

EVENTS

08 June 2012

Boutique Hotel Summit

The second annual Boutique Hotel Summit, held in London in May, focused on a booming boutique hospitality market that has defied tough economic conditions. Covering the latest trends in marketing, branding and technology, a number of key themes emerged in the panel sessions with experts from across the industry. Stylus reports.

Boutique Hotel Summit

The second annual Boutique Hotel Summit, held in London in May, focused on a booming boutique hospitality market that has defied tough economic conditions. Covering the latest trends in marketing, branding and technology, a number of key themes emerged in the panel sessions with experts from across the industry. Stylus reports.

The Curious Traveller

Several speakers at the summit spoke about a new breed of traveller emerging in the market that is distinguished by their mindset rather than age demographic. Keynote speaker Gordon Campbell Gray, chairman of **Campbell Gray Hotels**, said they are “intelligent, curious, engaged and of all ages”.

Star rating is less important to these travellers, whose trips often mix business and leisure. They recognise quality and value the experience of the hotel stay more than loyalty programmes.

Angus Thirwell, CEO and co-founder of **Hotel Chocolat**, noted that experiential travel has been key to the success of his debut hotel Boucan by Hotel Chocolat. Located on the company’s cocoa plantation in Saint Lucia, chocolate is at the core of both the restaurant and the CocoaJuvenate Spa.

Thirwell said the Tree to Bar Experience, which allows visitors to make chocolate from cacao pods they pick themselves, is immensely popular.



Cocoa Plantation at Boucan by Hotel Chocolat



CocoJuvenate Spa at Boucan by Hotel Chocolat



Cacao Cuisine at Boucan by Hotel Chocolat



Angus Thirlwell, founder, Hotel Chocolat



Angus Thirlwell, founder, Hotel Chocolat

Locality and Culture

Several panellists spoke about the need to localise by integrating the neighbourhood into a hotel's design and ethos. The demand for macro, international brands has subsided, with consumers now looking for micro brands that participate and engage with their communities.

Town Hall Hotel in London's East End is a great example of a hotel that incorporates its surroundings and heritage to create a unique guest experience. Housed in a former council building in Bethnal Green, the hotel has retained the integrity of the Edwardian structure while integrating modern luxury and injecting the area's contemporary culture with installations from local artists.

Reactionary art can also be used as a point of difference to generate publicity and drive trade. **Hotel Fox, Au Vieux Panier** and **Hotel The Exchange** were cited as examples of successful art-led design. However, panellists warned that boundaries on fundamentals such as layout and lighting must be set on artists to ensure the space will function.



Town Hall Hotel



Hotel Fox



Hotel Fox



Au Vieux Panier



Hotel Fox



Spas: Finding a Balance

Travellers are now looking for more meaningful experiences, also discussed in Stylus' **Balanced Values** macroview. They are in search of the "non-wow factor", said Shelley Reiner, senior associate at **Wimberly Interiors**. "People are maxed out and want to reconnect with themselves and their spirituality."

Extended wellness programmes could be integral to answering this need. Kevin Wallace, president and CEO of **Jebel Ali International Hotels**, said that medical spas offering both surgical and non-surgical treatments could also be popular in the future – particularly in the United Arab Emirates.

Brand alignments can be important to the success of a spa in a hotel. Wallace advised that a spa brand "must fit within your ambience, positioning and price. It wouldn't do us any good to partner with a spa brand that wouldn't complement our brand."

Susan Harmsworth MBE, founder and CEO of **ESPA International**, expanded on this – saying that it is important for hoteliers to partner treatment-led spa brands rather than department store brands as "the treatment has to work or [guests] won't come back".



Travellers are looking to reconnect with their spirituality



Extended programmes can address travellers' wellness needs



Exploring Online Marketing

Free methods of online marketing should be harnessed before turning to expensive external channels, such as online travel agents. Hotels can build their 'online real estate' through SEO-enhanced websites and also profiles on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. "The higher up you are (in search results), the more clicks you'll get", said Nigel Huddleston, industry head travel at Google.

In **Flash Sales – The Future for Travel?**, Stylus examined the effectiveness of limited-time discount sites. Panellists echoed the importance of being selective. Some sites focus on quantity, which will increase footfall and spread word of mouth, while others focus on quality and providing curated content for affluent customers.



Antoine Buhl, chief technology officer, Availpro; Nick Stafford, GM Europe, LivingSocial Escapes; Suzie Wotton, vice president of marketing, Red Carnation Hotels; Nigel Huddleston, industry head, Google Travel

Managing E-Reputations

According to **Availpro's** chief technology officer Antoine Buhl, 89% of travel decisions in the UK are influenced by information read online, while travellers visit an average of 26 sites before making a decision. "The biggest change in the online travel industry is recommendation," he said. "E-reputation is a direct consequence of the quality of service to your clients." **Trip Advisor** was highlighted as a crucial resource and general managers across the board agreed that it is becoming a larger part of their remit to engage with reviewers.

Emphasis was placed on Twitter being a relationship management tool rather than a sales channel – used to interact with guests and reflect the experience that they can expect from the hotel. Philip Newman Hall, director of **Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons**, shares what's going on behind the scenes on Twitter – including new dishes in the restaurant and the line-up to the hotel's festival. He places a special gift in the rooms of guests who tweeted about their upcoming visit.



Le Manoir Twitter page



Trip Advisor



Optimisation and Mobile

Mobile usage of online booking sites has grown from 4% up to 12% in the past year. More than 20% of travel clicks are on mobiles, with a third of those clicks from iPads. Mobile apps can encourage customer loyalty, but ensuring a hotel's website is optimised for mobile browsing and booking is the priority.

In-room iPads providing room service, magazines, city guides and room control are becoming a customer expectation rather than a luxury. Travellers now are now constantly connected, which has given rise to hotels such as **citizen M** hotels that feature self check-in terminals and in-room touch-screen control pads.

The Eccleston Square Hotel in London was also highlighted as a luxury hotel addressing the needs of the technology-hungry traveller. See the Stylus report **Guest Services Go Mobile** for more on this topic.

Charging for wi-fi was a point of contention. Clare Lavery, head of marketing for Swire Hotels (read Stylus' profile of **Swire** here), put forward that it was outrageous to charge your "voluntary marketing army" for web usage: "Customers are booking by mobile, tweeting about their booking, and are then charged for internet on arrival? Hotels need to weigh up the cost of providing free wi-fi versus the cost to their reputation on Trip Advisor."

With more than 755 million mobile device users, China was underlined as a key region to address. Lavery advised that 92% of the market uses social media and that Weibo (the equivalent of Twitter in China) has 300 million users spending £160m commercially through the site.

BeatBabel, an American company offering commission-based translation of ecommerce sites, was highlighted as a potential tool to meet the financial challenge of optimising websites for other countries.



Moodpad at Citizen M



Eccleston Square Hotel

Weibo

Stylus Summary

The 'intelligent' traveller values the experience of a hotel stay over star ratings or loyalty programmes. Integrations of art and local culture have proved successful models for creating a unique guest experience, which is the key to tapping into this market.

Extended wellness programmes need to address the growing trend for travellers seeking meaningful and spiritual experiences. Medical spas offering both surgical and non-surgical treatments could be popular in the future.

The global population is becoming increasingly tech-savvy and hotel websites must be optimised for mobile browsing and booking. Consumer expectation of in-room technology is rising, with iPads and free wi-fi becoming an expectation rather than a luxury.

Who is your target customer?

Identifying your audience – including their attitude and interests – will help you to define a concept and design that will appeal.

How do you want to be viewed by your audience?

Traditional marketing and PR are no longer enough to get your message across. With online recommendation soaring, companies **must become part of the conversation.**