting and trying new things, it’s nothing we ever would have thought to put together pre-pandemic.”

Now, with travel starting back up, our experts say that they’re keen to hold onto that entrepreneurial, innovative spirit. “That willingness and ability to pivot and think about our hotels differently,” Schultz said, “has been really important to us.”

Data-driven response: With mid-

stay surveys and other immediate feedback mechanisms collecting information from guests while they’re on-property, hotels want to be able to respond to that feedback in the moment. New

“It’s nothing we ever would have thought to put together pre-pandemic. That willingness to think about our hotels differently has been important to us.”

applications are making that possible, including a new product from TrustYou that allows teams “to interact with each other,” Dowling said, “so they can handle those guest requests in a lightweight and efficient way.”

Added Castillo: “If you’re going to

start incorporating mid-stay feedback, it's one thing to ask for the feedback, but if you don't do anything about it, it almost makes

the situation worse. But if you do something about it, then you can really improve the experience." ■

Christopher Durso is vice president of content development for Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International (HSMAI). HSMAI writer *Kaitlin Dunn* also contributed to this white paper.

ABOUT HSMAI Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International (HSMAI) is the hospitality industry's leading advocate for intelligent, sustainable hotel revenue growth. HSMAI provides hotel professionals and their partners with tools, insights, and expertise to fuel sales, inspire marketing, and optimize revenue through programs such as HSMAI ROC, Marketing Strategy Conference, Sales Leader Forum, and Adrian Awards. HSMAI offers organizational and individual membership, with more than 7,000 members in four global regions – the Americas, Asia Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East. – hsm.ai.org

ABOUT TRUST YOU TrustYou is on a mission to make communication and feedback simpler and more productive. All communication channels, together in one place, is the new way of doing business. Today, customers expect instant responses on their preferred communications channels. As a subset of communication, feedback is the foundation to build better products, services, and companies. TrustYou helps companies win through the power of listening and provides a Guest Experience (GX) platform that makes listening to customers easy, powerful, and actionable. – trustyou.com

© 2021 Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International