

Five Ideas for Using Brand to Drive Guest Loyalty

By: Matt Huss
Senior Strategist
212.817.6585
mhuss@siegelgale.com

www.siegelgale.com

Introduction

Customer loyalty continues to be a hot topic among marketing professionals. Much of this discussion centers around getting customers to recommend your product—in your case, a hotel—to someone else.

The question is: Why should a guest recommend your hotel? Why should they want to come back? How do you create fresh and engaging ways to make a guest stay special? After all, service and accommodations at your hotel should not only be high quality, they should be distinctive and memorable.

The answer: think brand. A clear, compelling brand represents a rich, proprietary source for creating a distinctive guest experience and for making guests want to come back.

+ HOTELS SHOULD USE THEIR BRAND AS A PLATFORM FOR CREATING FRESH, DISTINCTIVE WAYS OF CREATING A PERSONALIZED EXPERIENCE THAT MAKES EACH GUEST FEEL SPECIAL.

Here are five ideas for using brand to drive guest loyalty.

Idea #1: Think outside the cookie

How can you make your hotels stand out from the competition...and from one another?

That's yours, this is mine. In the ever-expanding world of hotel chains, it's getting harder and harder to distinguish one hotel from the next. Sure, there's the sign and the name, and, oh yes, the occasional baked good for each guest, but is that all that separates one hotel from the next?

As hotel groups around the world continue to expand, one basic truth is overlooked: Strong brands clearly communicate what makes a hotel distinctive and relevant to its customers. This applies to your hotel or to any hotel that wants to create meaningful differentiation and not rely on smoke and mirrors for appeal.

The remedy for this ailment lies in returning to branding basics and simplifying what you stand for. Today, hotel companies need to revisit their roots and develop a distinctive promise that captures the essence of each brand in simple terms and provides a platform for true differentiation and a distinctive customer experience.

An example of this is a new hotel in Riviera Maya, Mexico, named Tres Rios. Tres Rios recently developed a story of connection—one that shows how people can get in touch with nature—and with themselves—when they visit the hotel. This story is based in the strong connection between history and nature and combines ancient and contemporary themes of both Mayan and modern Mexico to make the hotel distinct and set it apart from other hotels in Mexico and beyond.

(over)

Getting back to basics and being clear about what distinguishes each hotel brand will put your company in a much better position to grow your base of loyal customers and attract new ones.

Idea #2: Create “freedom in a framework”

How can each of your hotels express their individuality and the corporate brand simultaneously?

As hotel groups continue to expand, they’re challenged by balancing the need for brand consistency across all their properties with the need to express some degree of individual personality and character at each location.

Hmmmm...this leaves hotel marketers in a quandary. Not to worry, though. There is a way to simplify and manage all this complexity.

Freedom is a good thing. Individual hotels need the freedom to bring out the spirit and flavor of the local surroundings and the personalities of the staff. There is a genuine need to be different, and that’s okay. Freedom of expression should be encouraged.

However, individual properties should also be encouraged to maintain some “family ties.” In the end, guests often choose one hotel over another because they have a sense of comfort and familiarity with the name and the special, shared characteristics of that hotel family that transcend any one individual location.

Ritz-Carlton provides a perfect example of freedom in a framework. The atmosphere and ambiance of each hotel is inspired by the uniqueness of the local culture. While each location is designed to be warm and relaxed as the credo says, the services offered vary according to location, as do the designs, materials, and even aspects of the individual units.

The result is an experience that guests can rely on, balanced with a localized flavor that they can look forward to discovering.

By giving each hotel “freedom in a framework,” you will reap the benefit of the brand that you worked so hard to build while keeping your individual locations happy and inspire them to find new and exciting ways to appeal to their guests.

Idea #3: Tune in to younger guests

How can your hotel understand what younger audiences want and appeal to them?

Ahhhhhh, youth. Remember when life was easier, and you thought you knew it all? For many hotel guests, that time is today. There’s a growing population of young travelers, and they’re all looking for hotels that meet their needs.

Problem is...they have very particular demands, and no one is communicating with them.

The thing about today’s “younger generation” is that there isn’t just one younger generation. There’s a whole world of young folks with purchasing power: 30 somethings, 20 somethings, generation X, generation Y, millennials, etc.

With all these groups and all this opportunity, what you DON'T want to do is guess. You need to understand the drivers of brand preference for each group, so that you can build a clear, compelling brand and messaging around the audiences that matter to you the most.

A general review of research conducted on younger audiences—generation Y in particular—reveals that these groups have specific needs and preferences that must be addressed. This includes a demand for real-time information and the expectation that the web will be a delivery tool of any product or service that they buy. Placing iPod docking stations in your hotel rooms, for example, goes a long way toward demonstrating that your hotel understands these audiences' needs.

Younger guests are also skeptical about marketing communications. Using simple, straightforward messaging is critical to reaching younger customers. There are many options for testing messages using online tools and in-person panels. Smart marketers use these to their advantage.

Hotels that act now to understand how younger audiences choose between brands will put themselves in the pole position to capture the hearts and minds of an expanding audience before the competition does.

Idea #4: Reinvent the warm hug

How can you make guests feel special in a way that's different from other hotels?

In today's world, taking a "one-size-fits-all" approach to customer relationship management is a surefire way to leave everybody unhappy. The "same old same old" just won't cut it anymore. Savvy consumers want to be treated like rock stars with a new hit song every time they stay at your hotel.

But catering to each guest's preferences on a one-off basis can be expensive and complicated. How can a hotel develop guest interactions that are simple, cost-effective, and have an impact?

Oftentimes, it's the little things that matter. A handwritten note or a phone call from a hotel manager can make a big difference. But a hotel's strategy for making guests feel special shouldn't stop there. Hotels should use their brand as a platform for creating fresh, distinctive ways of creating a personalized experience that makes each guest feel special.

While many high-end hotel chains have been working hard to make the guest experience more personalized, the capability becomes more proprietary when it stems naturally from the brand. For example, Hyatt strives to provide guests with a home away from home, no matter what country they're in. A personalized experience is an important part of this offering, and Hyatt has found ways to make people feel like they really are home.

They recently implemented an "E-Concierge" system that allows guests to tell the hotel their preferences in advance of their stay. The system also captures preferences that employees observe during the guest's stay. Taking the home-away-from-home idea even further, Hyatt allows friends and family to record personalized wake-up call greetings for their traveling loved ones.

The result is a better experience for guests that is closely aligned with the brand, so it works overtime at strengthening the brand associations that you desire.

By tapping into what the hotel stands for and what makes it unique, there are countless ways to create a customer experience that stands out from the pack.

Idea #5: Get a grip on your visual identity

How can you use your brand to deepen relationships with guests?

It's what you do—not what you say you'll do—that matters. When it comes to branding, everyone understands that a well-managed brand is essential to success in a competitive marketplace.

Yet, many companies in the hotel business treat their brand as a label that needs to appear on every last towel, bathrobe, and set of slippers. Ouch! That hurts. And worse, it misses the point.

As the saying goes...less is more. One key to getting the most from your brand is to know when NOT to use it.

For your brand to really have an impact, you need to be strategic about when, where, and how it's applied. You need to think beyond merely labeling tangible items and start branding the experience you provide. You need to simplify.

This means focusing on specific interactions (e.g., check-in, room entry) and using the brand as a foundation for orchestrating memorable moments that leave a distinct impression in the customer's mind.

As Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts entered a period of unprecedented growth, the company realized that rapid expansion would present a challenge of maintaining a consistent yet personal experience across many more properties around the world. Recently, they created a thoughtful way to determine which aspects of the hotel experience should be branded and which should not.

Rather than putting logos on every last sugar packet and shampoo bottle, Four Seasons brands the entire experience as a distinctive, local, and individualized expression of the brand through each of its locations and each of its highly trained staff members.

The result was a holistic, branded experience that mirrors the exceptional service and unparalleled luxury that Four Seasons guests have come to expect.

By intelligently managing your hotel's identity, you have an opportunity to create an experience that deepens relationships with customers, and, ultimately, makes them want to come back again and again.

Conclusion

A clear, compelling brand represents a rich, proprietary source for developing a distinctive guest experience that will drive loyalty. Loyalty means repeat customers, more revenue and, ultimately, growth and stability for your hotels.