Hoteliers embrace the Age of Authenticity

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Unique experiences delivered through an authentic desire to serve are the drivers of the hotel industry's success, according to speakers during the Southern Lodging Summit in Memphis.

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MEMPHIS, Tennessee—Just because the Age of Authenticity firmly envelopes the hotel industry, it doesn't mean property-level and brand consistency will lose its importance. But the cookie-cutter approach embraced by the industry for the past 30 years could be in trouble, according to speakers at Wednesday's Southern Lodging Summit at Memphis.

Speaking on the opening presidents' panel, Robert Cole of Atlanta-based Hospitality Ventures Management Group said there's no question the authenticity of an experience is what drives guests.

"Guests want to stay in a hotel that's connected to the neighborhood, connected to the locale," said Cole, HVMG's president and COO.

"Guests are demanding authentic experiences in locations where they're staying," added Michael Tall, president and COO of Charlestowne Hotels. "They want to tell a story in their social network. There's no way we could begin developing something that doesn't have a story behind it."

Mitch Patel, president & CEO of Chattanooga, Tennessee-based Vision Hospitality Group, agreed.

"Social media has changed things tremendously and allowed us to want to experience more authentic experiences more than ever," Patel said.

The hotel industry needs to look no further than upstart competitors such as Airbnb as proof that authentic experiences are at the top of consumers' priority lists, he added.

The technology aspect is an integral piece of the authenticity puzzle, too, speakers said.

"In terms of uniqueness and authenticity … it's about pulling back the magic curtain of operations and putting that in front of the guests," said Dana Shefsky, director of digital product innovation for Hilton Worldwide Holdings, during the "Putting technology in the comfort zone" panel.

Hilton's digital check-in process that allows guests to choose their own room via the brand's app is a prime example of that, she said.

"That meant giving our guests control over the choice that our front desk traditionally made," Shefsky said. "We're going to see that trend continue."

The focus on authenticity carries right to the bottom line, according to Ron Hardin, VP of technology for Atlanta-based Davidson Hotels &

Resorts.

"The authenticity in the hotel guest experience ... guest satisfaction is closely monitored and factored into everything we do," he said during the "Technology" panel.

People are the answer
The authentic experience goes far beyond the physical presence of a hotel, according to speakers. The hotel industry is all about the people it employs.

Patel said the "culture trumps strategy" adage fits well in the hotel business.

"It's very important to understand we're not in the real-estate business," he said. "We're in the people-service business. That's a differentiator between other businesses (such as Airbnb)."

Vision subscribes to the "put the squirrel in the tree and the fish in the sea" mentality that places the right employee in the right position to best use their strengths, according to Patel.

Cole agreed.

"We're trying to hire for the heart, for the passion," Cole said, adding that HVMG has shifted its hiring practices to emphasize a service mentality over technical skills. "The No. 1 satisfier for employees ... isn't wages, although you certainly have to be competitive. (It's) who they work for."

"More important than design and what's in the hotel is the personality of the people you hire," added Julienne Smith, senior VP of real estate and development for Chicago-based Hyatt Hotels Corporation, during the "Designing for the future guest" panel.

The authenticity angle also means there needs to be a different approach to training and operations, according to the speakers.

"Gone are the days we all probably grew up in ... the particular training where you greet every guest in a certain way, this is the way you point," Tall said. "That's not authentic. In the space we operate in, (guests) see right through that."

It's essential for every employee-guest interaction to be conversational so guests feel the authenticity, according to Smith.

"We've done away with our scripts at all of our hotel brands because it isn't authentic," she said. "Nothing trumps the personal experience and human connection."

However, the overall design of a hotel can't be underestimated when considering an authentic experience, speakers said.

"The piece about the authenticity is vital," Tall said. "Every hotel needs to be designed in a certain way as it pertains to service."

But that isn't as easy as it sounds given the multiple age demographics of guests that are dominating the hotel landscape.

"The challenge is to design a hotel that bridges the gap between the retiree, the Gen Xer and the millennials," said Kim Bardoul, consultant with The Highland Group, during the "Designing" panel.

Moderator Lee Davis, designer/BIM model manager for Nashville,Tennessee-based Earl Swensson Associates, agreed during the "Designing" panel that authenticity is important, but it can be a bit of a catch-22 situation for millennial travelers.

"What we also want to see more of in these hotels is vibrant public spaces," Davis said. "As for room sizes, you can put me in a closet; as long as there is Wi-Fi, I'll be happy."

Smith said the authenticity must apply to the F&B outlets as well, especially when it comes to having a great local restaurant that speaks to the neighborhood.