

Hospitality Tech & the New Guest Experience

A sound IT foundation will be crucial to supporting the automation, personalization, and other digital measures that will be required to meet guest expectations.



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Travel is Back

Americans are once again venturing out, taking vacations that involve airplane flights and hotel stays. A recent [survey by Deloitte](#) found 4 in 10 Americans intended to take at least one trip with a flight and/or stay in paid lodging in the coming months. That number is not far from pre-pandemic levels, such as the summer of 2019, when 42% of Americans expected to travel for leisure, Deloitte reports.

However, travelers today have a set of considerations in mind that they may not have had in the past. Of the travelers who choose to stay in a hotel, 89% cited enhanced health safety measures as a driver for their choice.

The survey uncovered another trend that hotels should take note of: Travelers are increasingly booking their stays directly with the hotels, as opposed to through an online travel agency (OTA). More than half of travelers (54%) said they will book direct, while fewer than one in five (17%) plan to reserve via an OTA.

These findings add to a trend toward personalization and automation that was already in full swing pre-COVID but is now even more important as travelers seek touchless services from check-in to check-out and everything in between.

In a [survey of over 1,000 U.S. residents](#) by the custom solution developer Metova, 86% of respondents said, all other things being equal, they would choose one hotel over another if it offered the option of a fully contactless mobile check-in, concierge, check-out, and facility reservation application.

Such findings make clear that hotels will need to invest in sound technology and security infrastructure if they are to deliver what guests expect. Automation and personalization applications require fast, reliable WiFi connectivity throughout the facility and in guest rooms. Back-office networks must likewise include reliable connectivity to various cloud-based resources that support hotel applications. And to protect both the hotel and its clients, it all must be highly secure, to protect against threats like ransomware and phishing attacks that are ever-present.

Choice is Paramount

As the number of people venturing out to travel indicates, many are eager to put the pandemic behind them, while others will travel but remain cautious. That means hotels need to offer a range of options for guests.

Some will want as much automation as possible, with little person-to-person interaction. That means perhaps self-service check-in kiosks or an app-based check-in process. But others will be comfortable with a traditional, in-person check-in process.

The point is hotels need to be ready to offer choices so they can meet guests wherever they are in terms of their comfort level.



Seamless Reservations

Automation is becoming a greater part of the hotel guest experience, and it starts at the beginning, with the reservation process. Given the Deloitte finding that more than half of guests are now booking directly, hotels need to ensure the process is simple and seamless.

Whether guests use a hotel app or its website, the reservation process is an opportunity to collect data in advance of the stay, including desired room location, proximity to elevators or other hotel facilities, type of bed, and any special requests. Such data can be valuable later for future visits when the guest's preferences can be pre-populated.

The reservation process is also a chance to deliver useful information to guests, such as about area attractions and restaurants, hotel amenities, and any special services, such as a spa. It's also a good time to remind guests about all the steps the hotel is taking to ensure cleanliness and safety, a topic that is still top of mind for many travelers.

Finally, hotels should send an automated message that enables guests to confirm arrival and departure dates, payments, and other details in advance via their mobile device, with a link that enables them to easily make any changes.



Automating the Arrival Experience

Guest arrival is the time when automated systems can really kick into gear—and it's more imperative than ever. Hotels have two main options for automating the check-in process. One is a kiosk in the lobby, similar to the check-in kiosks that are common at airports. In addition to checking in guests, the kiosks can be used to accept payment by credit cards or even cash, as well as offer upsell opportunities. They can also dispense keys or barcodes that let guests into their rooms.

The other option is a fully contactless system that works either from a hotel website or an app. As with the kiosk, the contactless solution can offer upselling opportunities and provide a level of personalized service, based on what the hotel knows about each guest from past stays or the reservation process.

That can range from setting the temperature in the room to offering recommendations for local attractions and events. Mobile apps can also serve as room keys, eliminating the need for a separate physical key entirely.

Automation can also extend to baggage delivery. Front desk management tools can help manage and track bellmen, luggage valets, guest deliveries, laundry, room service and more. Guests can print out baggage tags at a kiosk, attach it to their bags, and be on their way. Or they can request baggage service ahead of time from a mobile app.

Once they get to their rooms, guests may be welcomed by name with a pre-recorded video that serves as another opportunity to inform them of hotel amenities and offerings.

It's All About the App

Going forward hotel loyalty applications will be an even more important vehicle for delivering both automation and personalization.

To succeed with loyalty apps, hotels will need to step up their game in terms of the sorts of benefits they deliver in order to garner guests' attention. The [2021 Loyalty Report](#), an annual study of more than 35,000 North American consumers by Bond Brand Loyalty and Visa, found consumers belong to an average of 16.7 loyalty programs but are active in only 7.4 of them. Of those seven, the travel sector accounted for only 0.8 of them, although that was up 5% from the 2020 report.

But the influence of a strong loyalty program is significant. Nearly three quarters of respondents (73%) say they are more likely to recommend brands with strong loyalty programs while 80% say the programs make them more likely to continue doing business with a given brand.

The good news is hotels have multiple ways to make their loyalty apps more attractive. They can, in fact, become instrumental to the hotel experience.

Today it's possible for the apps to manage all features of a guest's stay in a hotel. In a post-Covid world that puts a premium on touchless experiences, guests will welcome the ability to have such control from their own mobile device.

Consider just some of the possibilities:

- Customers can control the television from their phone; no need to handle a remote control or touch the TV. It also minimizes the requirement for the hotel to sanitize and bag remote control devices.
- Lighting and temperature can likewise be controlled from the app.
- All requests for housekeeping, toiletries and other miscellaneous items can be made through the app.
- Room service requests can be entered via the app, with ample opportunities for upselling. Guests can also be given an estimated time of arrival for their orders.
- Concierge requests can be entered and answered via text, voice, or video calls. The concierge can send links with additional information, such as about local attractions, reservations at area restaurants or tickets to a local show.
- Apps double as room keys, again obviating the need for physical keys—giving guests one less thing to touch, or potentially lose.

As customers use their apps, hotels can garner valuable data that drives further personalization efforts, including insights on offers that, based on their past preferences and experiences, guests will find valuable.

In-room Considerations

In terms of in-room offerings, the basics come down to entertainment and fast, reliable WiFi.

Today guests expect entertainment offerings that are akin to what they have at home. That means plenty of channels to choose from as well as pay-per-view movie options that cover everyone from a solo business traveler to a family with young children. The ability to log in to popular streaming apps would likewise be welcome.

Fast WiFi is also crucial for a number of reasons. One is that many travelers will opt to stream content on their own devices rather than use the in-room TV. For a family traveling with two kids, that can mean four people streaming simultaneously.

WiFi is also crucial for business travelers who treat their hotel room like a remote office. They need WiFi to support not only web browsing, but video conference calls.

Digital Signage

As guests venture out of their rooms, hotels can increase their use of digital signage to help keep them informed and at ease. In gyms, at the pool and in other common areas, digital signs could be used to indicate the last time the area was cleaned and any other steps the hotel is taking to mitigate health concerns.

Digital signs can also be used throughout the hotel to help guests find their way and keep them informed about things like restaurant opening and closing times. If a hotel is hosting a conference or private event such as a wedding, digital signs could be used to both welcome attendees and inform them which room to go to, and where it is.

A step up from digital signs are voice-activated interactive video kiosks deployed in strategic locations to anticipate and answer guest questions about hotel amenities, local attractions, restaurants and the like.





Automated, App-driven Check-out

When it comes time for guests to check out, that experience can be fully automated.

Using the hotel app, guests should be able to:

- Arrange transportation
- Schedule baggage delivery to the departure area
- Review and settle all hotel charges
- Receive payment confirmation, including where to send the transaction record.

Using the app for the checkout process makes the experience fast, convenient and completely touchless.

Technology Requirements

Delivering on these various automated, hands-free, personalized interactions will require hotels to have sound technology infrastructure in place.

In terms of wide-area connectivity, hotels need options that are reliable and scalable. Many will find software-defined wide-area network (SD-WAN) services will address these requirements well. With SD-WAN, network control functions are abstracted from the underlying network. This enables hotels to choose the WAN service that matches the requirements of each application. Some applications may require the performance of private lines while others can be supported by lower-cost Internet links.

SD-WAN also can help support a reliable network because it's simple to configure backup links for each connection, such as using an Internet or even wireless service should the primary connection go down. And security tools such as firewalls and intrusion detection/prevention software are often built into the SD-WAN appliance at hotel sites. The appliances, which can be physical or virtual, can be simple to deploy, which is important for hotel chains that don't have IT personnel at every location.

As mentioned previously, robust WiFi is a must in every guest room but also in common areas and meeting rooms. Strong WiFi is also important for back-office applications and should be configured separately from guest networks to help keep them secure.

Working with a Managed Service Provider

For hotels with numerous locations, installing and supporting all this infrastructure can be daunting, especially if IT staff is limited. In such cases, employing managed services may make good sense.

Managed Service providers can help implement and manage SD-WAN, Internet connectivity, Ethernet-Dedicated Internet, WiFi, and cybersecurity solutions. Partnering with a provider can take some of the burdens off internal IT staff, enabling them to stay focused on strategic projects.

Comcast Business also offers the voice and entertainment services that hotels need, making it a one-stop-shop for supporting advanced automation and personalization efforts.

The rules of the hotel game are changing post-pandemic. To meet guest expectations as they once again venture out, hotels will need to employ a heavy dose of automation and deliver services in a hands-free fashion. Their loyalty apps will play an outsized role and all of the efforts will depend on fast, reliable, networks being available throughout the hotel environment.

To learn more about how Comcast Business can help your hotel be ready to exceed customer expectations, visit: **business.comcast.com/hospitality**

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