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4 ways hotels can improve in 2018

BY DAVID EISEN
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It's a new year and another chance to get it right or wrong. In the hospitality industry, this means getting it right where it counts the most: with customers. And as hotel companies roll out new brands, developers build new hotels, new technology progresses at warp speed, all amid the impediments of home-sharing and online travel agencies and the certainty of an unpredictable Trump administration, 2018 is shaping up to be a year when hotels will have to fight harder for market share and operators will be under the gun to show their worth.

It's a lot to digest. Here, then, are four things I believe the hotel industry needs to do better in 2018.

1 Back to basics. Hotels have turned the corner from mundane and monotonous to lively draws not only for hotel guests but for locals, with activated public spaces, hip bars (rooftop or otherwise), restaurants that are foodie destinations and not just insipid afterthoughts and an overall aesthetic to bring all these threads together. These are all great and solid ways for owners to realize a strong return on their investment, but are hotels forgetting their real purpose? To wit, sleep. It took media doyenne Arianna Huffington to push sleep into the public consciousness. And I thank her. If you are like me, there is nothing better than eight hours of strong, uninterrupted sleep, but I find that more and more difficult to get at hotels. And while I applaud more investment in sleep hardware (cozier mattresses, linens and pillows), I think more emphasis should be placed on sound insulation. On too many occasions I've been sound asleep only to be roused by an elevator door opening, a noisy guest or a rickety roomservice cart. Instead of upping thread counts, let's up soundproofing in 2018.

2 Sensible technology. I am no Luddite, but does all this new technology really matter when I'm staying in a hotel room for two nights? There is no doubt that we live in an experience economy, so an Internet of Things guestroom, the likes of which Marriott is working on, sounds cool, but by the time I figure out how to use it, I'll be checking out. As long as there is ROI for hotel owners (cost savings), I am all



for hotel companies developing this technology, but short of that I don't initially see the impact for guests. Before we do this, can we please have a TV that is easy to work, thoughtfully placed outlets and a check-in/check-out process that is 100-percent mobile optimized? I want to speak to fewer people in 2018. Thank you.

3 Marketing matters. Part of the marketing fees hotel owners and franchisees paid in 2017 helped fund an advertising push routing low-price guarantees (Hilton's "Stop Clicking Around" and Choice's "Badda Book. Badda Boom." are two of these). While entertaining, they aren't convincing enough that the lowest price can be found at brand.com. How do I know? Expedia's Q3 revenue was \$2.97

billion. That's how. Hotel companies have no issue decrying OTAs, but apparently not on TV, radio or online. Until they call out OTAs by name and make it clear that booking direct offers a lower rate and more amenities, customers won't be dissuaded from seeking out intermediaries. Remember "Where's the beef?" If Wendy's can do it, so can Marriott.

4 Faithfully yours. I am loyal to few things: Baltimore Orioles baseball, Siete Leguas tequila and Coen brothers films are three. I also understand them: one an annual disappointment, another a tasty spirit and the last reliable entertainment. On the other hand, and without shame, I can't, for the life of me, wrap my head around hotel loyalty programs. First, the name. Call them points programs. No Yankees fan, for instance, is also a Red Sox fan, and a Blue Jays fan, and a Rays fan. Doesn't happen. But there are those who are loyal to Marriott Rewards, Hilton Honors and IHG Rewards, all in the hopes of accruing enough points for a free stay. Thing is, you need a Ph.D to fully grasp each program. According to a J.D. Power study, only about half of loyalty program members understand how the process actually works. I have a hard enough time keeping track of each of my member numbers. Let's simplify points programs in 2018—it'll have to happen in order to make heads or tails of whatever the new Marriott program will look like. Make them fair, make them easy. Make 2018 great again! **HM**

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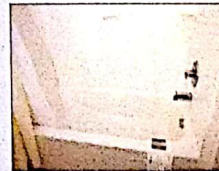
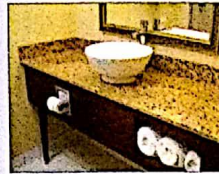
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