

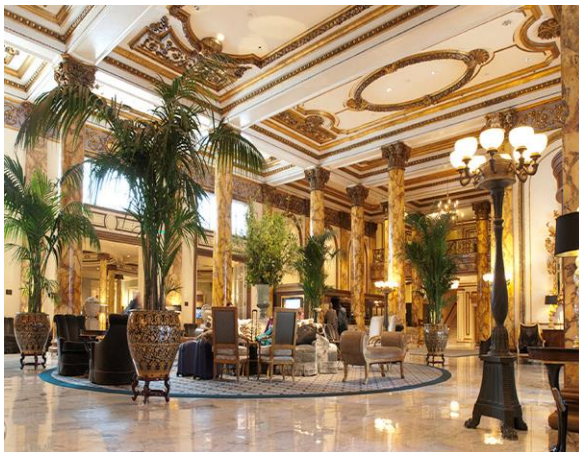
Articles / Whitepapers

Practice: Marketing & Technology

Topic: Mobile

Lobby Tech.

...what goes around comes around!



By Mark B. Hoare

Being somewhat of a romantic when it comes to hotels, especially the Grand hotels, I was captivated recently when leafing through a copy of Bradshaw's Continental Railway Guide, the 1913 edition. This print publication transports us back to the halcyon days of steam-driven railways journeys that granted the well-to-do access to virtually any place of interest in Europe. From natural spa resorts, Riviera beaches, alpine heights, to every grand European capital.

With each documented destination, the traveler is provided a brief overview of the most noteworthy hotels from which to choose. These hotel descriptives clearly had the same intent back then as our equivalent modern-day marketing materials, albeit their respective delivery mediums have changed

beyond all recognition. What piqued my interest within the hotel descriptions were the promotional points-of-differentiation that the hotels employed to gain the traveler's eye, and through that, hopefully their patronage. Despite this travel guide being over one hundred years old, technology seems to have been just as much of a key differentiator back then as it is today.

That said, it is perhaps reasonable to suggest that the availability of a lift [elevator] as an alternative to stairs could be contrasted with today's availability of full self-check in as an alternative to the front desk clerk, and that the advent of Electric Lighting is on a par with [free] high-speed internet access available contiguously throughout the hotel today. Our industry is, and always has been, looking to augment the fundamental act of being hospitable by carving a competitive edge through technology.

In recent years in-room technology has received much [perhaps too much] attention and investment aimed at the on-property guest. As these in-room gimmicks and gadgets have become commoditized, and in-room revenue centers such as the telephone, minibar and pay-per-view movies have slumped, hotels are looking to other areas of the property to better align themselves with, and attract, modern-day guests, be they business or leisure travelers. Ironic then that following all our efforts to leverage technology to keep guests in their rooms we're now focused on enticements to keep them out of their rooms, but still on-property.

The lobby is our current-world example of this. Peculiarly we find ourselves back full circle to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the hotel lobby was the social gathering point for residential and non-residential patrons and, in some prime locations, was 'the place to be', and 'the place to be seen'.

During the latter part of the twentieth century hotel lobbies, for better or worse, became utilitarian in both their function and design. They became a transit area, not a place to linger, hang-out, meet, do business and socialize with friends and strangers. But today, led by the big hotel corporations, remarkable attention and investment is being ascribed to the lobby experience, and you guessed it, technology is being leveraged again to champion this new competitive edge. In the main, it is these big hotel corporation's niche and lifestyle oriented brands that are seeing more of the lobby-experience attention. Understandable so, as with a tightly defined guest demographic the lobby design can be more focused. Marriott's new Courtyard, Starwood's W, and CitizenM brands are prime illustrations. Each having identified that their principle guest type is more disposed to frequenting a convenient social space than their private rooms.

But these hotel brands also appreciate that throwing more chairs, a splash of vibrant paint, and a branded coffee stand into the lobby just doesn't cut it. Their lobbies are being completely re-envisioned as multi-function spaces incorporating Zones that simultaneously cater for social, casual, individual and formal activities. Spawned by this success, specialist creative design companies are fast maturing into this niche designing multi-use, branded lobby experiences that align with not just one type of modern traveler [Yes, guests other than Millennials use hotels these days, although the maniacal attention they're receiving might lead you to believe otherwise] but rather, an eclectic cross-section of hotel guests with an equally different set of reasons for using the property. As we might expect, guest-facing technology is again being highly leveraged as an essential differentiator in the design and deployment

of these new home-from-home ambiance spaces. The most noteworthy examples being:

- Wired & wireless table-top charging zones
- Wandering [contiguous], multi-device hi-speed internet access
- Self-service touch screen check-in/out
- Interactive wall mounted Information Boards
- Walk-up PC and Mac computers, with direct wireless printing
- 24 hour self-serve pantries with mobile-pay
- TV furnished media pods with screen mirroring capabilities
- 55" touch screen coffee tables
 - Featuring Windows 10, MS Surface Hub and table-service ordering
- Even Yotel's YoBot self-check luggage robot

The above are all guest-facing technologies that are well on the way to becoming ubiquitous in our hotel lobbies, some of which you will have already enjoyed. However, we should not forget all the other leading edge technologies that support the lobby experience, albeit opaque to the guest, such as RFID luggage labels, Traffic Flow Analysis, Guest Identifying Portals[Doors], Hyper-Proximity Marketing, etc. But that's a fascinating subject area for another article.

Personally, I love hotel technology and have made an enjoyable and successful career out of it but, in truth, I still cherish the occasional opportunity to enjoy the unique and less technological experience of the classic Grand hotel's off-the-grid lobby. A lobby where you can sit in a built-for-comfort (not just for looks) chair, drift between centuries, enjoying an Earl Grey tea in real chinaware, with hand cut sandwiches and delightful finger pastries, all while listening to the muted hum of respectful conversation all around you and watching the comings and goings of your fellow patrons. ■

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Mark B. Hoare, is the founder of directional|htl LLC, an Atlanta-based consultancy servicing the global hospitality industry. Hoare has broad experience in all aspects of hospitality technology, operations, and management. For more information, please visit: www.directional-htl.com, or call 404-675-9930.