

Customer Advisory Boards: Blessing or Curse?

... Understanding the Role of CABs in Shaping the Future of Hospitality Tech



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In our modern hospitality world, where technology underpins nearly every aspect of operations, vendors and hotel operators alike are in a constant race to innovate, differentiate, and deliver seamless guest experiences. Property Management Systems (PMS), Central Reservation Systems (CRS), and Point-of-Sale (POS) solutions are no longer just tools, they're strategic enablers.

To align product roadmaps with real-world operational needs, many informed vendors have doubled-down on Customer Advisory Boards (CABs). These boards, comprised of senior leaders from key client organizations, are intended to provide insight, feedback, and strategic direction. But are they truly collaborative incubators of innovation, or carefully curated echo chambers?

In this article, we explore the pros, cons, and key considerations of CABs in the hospitality technology

industry, offering a balanced perspective for both vendors and their most engaged customers.

What Is a Customer Advisory Board?

At its best, a CAB functions as a strategic think tank. It brings together a select group of customers to provide structured feedback on future development plans, validate new features, and discuss industry trends. Importantly, it's not a sales presentation or support forum, it's a venue for co-creation and strategic alignment.

In hospitality tech, CABs typically include CIOs, revenue leaders, and operations executives from influential hotel groups who rely heavily on the vendor's systems for their core business functions.

Why Vendors Create CABs

Strategic Input. CABs help vendors stay grounded in the operational realities of their customers. Hearing firsthand about guest experience goals, revenue strategies, and operational bottlenecks helps shape smarter and business-relevant roadmaps.

Loyalty and Retention. Customers invited to CABs often feel more invested in the vendor's success. The sense of partnership builds stickiness and elevates the vendor from "supplier" to "strategic partner."

Early Warning System. CABs offer valuable foresight. Discussions around privacy regulations, ordinance deadlines, or tech stack interoperability can surface challenges before they become critical.

Market Validation. CABs allow vendors to test concepts and prototypes in a low-risk, high-value environment before committing development resources.

“CABs aren’t about asking for feedback on what you just built, they’re about building the right thing to begin with.”

What’s In It for the Customer?

Influence Over the Roadmap. CAB members gain a unique opportunity to shape product features, integrations, and design priorities, often before general release.

Access to Innovation. Many vendors share early releases, prototypes, or beta access with their CABs, giving members a head start on new capabilities.

Peer Learning. CAB meetings often serve as valuable networking forums, where hospitality professionals share ideas, successes, and failures. Being careful not to fall foul of antitrust risk, of course.

Vendor Accountability. A seat at the table gives customers a direct channel to hold vendors accountable and ensure the product continues to evolve in ways that support their business goals.

When CABs Are a Blessing

When thoughtfully designed and well-facilitated, CABs become a powerful driver of shared success.

Case in point: A leading PMS provider recently restructured its CAB into vertical-focused subgroups, luxury, boutique, resort, and multi-brand operators, allowing for more targeted discussions. The result? Increased product relevance, faster time-to-market for new features, and measurable improvement in customer satisfaction metrics.

Another CRS vendor used its CAB to test dynamic packaging logic for experience-based stays. The input received not only refined the UI but avoided a costly rollout delay.

In these cases, CABs delivered:

- ✓ Clearer product priorities
- ✓ Accelerated innovation
- ✓ Improved client satisfaction and loyalty
- ✓ Lower churn among strategic accounts

“The best CABs turn feedback into forward motion. For everyone involved.”

When CABs Go Wrong (...and they do!)

Unsurprisingly, not every CAB lives up to its potential. Poorly run boards can quickly become counterproductive or even damaging.

Selective Listening: If vendors cherry-pick feedback to support pre-existing plans and ignore dissenting voices, trust erodes quickly.

Lack of Diversity: Boards dominated by a single property type or geography can lead to biased road maps and missed opportunities to serve a broader market.

No Follow-Through: Customers need to see the impact of their contributions. If vendors don’t report back on how feedback was used, members become disengaged.

Overreach by Members: Some CAB participants push hard for custom features that serve only their specific needs. If not managed properly, this can skew priorities.

CAB Fatigue: If meetings lack structure, clear purpose, or measurable outcomes, members may question the value of their time, their travel budget, and inevitably pull back.

“If you’re only listening to the loudest customer, you’re not running a CAB, you’re fielding a complaint.”

Optimal CAB Interaction Cadence

Face-to-face **once per year** gives enough time to reflect on product evolution, customer needs, and major strategy shifts, while justifying the travel commitment.

Virtual touchpoints **mid-year** ensure continuity and keep the relationship active without overburdening participants.

Quarterly webinars scale the CAB's impact and show accountability ("We listened. Here's what's changed.").

Asynchronous tools (CAB Portal) offer low-friction ways to sustain engagement and draw fast input from your most committed customers.

Best Practices for Getting It Right

For Vendors:

- **Be Structured:** Develop and maintain a formal Charter that defines the CAB's mission, scope, and operating principles.
- **Be Selective:** Invite members who are both experienced and collaborative.
- **Be Transparent:** Share what's being built, and why. Explain decisions.
- **Facilitate, Don't Dominate:** Let customers talk. Moderate discussion to avoid monopolization.
- **Document Outcomes:** Provide post-meeting reports and roadmap adjustments.

For Customers:

- **Engage Fully:** Come prepared with real-world insights and a willingness to contribute.
- **Think Broadly:** Avoid lobbying for edge-case features. Prioritize scalable solutions.
- **Ask Questions:** Push vendors to clarify decisions and timelines.
- **Give Feedback on the CAB Itself:** Help improve the forum's structure and impact.

Who Should Own the CAB Inside the Vendor Organization?

For a Customer Advisory Board to truly function as a strategic asset, it must be owned and operated by the right team within the vendor's organization. A

common misstep is to delegate CAB operation and management to a single department (Often product or marketing) without cross-functional alignment. But a well-run CAB is not a product showcase, a sales pitch, or a PR exercise. It's a multidimensional initiative that requires executive sponsorship, operational rigor, and a high level of customer empathy.

Executive sponsorship is critical. The CAB should be visible and prioritized at the C-suite level. Ideally, a Chief Product Officer (CPO), Chief Customer Officer (CCO), or Chief Operating Officer (COO) sponsors the board, reinforces its strategic importance, and attends meetings regularly. This ensures customer input is heard at the top and that the CAB remains connected to long-term business objectives, not just quarterly releases.

Day-to-Day leadership belongs in Product or Customer Success. The operational lead for the CAB is most effective when positioned at the intersection of product strategy and customer success.

Conclusion: Strategic Asset or Empty Exercise?

When designed with purpose, managed with care, and rooted in mutual respect, CABs are a strategic asset for hospitality tech vendors and their customers alike. They lead to smarter products, stronger partnerships, and more future-ready solutions.

But when they lack transparency, diversity, or follow-through, CABs can become little more than corporate theatrics, burning time, money and enthusiasm without moving the industry forward.

In an industry that thrives on relationships and rapid evolution, the best technology vendors aren't just building software. They're building ecosystems of collaboration. The Customer Advisory Board, done right, is the cornerstone of that ecosystem. ■

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