

Guest Service

It's Not Just About the Bonus Points Anymore: Rethinking the Elite Guest Experience

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It was almost the perfect weekend. In the middle of an otherwise long stretch of business travel, I rewarded myself with a three-night weekend stay at a posh, branded resort just minutes from Las Vegas. For me, the trip was "free" or as free as things get in this day and age. I booked an entirely points based reservation, accumulated through many nights away from home like thousands of other road warriors throughout the world. As an elite member, I received my anticipated warm welcome upon arrival, an upgraded room, and enjoyed my first day of rest and relaxation in a long time. On day two, just as I was placing my sunscreen into my bag en route to another day of relaxed poolside bliss, I happened to glance at my newly blinking Blackberry... and that's when my "relaxing" weekend came to a screeching halt.

Sometime during the night, the remaining portion of my hotel stay had been cancelled "per my request" or so the cancellation email stated in a polite but firm fashion. As a former hotel ops manager myself, the initial email was annoying but not cause for alarm; after all, these things do, unfortunately, happen.

Reviewing the cancellation notice, I promptly called the number displayed on the email, which was supposed to assist me if there was a problem. I assumed a quick phone call would reinstate the reservation and I would be on my way to enjoying the three-digit Nevada heat in no time. Imagine my surprise when, within seconds of dialing, I was warmly informed that the office was closed, not to reopen until Monday. No alternative number to call, no "press zero" for assistance, just a polite thank you and dial tone. Not quite in a panic yet, I promptly dialed my elite "members only" number, assuming that someone must be available to handle the brand's most loyal guests on a weekend; a knot began to form in the pit of my stomach as I surmised that, at least according to this brand, loyal guests apparently didn't need assistance over the weekend. The knot expanded as I spoke with the hotel's front desk staff, who gave me the enviable option of either paying rack rate or leaving the property; only after a bit of begging and pleading was a front desk manager able to miraculously reach an "after hours number" for the rewards department and reinstate my reservation. Two hours after my initial email was received, I was finally able to leave my room, albeit in a far more stressed condition than I ever expected. So much for a restful weekend.

Being in the industry, I can (usually) get myself out of a cancelled reservation or mixed-up arrival date without too many challenges and chances are that your best, most loyal guests can as well. After all, they are the ones who literally spend years of their lives in your guestrooms, restaurants, and bars across the globe. They come back to you time and time again for a variety of reasons; yes, perhaps the dollar-to-point ratio may be a key factor, but often times it's something larger than that...a consistently clean guestroom, a "we've been expecting you" greeting, maybe even the turndown amenity, that keeps them coming back for another night. For most properties, the elite guest experience is traditionally crafted through an array of policies and procedures designed to ensure a seamless experience within the typical service framework. But what about those moments that require assistance beyond placing extra towels in a guestroom before arrival - the ones that may require out of the box thinking or necessitate partnership

between the hotel and the corporate office outside of normal working hours? It only takes one or two instances where your team isn't there when your best guests need them the most to make someone start thinking about pooling their points- and thus spending their money - elsewhere.

In the wake of the Great Recession and continued economic turbulence stateside, guest loyalty plays a large part in the "health" of a brand now more than ever. Although price sensitivity is still omnipresent in the marketplace, service remains a determining factor in where guests choose to lay their heads at night. When thinking about the elite guest experience, one must think in terms of a three-fold challenge: first, creating a consistently exceptional service experience for all guests at both the hotel and corporate level; second, ensuring that the elite experience meets or exceeds current guest expectations; and third, developing a reliable support system to assist both hotels and guests when the unexpected happens outside normal operating hours.

From a first time guest to a life-loyal one, creating a universally exceptional guest service experience from the beginning to end of the guest lifecycle sets the foundation for repeat business and ultimately an increase in loyal guests. Most major brands, as well as a plethora of independent hotels across the world, make the wise choice of investing in a quality assurance program to ensure that the basic service tenets are being executed and delivered to guests on a regular basis. Whether completed as part of a corporate mandate, as many robust quality assurance programs are, or done simply in a traditional "secret shopper" format to ensure staff is doing the right thing at the right time at the right location, quality assurance programs can help pinpoint areas of strength and weakness at the property and corporate level. Taking the quality assurance concept a step further, many of today's biggest brands are balancing both macro and micro shop programs, concurrently conducting annual broad-scope, 360-degree evaluations of every facet of the guest experience from reservation to check-out with targeted, more frequent evaluations of specific service touch points, such as pre-arrival telephone interactions, room service execution or guest service recovery. Looking at both the forest and the individual trees not only keeps teams on their collective toes, but also provides glimpses into key aspects of an operation on a more frequent basis.

Expanding the quality assurance concept to the elite experience is an increasingly popular way to explore both the corporate and hotel-level execution of elite guest touch points. Here, "micro shops" of interactions such as the elite guest check-in experience, amenity delivery, or even concierge lounge service can help place a focus on those elements that elite guests hold most dear. Moreover, these concentrated shops can reveal some of the delivery gaps between the corporate and hotel level aspects of an elite program, such as member information incorrectly downloading, incorrect tier levels associated with the wrong guest, or simply a complete lack of acknowledgment of a member's status within your program. Clinical assessments aside, challenge your team on every level and in every department to learn more about your best guest's preferences beyond the traditional pillows and newspaper. Yes, this may take some finesse on your team's behalf; after all, an associate showing interest can quickly morph into being creepy in the eyes of a guest.

However, a well-placed discovery question or two with a chatty elite guest can yield a wealth of information on which to build a long-lasting connection. Want to take it up a notch? Ask one of your frequent road warriors where else they stay while traveling. If it's a sister property, call them to share details you may have learned about that guest – whether it be the guest's favorite sports team or particular cocktail at the bar. Imagine their surprise when that non-chalant conversation at Hotel A creates an unexpected delight 500 miles away at Hotel B!

All of the quality assurance programs and creative methods of connecting with your guests aside, those after hours "moments of truth" are a prime area of opportunity to set yourself and brand apart from the pack. Here, there may be little that can be done at the property-level to make things easier on the guest, but a wealth of opportunity exists at the corporate level. In today's hyper-connected world, where information – and answers – are expected at the drop of the hat, is it reasonable to assume that your most "wired in" elite guests are willing to wait over a weekend to have a problem resolved? The simple

answer is no. Guests, particularly those who have spent many evenings and dollars (expense account or not) with a specific brand expect the service to which they are accustomed not only in daylight, but after hours as well.

Before the arguments of manpower cost and operational realities are understandably hurled at me, let me pose this question: is it worth it to have one or two third-shift or cross-trained weekend associates on the payroll to ensure that your elite guests can be assisted when they need it the most, or is it better to take the chance of them packing up their suitcases and heading for your competitor down the street? Hotel people are notorious for pointing out that hotels don't operate in a 9-to-5 world, rather in one where the concepts of "after work," TGIF and holidays don't exist. If this is the case, why should the support teams needed to help the hotels be successful play by different rules? A significant ramp-up in staffing is unnecessary, but one or two associates able to assist at the corporate level after traditional business hours may be the key to keeping your best guests calm and connected in their moments of need... and keep them coming back for more.

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