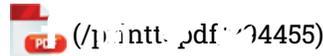




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The real opportunity in voice is human engagement

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While it seems more on-trend to have voice-search capabilities at your hotel, don't forget entirely about the importance of human-to-human interaction between front-desk staff and guests.



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Seems like every day when I read hotel industry news publications there is always a headline addressing an urgent need for hoteliers to focus on "voice" to stay ahead of the competition. But when I read further, it ends up being about the explosive growth in people using voice searches on the web or that hotels should offer guests the option of using voice commands as they would in smart-home navigation back home.

I'm sure that many guests will enjoy being able to adjust the temperature or turn off the lights in their room by voice command, although this does raise huge privacy concerns that will eventually show up in headlines. It seems that the very hotels that are the earliest adopters—



like ultra-luxury—have the clientele that might be the most concerned such as celebrities and dignitaries. So we better be sure to provide a “kill switch” that turns off that microphone with zero defect.

As far as this urgent need for web marketers to meet the needs of hotel guests who are going to start the discovery or “inspiration” phase of their booking search by using a voice search instead of tapping glass on a smartphone, clicking keys on a keyboard or even using voice-to-text for traditional search, I honestly don’t see this catching on anytime soon.

I often use voice-to-text and also have an Amazon Alexa device that I use to check the weather forecast or play a song. However, I just don’t buy that a “voice-only” search for a hotel room is going to catch on that quickly. People like to see pictures of the hotel, take a virtual tour of the room and read reviews. Or if you already know the place you are booking you will just use an app like I do vs. having an Alexa or Siri misunderstand your voice command or get thrown off by background noise. HNN’s Sean McCracken said it best in his recent article, “How much does voice really matter (<http://www.hotelnewsnow.com/Articles/293887/How-much-does-voice-search-really-matter>)?”

To me, the real and immediate “voice” opportunity that’s often overlooked is the focus on human-to-human conversations that are taking place every day at your hotel. Sure, plenty of guests book online, but many of them still call directly to reconfirm, convey a special request or to double-check a rate or room category they see at on an online travel agency. Even in the group and event side, where the majority of corporate and BT travel leads come in via platforms like Cvent or Lanyon, there are still plenty of SMERF leads, catering leads and urgent short-term booking leads from all segments coming in via voice. Service related calls to hotel sales and catering sales are frequently happening too. Then there are all of the calls from in-house guests who have questions, requests and complaints.

Being someone who stays at about 140 hotels per year, I often find myself being the caller in most of the above situations and from what I see, the overall level of telephone hospitality excellence is degenerating rapidly.

Even while staying at luxury hotels, I hear front-desk lines being answered with an abrupt “front desk” followed by a long pause. Even if they say the correct script, it is often spoken so rapidly that I cannot understand it. After I relay my request, I often hear “Sure, no problem.” What happened to “good evening, Mr. Kennedy, this is Douglas at the front desk, how may I assist you tonight?” What about “most certainly, Mr. Kennedy, we’ll send that right up. Is there anything else I can assist you with?” When I call for a hotel manager I often hear a click followed by a voicemail greeting, and that greeting is often referencing an out-of-office message from a few weeks back. What happened to “Mr. Kennedy, Ms. Doe is away from her desk. Is there something I might assist you with or would you like me to connect you with her voicemail?”

When I call from the outside, I would estimate my call is disconnected at least 20% of the time and when it is I rarely receive an apology when I call back and state such.

While standing in the lobby waiting for my client appointments, I often hear front-desk colleagues talking to guests who are obviously searching on an OTA website and asking about for details about a room or rate option they are seeing. More often than not I hear the front-desk colleague coaching the caller on how to navigate the OTA site rather than saying, “since I’m right here at the front desk, I can book that for you right now and put directly into our system, noting your special requests...”

Indeed, it seems more fashionable and trendy to focus on “voice” as in in-room tech and online voice-only searches, and surely that is important. Yet, let’s not forget about the human “voice” conversations taking place every day in your hotel.

Doug Kennedy is president of the Kennedy Training Network, Inc. a leading provider of hotel sales, guest service, reservations and front desk training programs and telephone mystery shopping services for the lodging and hospitality industry. Kennedy has been a fixture on the industry’s conference circuit for hotel companies, brands and associations for more than two decades. Since 1996, Kennedy’s monthly training articles have been published worldwide, making him one of the most widely read hospitality industry authorities. Visit KTN at www.kennedytrainingnetwork.com (<http://www.kennedytrainingnetwork.com/>) or email him directly at doug@kennedytrainingnetwork.com. (<mailto:doug@kennedytrainingnetwork.com>) He is the author of “So You REALLY Like Working With People? - Five Principles for Hospitality Excellence.” (https://www.amazon.com/dp/1539140970/ref=cm_sw_su_dp)



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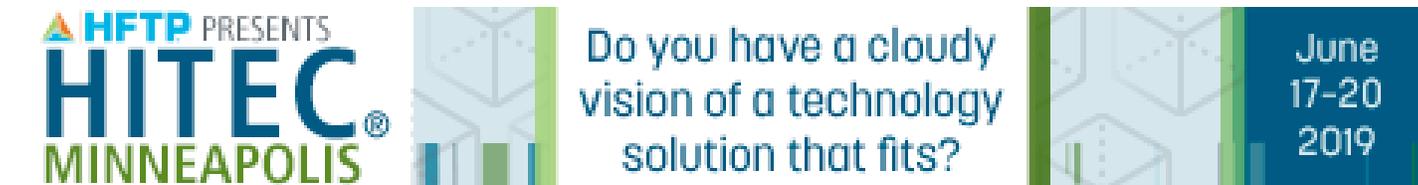


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