



Messaging, Trust, and Other Priorities for Hotel Loyalty Professionals

By Kaitlin Dunn, Writer, Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International (HSMAI)

As part of [Road to Recovery 2020](#), HSMAI hosted a virtual Executive Roundtable for hospitality chief loyalty officers in partnership with Clairvoyix on Oct 2. Roundtable participants choose the topics that they wanted to focus on; participating companies included Accor, Marriott, Red Roof, Best Western, Preferred Hotels & Resorts, Wyndham Hotels & Resorts, Extended Stay America, and Radisson Hotels. Participants had a robust discussion around topics of their choosing, including:

RECOVERY TIMING

The timing of when a vaccine becomes available to the general public is a major factor affecting how quickly the industry will recover, but roundtable participants said that they don't believe it will be a magic switch back to normal. "The availability of the vaccine is key to all of us recovering, but it may not be the golden ticket that will have people flooding into our hotels like they were before," one participant said.

Other participants, however, think that just the announcement of a successful vaccine may help inspire confidence and potentially bring some business back. "Even if it takes a while to be distributed, I think that just the announcement of a vaccine will start to relieve people's stress and allow them to focus on their future lives," one participant said. "It won't immediately drive people into hotels, but it will let them relax and think about getting back to normalcy."

"I don't see this one crystalizing moment where everything goes back to normal," another participant said. "I think it's going to be slow growth, and the question is just how slow will it be. I think the announcement of the vaccine will build trust with some people, but the overall recovery, especially for group and business travel, won't be until 2022."

However, participants said, the vaccine isn't the only factor to consider, and it is still too soon to accurately predict when business levels will return to pre-COVID levels. "What's unknown is when people will feel comfortable," one participant said. "There are a lot of people who won't feel comfortable taking a vaccine for quite some time. A lot of us thought at one point that once we got a vaccine there would-be pent-up demand, but I think it's going to take a while. People have gotten used to things now and there are still a lot of concerns. It may take into 2022 for us to be back to more normal occupancies."

Another participant added: "It's going to be at least 2022 before we are getting close to what we consider good levels. The other factor is the economy. It's going to take a while before businesses feel comfortable putting their travelers on the road."

NEW MESSAGING

As marketers have had to adjust their strategies to the new world we live in, customers are showing strong preferences for some surprising features, such as exterior corridors. “Those properties have become king of the road,” one participant said. “They are doing substantially better than comparable offerings with interior corridors”

“It’s been fascinating to think about how things that generally for the vast majority of travelers haven’t been preferred, have now become a key part of our messaging,” another participant said. “Those exterior hallways are partially why occupancy has come back quicker in economy and budget hotels that have them than upscale hotels.”

Other participants said they are pushing out creative ways to utilize their space, including one participant whose properties are offering a day rate for people who want to work in a hotel room instead of at home from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. “We keep testing different uses for our space,” another participant said. “We have a few hotels that have offered virtual academies for local students.”

BUILDING TRUST

Messaging has to focus on hotels’ cleanliness policy, which is a big part of building up customers’ confidence and trust in the industry, participants said. “Demand used to exist, and it was our job to bring it in,” one participant said. “Now it’s different. The demand doesn’t exist, so we have to build back that trust to consumers who no longer trust the concept of travel.”

One participant added that while cleanliness messaging is important, it’s more important that individual hotels actually enforce those policies. “We have a focused approach at delivery at the hotel level,” the participant said. “If the execution doesn’t happen at the unit level, we will lose the few customers that did have that trust in us. We have to make sure we are executing the statements we made about cleanliness. It’s rallying the troops and ensuring the actions match up to our marketing messages.”

Another participant added: “We need to keep talking about and sticking to our commitment to clean. Tired hotel rooms look dirty.”

(Read takeaways from HSMAI’s previous CLO virtual Executive Roundtables [here](#) and [here](#).)

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