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Hospitality Service Innovation: KLEEDing an Outstanding Guest Experience

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Abstract

The paper proposes to innovate service strategies following the KLEED model that expands to the attributes for the outstanding guest experience. The study is based on a review of academic literature, business news reports and online resources regarding human touch and technology the hotel industry is using. The suggestions were drawn from the authors' guest journey experience while staying in different hotels. Human touch or personal interaction is an integral part of the hospitality service business, and should never be set aside. In the same way for technology, adopting it contributes to the value creation of the hospitality business resulting in greater guest satisfaction. Thus, a blend of human touch and technology turns out to be the main ingredients for the outstanding guest experience. This paper used the authors' experience as hotel guests and other business reports to draw suggestions on how a blended service will create outstanding guest experience.

Keyword : automation, guest experience, hotel industry, human touch, technology

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, as technology evolves and guest expectations change, guest engagement with self-service technologies is now becoming an expected part of the travel experience. Guests expect even more personalized, convenient and streamlined interactions with hotels, their staff and their technology. This leaves travelers to prefer self-service options that prioritize convenience at every turn, whether they are making reservations or checking-in by smartphones or through kiosks. This allows guests to have access to a virtual key from their mobile device, or to communicate with staff via text messaging. As a result, hotels have introduced a variety of technology-driven innovations designed to meet the demand and revolutionize the guest experience.

As technology continues to evolve and gain popularity in the hotel industry, it can be tempting for hotel organizations to jump on the technology bandwagon and give guests a free hand over everything from booking a room to checking-in, and checking-out. However, guests desire and require various

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levels of automation and personal touch throughout their stay journey, making it important to have the right “blend and mix” between automation and hands-on, and interpersonal interaction.

Delivering guest service satisfaction and providing great customer experience have always been at the core of the hotel industry’s offering. Human touch once regarded as a source of competitive advantage has changed with the onset of technological innovation. Technology has given new tools to meet the needs of both the organizations and guests [1]. The estimated probabilities of technology replacing frontline hospitality positions such as host and hostesses (probability of 0.97), receptionists (0.96), and desk clerks (0.94) are particularly high [2].

Hospitality’s nature has been based on kindness, friendliness, helpfulness, politeness, welcoming and warm reception that occurs in human interaction [3]. This can evoke an emotional connection that has a positive impact on the guest experience. Moreover, the essence of hospitable service lies in the unique emotional bond of warmth and trust between hosts and guests [4], suggesting that guest service requires a human touch. While the adoption of technology might significantly contribute to service process efficiency, it still must meet guest expectations for human-provided hospitableness [5]. Thus, technology exposes an antinomy for guest service - the provision of human touch service experience as the core product while delivering it with a technology that excludes or represses human contact.

This antinomy can create a dilemma for hotel organizations. Guests look for human interaction but they also desire speed, efficiency and reasonable price. The challenge is how to achieve a balance between meeting guest expectations for human touch while offering speedy and efficient service that technology offers. Finding the balance requires thoughtful consideration and an in-depth understanding to meet the expectations of the targeted guests. Managers will need to make proactive changes that focus on customer preferences, quality, and technological interfaces to stay competitive [6]. On the other hand, travelers are choosing to patronize hotels that offer the best value proposition under existing budgetary constraints [7]. Thus, to meet the challenge, hotel managers need to find the right balance to blend human touch and technology.

2. Background

The hotel industry has an overwhelming service offering to stay current in their operations. Hotel managers have difficulty in choosing them as they attempt to be different from their competitors. As the hotel industry is rapidly changing due to accelerations in information technology [7], managers will need to make proactive changes that focus on customer preferences, quality, and technological interfaces in

order to stay competitive in such a dynamic environment [6]. Hoteliers need to understand guests' preferences to strategize and positively impact their satisfaction.

2.1 Guest experience

Knowing each guest and taking care of their every need is at the core of understanding and delivering an exceptional guest experience. The concept of having intimate knowledge of, and providing round the clock service to guests is realized in a different way today [8]. The core of what makes it real for guests is fundamentally the same, but how hotels interpret and deliver on those needs is quite distinctive.

Hoteliers and associates attest that guest service is imperative and remains as essential as ever. This is compounded by the fact that guest expectations are continuing to rise. Many guests have come to expect hotels to deliver more than what is promised, and what is implied is that guests are now expecting hotels to go beyond [8].

In 2017, Deloitte [9], a multinational professional services network conducted research to identify what makes a great hotel experience. There were 6,600 hotel guests from 25 brands across different hotel tiers who participated in the survey. Their survey revealed the basic needs for a satisfactory guest experience include clean rooms, well-maintained property, great value for money and location. More importantly, it surfaced differentiators to deliver outstanding guest experience. The guest satisfaction scores across the hotel experience show the following: empowerment (67%), engagement (66%), knowledge of guests' needs and preferences (65%), attentiveness and empathy (62%) and excitement (56%). These are the notable factors that can guide hoteliers on how to deliver an exceptional guest experience. Also in their guest experience survey, they identified five guest's needs and attributes connected to them. First is knowledge about the guests. It is the foundation for delivering all guest needs, of knowing and remembering guest preferences. Second is engagement. This is how the hotel team engages with guests in a personalized, authentic, and attentive way. The third is "attention" to guest needs, empathy, and then follow through. Guest assistance, showing empathy and follow-through were identified as vital to guest service. Fourth, is "empowerment", an increasingly important attribute for guests. Last, is "excitement". This is when the hotel creates moments that surprise guests and exceed their expectation [8].

2.2 Hotel technology for value creation

Today, automated technologies are widely used in service industries such as hotels. The application of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence and service automation leads to unprecedented changes in the ways hotels render service to their guests [9]. Service automation is the process of using machines to perform a certain sequence of operations [10] such as answering guest queries. Likewise, service automation is the basis of self-service technologies through which part of the process of producing and delivering the service is transferred to the customer. Self-service technologies are technological interfaces which allow customers to get services free from the direct involvement of service firm's employees [11]. Self-service check-in kiosks are used in hotels to allow guests to reduce waiting time, proceed to their guest room faster, and therefore, improve the guest experience. Similarly, mobile applications are used for guest room check-in and unlocking guest rooms [12].

Artificial intelligence (AI) is defined as the development of computer systems able to perform tasks normally requiring human intelligence, such as visual perception, speech recognition, decision-making and translation between languages [13]. In the hotel industry, several hotels use it in smart rooms that are tailored to guests' needs, as well as in AI-powered chatbots and robot concierges designed to provide guests with a more seamless check-in experience, real-time pricing, or answer questions which help to free up human staff for more complex guest-related tasks and requirements.

Focusing on delivering an outstanding service, it is important to understand how technology can enhance the guest experience significantly. There are stages in the guest journey that can optimize their experience. For instance, prior to the guest's arrival, an email containing information about the hotel, the possibility of pre-check-in, or add-on products or services can be sent to the guest. During their stay, guests can rate or assess their satisfaction level and communicate issues to the hotel using WiFi or Quick Response (QR) code enabled questionnaires. After their stay, guests can be invited to write a review and relationships can be continued over a longer period to enhance loyalty. Furthermore, technology can assist in guest management. For hotel managers, being able to offer a better guest experience is made possible by streamlining operations. Digitization assists in the operations to proceed in ways that are simpler and quicker. For instance, the Property Management System (PMS) and other forms of channel manager are vital tools to assist employees to work more efficiently. The feedback collected through QR codes can give a precise idea of the guest experience. Thus, technology-enabled communication enables guests to have quick and easy access to the hotel. Whereas, it is easier for the hotel to manage requests, complaints, and other demands. The information transmitted to the relevant

department is quick and easy as well as the follow-up to the appropriate measures taken.

Technology, artificial intelligence and service automation have their advantages compared to hotel employees. When adopted into hotel operation, they could work continuously without needing meal breaks or days off. It could implement various tasks and expand their scope with software and hardware upgrades. For instance, a check-in kiosk would need only a new software package in order to be used for another purpose. A conversational design would allow a chatbot to be able to provide relevant answers to customer inquiries. Furthermore, technologies are more consistent when delivering service procedures and they do it perfectly and in a timely manner. Routine work is very natural and consistent for them even without supervision.

While technology can enable guests to have the self-service experience, there are important contentions for keeping a human touch. First, service robots, self-service kiosks, or chatbots lack creativity. They cannot invent new ways to deliver services to guests, regardless of whether the innovation is in the form of a new service or a new way to deliver an existing service. Second, there is an absence of a personal approach as it follows the service process script without deviation. Third, they can only work in structured situations as chatbot, and robots can only provide answers to questions that include specific keywords. Last, these technologies are completely dependent on human supervision for maintenance, monitoring of the service delivery process and human intervention when a failure occurs [13]. Consequently, hospitality scholars have emphasized the importance of how front line staff can vitalize emotional reactions and deliver an exceptional service. Thereupon, [14] suggests that service employees add a human touch that is a “unique dimension to technology, regardless of functionality”.

2.3 The beauty of human touch

While technology is important in creating a seamless guest experience, the application of human touch is also extremely vital. The hotel industry cannot be counted as part of the hospitality business without the human element. Personal interaction and human touch play an important part in the service delivery. Human touch should be present at every step, right from arrival at a hotel to departure from it. Human interactions are necessary to ensure that a guest's stay is not just comfortable but also enjoyable.

Torres & Kline [15] in their qualitative study titled “From customer satisfaction to customer delight: Creating a new standard of service for the hotel industry”, revealed how guests appreciated the warmth, kindness, support, genuine concern and behavior of hotel staff that embodied human touch. Human touch was seen and experienced in a variety of ways. First, when a hotel staff proactively solves a guest’s

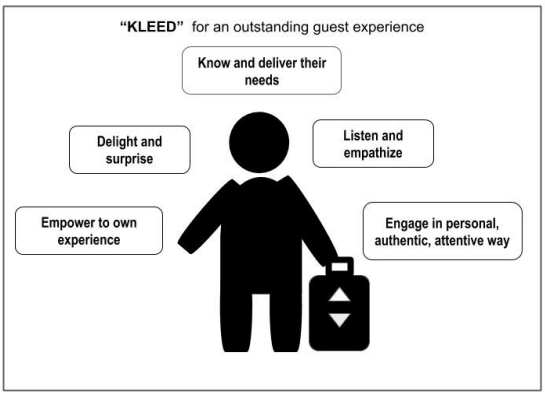
problem. This creates a lasting impression especially when the problem is not the hotel's responsibility such as when a guest's luggage did not arrive from the airport in time for the event that the guest planned to attend. When guests face a struggle or dilemma and the hotel staff gracefully handle guests' problems beyond the usual approach by providing an unexpected solution, in this case shopping for the guest's outfit, this is something that any technology is not capable of doing at that needed moment. Second, guests were pleased by the charisma of hotel employees embodied in their personality and friendly attitude. Lastly, guests felt important when hotel staff paid special attention to their needs.

By drawing on [15] study, we can concur that hotel employees' understanding of human needs and their individual needs cannot be programmed into artificial intelligence. In the same manner, a strong charisma cannot be infused in computer programs. Furthermore, technology cannot offer personal interaction and is incapable of making the guest feel important. Nevertheless, no matter how fast, accessible and efficient hotel technology is, it cannot deliver an overall satisfaction as it lacks personal interaction or human touch.

Hotel organizations understand that "hospitality" through human touch constitutes a competitive advantage, and emphasizes this through the organizational mission, vision, cultural values and operational practices [16]. The frontline staff's manner of speaking, genuine concern, friendly gestures, professional behavior, all embodies human touch. Several scholars, such as [4] and [17], [18] have stressed the importance of human touch that happens in a service experience. Similarly, [19] argued that human touch or personal interaction between employees and guests is the central part of the hospitality product.

3. The right balance for an outstanding guest experience

Finding the right balance means an artful blend of human touch and technology to create authentic anticipatory experiences. In order to win and retain guests, hotels should be more thoughtful about how people and technology, powered by insights, weave together to deliver authentic hospitality. As we propose to blend human touch and technology, it is useful to understand the different attributes, aspects, and components of the outstanding guest experience. Based on the study of [9], we came up with the [Fig. 1] that follows an easy to remember mnemonic called "KLEED", a 5-point model that expands to the attributes of the outstanding guest experience. KLEED stands for Know and deliver their needs, Listen and empathize, Engage in personal, authentic, attentive way, Empower to own experience, and Delight and surprise.



[Fig. 1] Attributes of the outstanding guest experience

3.1 Know your guest and deliver their needs

Knowing your guest is the foundation for delivering guest needs and remembering guest preferences. Today, with the presence of a digitally connected environment, guests are getting accustomed to hotels that interact with them by understanding, remembering, and predicting their preferences. This can be executed best as a blend of human touch and data science, delivered through people and technology. My personal experience below speaks for a hotel's unique hospitality. This was when my husband and I had an overseas trip.

In our recent trip to Singapore, I booked a double room at a boutique hotel for three days. I remember that while booking, the online booking site asked who my companion was. I honestly answered that it was my spouse. When we arrived at the lobby, we were immediately greeted by the frontline staff who quickly processed our check-in and after a few minutes, we were ready to proceed to our room. As we entered the room, my husband was surprised to see the personalized welcome greeting on the television bearing his name and wishing us a wonderful stay. He was very delighted that the hotel knew his name and deeply felt their digitized welcome.

As guests search for several hotels before booking a room, information such as budget, preferred location, and room type are reflected on the website to assist them in selecting their best option. For most travelers, location is a key factor in choosing their hotel – its proximity to the places guests want to visit and the beauty of its surroundings. Another factor to consider is the hotel category as quality and services depend on its star or rating. Furthermore, price is a factor that is highly considered

when making the final decision for booking a room. All this information is made available through different online hotel booking sites. Thus, using technology and providing access to online hotel booking platforms suffices as a preliminary hotel service to anticipated guests.

3.2 Listen and empathize

Listening to guests' feelings, hearing their needs, and empathizing with their situations are powerful attributes of a hotel. My narration below demonstrates how a hotel staff's empathy gestures could help ease prior hassles. This was my experience in a hotel in Busan.

We booked an overnight stay at a hotel in Busan to apply for a Japanese visa and fly the next day. We were traveling from another city, so we made sure that we would not miss the time window (9:00 - 11:00 A.M.) since we were leaving for Japan the following day. When we arrived at the Japanese Embassy, we were surprised that there was no long queue, so we finished our transaction earlier than we expected. Having nothing to do and with our travel luggage, our only option was to proceed to our hotel. The problem was, it was still early for checking-in as the check-in time is at 3:00 P.M. We arrived at the hotel around 10:00 A.M. and all the front desk staff were busy processing check-out. As I got to my turn, I tried requesting from the front desk people to accommodate us for an early check-in but was politely declined due to full occupancy. We were tired and exhausted because we left our place early, commuted, and transferred to 3 connecting trains which took 3 hours. This was very frustrating as we really wanted to rest and nap. Fortunately, we found an empty couch in the lobby and patiently waited for the time. After an hour, a front desk staff approached and informed us that we really had to wait as the rooms were getting cleaned but offered to take care of our luggage so we could have lunch. I fully understood the situation and appreciated the effort of the hotel staff who offered to take care of our luggage.

In the situation above, I was humbled by the staff's friendly gestures. I have learned something from my experience. That is, guests have to understand that things do not always happen the same way they want them to be, and the way for hotels to handle these kinds of situations should be with extra hospitality and care. The move of the hotel staff to approach us (waiting guests) on the couch helped ease our frustration. If handled well, the human touch can indeed positively affect the guests' perception towards a hotel.

3.3 Engage in a personalized, authentic and attentive way

Engaging your guest is how the hotel team engages with their guests in a personalized, authentic and

attentive way. Check-in procedures play a special role in every guest's journey. These include the welcoming of guests who have booked a room, and then asking for proof of booking for identification purposes. The latter, however, appears to be a simple task that can be done independently by the guest using a self-service check-in. On the other hand, when using self-service check-in kiosks, the notion of hospitality such as personal greeting and welcoming disappear even though the word "welcome" can be digitized. At this point, the human touch is important. To cite an example, I would like to share a recent experience when I checked in to a newly built 3-star hotel in Taipei.

We booked a 3-star hotel in Taipei for an overnight stay. According to their website, the property is only 700 meters away from the train station, our main deciding factor for choosing it. Not being familiar with the place, we relied on locals to help point the hotel's location. We asked several locals and realized that we were just going in circles in the area. After an hour of searching when we were about to give up, we passed by the hotel. Finally, we checked in but we were so tired. They asked me to show our booking confirmation, gave my credit card, and we were done. Although the official check-in time is at 2:00 P.M., I requested for early check-in as we were there at 9:00 A.M. and felt that it would be a long wait. The staff politely said that they had no room available. Then, she pointed to their kitchenette and offered us free self-serve continental breakfast and make ourselves comfortable while waiting by gesturing on their couch. We appreciated it very much.

For someone who is tired and sleepy, this is an embodiment of true hospitality, care, and concern. They even offered to keep our luggage in their luggage room so we do not have to look after them. My personal experience above only shows how hotel people significantly matter during the initial check-in procedures. Despite all the technological advancements, human engagement remains critical for hotels. The second author's experience, on the other hand, when he went to the hotel in person to do the reservation on behalf of the embassy guests, narrated how the hotel provided him and the embassy guests personalized and authentic hospitality – from the booking process up to the actual arrival of the guests, and finally during their departure. His personal experience demonstrates how "human touch" could further strengthen hotel-customer friendly relations.

3.4 Empower your guest to own experience

Empowering is an increasingly important attribute for hotel guests. Interestingly, technology nowadays plays an important role in changing landscapes among hotel bookings. In fact, the millennials' inclination for flexibility and accessibility these days speaks to the current trend on guest service. For

example, prior to guests' arrival, the hotel can enable the guests to access tailored recommendations and reservations for activities, transportation around the area, restaurant recommendations, cultural events and festivals, and other things to do suggestions through a seamlessly integrated recommendation engine and systems.

I enjoy staying at different hotels as they give me wonderful experiences to learn and try new things. I would like to share three memorable experiences that made a lasting impression on me. First, as a coffee drinker, I always look forward to the coffee amenities offered in a guest room. One time, we checked in at a 5-star hotel in Las Vegas. As it was a deluxe hotel, its room amenities were also the finest. Instead of a regular coffee pot and coffee sachets, they have an espresso machine that made me excited to operate it. Though it took time before I could enjoy my coffee, the discovery of how to make it work is worth it. Second, the hit and miss operation of a complicated (for me) coin-operated washing machine because the instruction for washing is in Japanese. As I wanted to do it by myself, I wasted several coins because I always pressed the wrong button. Running out of coins, I sought help from the front desk. The last one, when we ordered room service without calling the room service number. Instead, we used a tablet to view and select the items, order and process the bill settlement.

Whenever I look for a place to stay out of town, the first thing I would always do is check the reviews of the previous guests before I finally make my booking. The feedback from other people who have already checked-in at that hotel may be able to answer the questions we have in mind. For example, how was the hotel in general – in terms of the air conditioning, breakfast, towels, check-in procedures, among other things?

Some strategies that would we like to suggest to empower guests. For instance, operating the hotel's personalized coffee machine, unlocking and locking safety deposit boxes, getting ice from the automated ice machine, or even doing their laundry using coin-operated laundry machines, information, tools, and opportunities should be readily available whenever needed to help tailor to the guest's unique needs and privileges. This information can be expressed in different languages and can be accessed through the aid of technology, such as Ipads, mobile phones, among other devices. In some cases, guests can use their smart television for ordering room service, watching movies, or even getting information on events happening within and near the hotel

3.5 Delight and surprise

Delighting is when the hotel creates moments that surprise guests and exceed their expectations. In Taipei, my husband and I were surprised to have received an offer from the hotel staff.

One incident during our stay was while we were trying to figure out how to be at the airport early morning the following day. The front desk staff offered to give us a free ride to the hotel as she overheard our discussion. This was something unexpected for us. Their simple gesture of bringing us to the airport early morning while the rain drizzles was something unforgettable.

What made our stay there even more memorable was that the hotel had open access to biscuits, bread, bottled waters, and hot beverages. That was something unexpected.

Friendly gestures usually make a positive difference to customers, especially when hotel booking is involved. The second author had an experience below which he described as "overwhelming", referring to a free dinner offered at an international buffet restaurant.

We had an appointment at a hotel in the city around 5 PM. After reaching an agreement on the package the hotel offered, we checked the function hall for our upcoming event. The hall met our expectations. Sensing that we were hungry, the staff led us to the hotel's international buffet restaurant for dinner and offered it free of charge. It was a friendly gesture that overwhelmed us.

These are simple touches that are unexpected, tailored, and delivered in ways guests do not anticipate. Check out, on the other hand, is also a key part of the guest experience. To continue our guest experience story in Taipei, my husband and I left our room and got down early for our airport departure. We planned to go down as we did not want the driver to waste time waiting for them. As I returned the room key to the front desk, the staff received the room key, looked at her computer screen and mentioned that it was still early and that they had to wait for the driver. I smiled and told her, "it was all right to wait". The front desk staff told me that we could still afford to eat breakfast while waiting. I appreciated her gesture, thoughtfulness and kindness in dealing with us and all the other guests who were also waiting for a ride to the airport.

4. Towards the outstanding guest experience

Hotel organizations can create and capture value by focusing on efficiency led by technology and hotel employees. They can do this by using the competent, efficient, personable human workforce at the face-to-face point of contact during guest arrival and stay at the hotel property. Likewise, adopting technology for marketing, advertising, selling and booking on the online platforms as well as assistance in the day-to-day hotel operation, appear to add convenience to potential guests. It is undeniable that replacing human interaction where it does not add any value, and increasing it where it does, is the

optimum use of technology. Hotel organizations should let computers and artificial intelligence analyze trends and patterns in guest management, guests' behavior and assist humans in the daily hotel operations while staff focus on personal interactions with guests.

Humans in hotels (i.e. hotel employees) should focus on what they do best. The hotel's front desk is the first point of contact upon guests' arrival. It sets the tone for their stay. Thus, the personality and attitude of the front desk staff are of the utmost importance. A simple genuine smile will help provide a friendly atmosphere to customers. Employees can greet guests by saying "good morning, afternoon or evening," and use the guest's name. As they perform guest service, hotel employees should pay attention to the details. No detail is too small when leaving a good impression. When attending an inquiry or receiving a complaint, hotel staff should be empowered to provide, solve, or fix issues and make the guests feel happy right away. It is also valuable for the manager to follow up with a courtesy call to ensure everything was handled to the guest's satisfaction.

With an understanding of where, when and how human touch and technology can be blended and communicated to guests and achieve business goals, technology can be the central hub for guiding guests through a journey that is personally suited to their needs and interests. It is not an issue of technology replacing human touch but technology helping and complementing human touch, blending their best for the outstanding guest experience.

5. Conclusion

In today's hotel industry, hoteliers constantly seek to find ways to delight their guests. For many years, both industry and academe sought to understand guests' needs to deliver an outstanding experience. The development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has caused striking changes in the hospitality industry by setting aside a bit of human touch. Service automation, artificial intelligence, and robots have provided hotels with vast new opportunities for value creation. For instance, artificial intelligence is a new form of intelligence that has the ability to synthesize several different ideas simultaneously, suggesting products and services according to the customer's taste, preference, and budget. It is able to respond to questions and provide valuable information to customers. The modern tourists are more demanding than ever, expecting immediate responses from online platforms. Thus the adoption of artificial intelligence allows businesses to deliver response times that would be impossible for humans. In the same way, chatbots, and AI enable personalization of product offerings, as well as improvement of operations and increased productivity while delivering consistent quality.

The adoption of technology adds value to guest experience however, it cannot provide the human touch. As demonstrated in the present study, the human touch is extremely vital in the hotel industry as it should be present at every step, right from arrival at the hotel until guests depart. Human interactions are necessary to ensure that guests' stay is not just comfortable but also memorable. A human being's personal touch will always be the core product in the hospitality industry such as in hotels. The hospitality world is only real with the human touch. It doesn't mean that the hotel staff needs to be alone in delivering service. They need technology's helping hand to deal with demanding customers. Technology is a support tool for world-class human service. It makes it possible to increase the productivity and efficiency of human staff while serving and dealing with guests.

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