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Touchless, Yes, but Not Service-less

... Striking the Right Balance in a Hotel Operations Environment that Changes Weekly

By Mark B. Hoare

Touchless, while not a new hotel concept, has recently fast-tracked itself to a much more prominent place within the hospitality industry's glossary of terms and practices.

Just one in an array of reactive approaches hotels are employing by way of addressing the current Covid-19 pandemic, the Touchless effect on today's hotel stay experience is poised to more assertively drive both positive and negative guest experiences.

From a hotel segment point-of-view one might argue that the Economy and Limited Service hotel sectors have had a much shorter path to adopting the shift to Touchless practices than the highly impactful aspects of implementing Touchless at the Luxury and Resort end of the lodging spectrum. So why has the pace to adopt and implement Touchless now jumped so much across all hotel segments?

Well, in no small part, the speed at which the traveling public's confidence is adequately restored to promote pre-Covid-19 levels of business will be a condition of how well hotels adapt to new social and cleanliness norms. However, this does not exclusively depend upon a renewed focus on cleaning diligence, but also on: a re-imagining of processes to minimize interactions with others; a reduction in the need to touch surfaces used in common; and to make it clear and obvious to the guest that the hotel is doing so. In short, how do we realize the Touchless hotel and do so without completely turning our back on all the underlying principles of being Hospitable?

Using the practice and principles of *hospitality* as a touchstone, we will touch on the most readily observed moves toward an accelerated, broader deployment of Touchless solutions and processes and assess their inevitable impact on the travelling guest.

To set the *hospitality* table let's look at generally agreed synonyms for the word *hospitable*: welcoming, friendly, congenial, genial, sociable,

convivial, cordial, gracious, amicable, well disposed, amenable, helpful, obliging, accommodating, neighborly, warm, kind, kindly, kind-hearted, generous, open-handed… while most of these apply to us all as *hosts* of visitors to our own homes, they should all be the goal of any earnest hotelier who seeks to avoid the guest's stay and experience being judged simply as a transaction.

First and foremost, we should acknowledge that Touchless is not all bad for the guest experience. As seasoned travelers we have for many years experienced the upside of Touchless technology during our hotel stays. These range from the basic but useful proximity activated doors at the entrance to the property, right through to bypassing all the Touchpoints involved in the Check-in and Check-out processes via the use of our own personal mobile devices.

This last point reaches back to the earlier comment that Economy hotels are actually designed for a transactional experience, and therefore the extent to which Touchless, or perhaps more precisely put, Self-service is employed, is a positive indicator of a successfully delivered no-fuss Economy, Limited-Service product.

Where the downside for a guest expecting an experiential stay is becoming more apparent is at the other end of the scale in the high-touch hotel sectors where Touchless and Self-Service are gradually, but purposefully, being introduced. Not primarily in reaction to the impacts of Covid-19, but in the underlying pursuit of reduced staffing, cost optimization and guest convenience. This has been a trend for decades and intentionally progressed by the technology-enabled partitioning of guests from hotel staff.

As we saw earlier in the list of synonyms for *hospitable*, the ability to practice and deliver hospitality is predicated foremost on human interaction.

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So how does the hotel owner, operator, manager strike the right balance for their differing guest types (the consumers), and hotel type (the product)?

This is by no means a new challenge. Rather, it is a function of fundamental hotel Brand definition and Brand management, and the advent of Covid-19 does not change this, despite a guest's (temporary) willingness to accept atypical procedures and practices to address the issue through Social-Distancing driven inconveniences. That said, the great danger is that post-Covid-19 we, as hoteliers, chose not to revert to the optimal levels of guest/staff interaction and the levels of service delivery commensurate with the intended Brand Experience, including Independent hotels who too have defined their own particular Brand Experience standards.

By way of example, the following are observed reactive responses to the Covid-19 situation that are hopefully only temporary deviations to Brand Standards.

- The first obvious reactive response to mention here is the across-the-board practice for hotel staff to wear face masks. While totally understandable, it does introduce a degree of anonymity and impacts the quality of human-interaction, especially as it relates to the welcoming and greeting of guests. I think we can all agree that this practice will be retired by hoteliers as soon as ordinances and formal guidelines allow.

- Elimination of your choice of complimentary newspaper delivered to your door, in the interest of reducing commonly touched surfaces. While hardly the most serious impact to guest expectations, this is a likely candidate for permanent elimination once the guest has been conditioned not to receive one.

- Elimination of Valet Parking services, again in the primary and legitimate interest of reducing commonly touched surfaces. It is hard to believe that this service will not be reinstated after the Covid-19 concerns are sufficiently diminished, but some hotels will see this as an opportunity to capitalize on a newly reduced guest service-delivery expectation.

- A much more guest-impactful reaction to the need to eliminate commonly touched surfaces is the observed (temporary) withdrawal of Porterage services, requiring guests to transport their own luggage to and from their room. Innovative hotels have sought to minimize the service impact by Porters and Bell staff using disposable luggage-handle wraps but, due to social-distancing policies, they only transport the luggage to the outside of the guest room door.

- A further observed example of reactive Covid-19 practices, now sadly employed at 4-star properties, and aimed at reducing commonly touched surfaces and promoting social-distancing, is the shift to prepare and deliver room-service F&B orders using *to-go* packaging, where the order is delivered as far as the outside of the guest room door. The order itself contains pre-wrapped silver [plastic] ware, condiments in packets, and disposable boxes containing the foodstuffs. Again, it is hoped that this particular practice will rapidly return to the more service-oriented delivery and guest/server interaction when Covid-19 concerns are sufficiently diminished.

- Perhaps the most egregious change that we have seen implemented across all lodging segments is the withdrawal of daily housekeeping room servicing, with Covid-19 being cited as the regrettable cause. Granted, the guest is informed upon check-in that if they need replenished room-amenities or replaced towels they 'just

have to call down and ask", but this is perhaps the most transparent example of hoteliers over-leveraging Covid-19 to cut costs at the expense of the guest experience.

The above observed examples are hopefully viewed by hotel owners, operators, and managers as temporary changes. But time will tell as to whether we are seeing new benchmarks evolve, and that guest service expectations must necessarily remain lower.

...can delivering Hospitality survive, or will a hotel stay just become a transaction?

Without the recent reactive Covid-19 driven changes to service-delivery standards, Touchless and Self-service initiatives were already becoming much more apparent across all hotel segments. Some of these can truly be categorized as positive improvements to the guest-experience, and others not so much.

For the upper hotel segments, where 'high-touch' service delivery and all the traits of being *hospitable* are integral to why the guest chose to stay at a property, the hotelier must work hard to find the right balance when it comes to Touchless and focus on those Touchless features that can be considered by the guest to be of relevant convenience, not just a means to reduce staffing levels and make the guest serve themselves.

Smart hoteliers will understand that the optimal approach is to offer their guests a choice in how they wish to interact and receive service-delivery. An obvious example might be self-check-in/out, whether by mobile device or lobby kiosks. Given four- and five-star properties enjoy the patronage of both the exacting business and leisure traveler it is reasonable to assume the business guest who is on his twenty seventh business trip this year wants to get straight to the room and avoid all the meet-and-greet fuss, whereas the leisure traveler is expecting of that high-touch experience.

Then come the Touchless, self-service conveniences that could be enjoyed by virtually all guests as positive experiences. Such as, in-room voice activated guest request fulfillment. It may not initially involve true

human interaction, but unless the property can answer a call from the room within one ring and have the right person/skill on the line to understand and action the request, then the voice activate service with an integrated capability to HotSOS, Alice, etc., will win the guest service experience contest. Again, if the guest feels they want the human interaction they can still dial zero from the room.

Conclusion… Touchless, and by association Self-Service, has already evolved us to a point where the spirit and delivery of *hospitality* is noticeably slipping away, driven by technologies that by design insert themselves between guest and staff. In anticipation of us all wanting to enjoy human interaction again after these last year of self-isolation and social distancing it would be prudent for hoteliers to polish up on what it truly means to be *hospitable*. ∎

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