

Forecasts

Top 10 hotel trends in 2020: Are they here to stay?

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Consultants at Hotel & Leisure Advisors compiled a list of 10 new trends that emerged in response to the pandemic and predict which ones might stick around.



By Heidi Banak

Back when we were all naïve enough to think that 2020's biggest headache would be a seemingly endless year of political campaign ads, hotels and resorts in the U.S. were poised to enjoy the fruits of a robust economy. But the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic threw the industry into chaos, forcing hotels and resorts to not only rethink their strategies for the year, but in many cases to completely overhaul their operations.

As Hotel & Leisure Advisors' consultants have continued to work on many assignments in 2020, we have had the opportunity to see firsthand some of the new trends in response to the pandemic, and we have compiled our top 10 list. While some trends will not likely outlast the pandemic, there are several that may just be the new normal across the industry for the foreseeable future.

1. Dining options/complimentary breakfast

When the pandemic first hit, most limited-service hotels suspended breakfast or only provided a grab-and-go alternative. As things have settled, more are now offering limited breakfast options provided by a server, while some have returned to a reduced self-serve option. While these were necessary steps at the height of the pandemic, we forecast that portions of these revised complimentary breakfast service options will continue as cleanliness and sanitation outweigh the greatest possible benefits of buffet options.

Many full-service hotel restaurants, which are generally reliant on hotel guests, closed completely amid reduced occupancy and the limitation on indoor dining. To compensate for the loss of revenue, some have provided a modified in-room option. The hotel provides a limited menu that is printed in-house and the

guest selects menu items and a time they would like to pick up their order. As guests could not eat in the restaurant, they would take their order with them or back to their room. We forecast that hotel restaurants will reopen at full-service hotels for breakfast, but this form of takeout breakfast ordering will also continue post-pandemic.

2. Digital check-in/keys

While digital check-in and digital keys were around before the pandemic began, the technology is being utilized more frequently and accepted by guests as a safe alternative to traditional practices. With an app-based room key, guests can submit credit card information, upload ID and electronically sign the registration card from their phone. Currently, most hotels do not have the door locks to work with the technology, but the number of hotels that do is steadily growing, though the technology is expensive. Digital check-in and room keys will not likely ever be the only option since not everyone has a smartphone, but post-pandemic there will be an increase in digital check-ins as people appreciate the convenience and ability to bypass the front desk. The desire for more automation and less human interaction is not only a product of a COVID-19 environment but also the sign of a changing generation that embraces technology.

3. Increased cleaning protocols

Increased cleaning has been the most significant and highly publicized measure that hotels are taking to keep guests safe amid the pandemic. While most hotels abide by strict cleaning protocols, those protocols are now made public to the guest to ensure they are knowledgeable about the cleaning process. In addition to frequent displays of hand-sanitizing stations in every part of the hotel, some hotels have placed stickers on the entry doors/doorjambes to alert the guest that the room has been cleaned and no one has entered the room since it was cleaned and inspected. Also, items such as TV remotes are placed inside a wrapper to illustrate that they have been cleaned as well.

These increased protocols for cleaning are likely to remain post-pandemic. Overt signs of cleanliness continue to make people feel more comfortable, and if they discontinue the process it may make guests question whether something has been cleaned thoroughly.

4. Pools and fitness centers

Initially, most hotels closed both pools and fitness centers, though now both are returning as available amenities. For fitness centers, some properties have installed sign-ins or time slots for use. If the room's equipment is within close contact, the equipment may be taped off to every other unit to allow social distancing. There is an increased presence of sanitizers and wipes to use on the equipment before and after use.

For pools and indoor waterparks, lounge chairs and overall seating has been reduced or removed altogether. Increased signage in changing rooms and locker rooms encourages social distancing and cleaning protocols on door handles and surfaces. Regarding the pools themselves, most believe the water is safe if it is properly chlorinated and operated according to CDC standards.

While capacity limits and time slots are not likely to remain post-pandemic, the cleaning protocols associated with them likely will.

5. In-room amenities

Note pads, pens, magazines, guest directories and Bibles have all been removed from many rooms. In addition, individual coffee packs were taken out in some hotels, but the coffeemaker generally remained, requiring that the guest go to the front desk for coffee, powdered creamer, sugar, etc.

While this may be a short-term cost saver for the hotel, it is an inconvenience to guests. As such, post-pandemic these items will likely return to rooms to ensure guest satisfaction and convenience.

6. Loyalty programs

As hotels see a record dip in occupancy, there has been an increased focus on customer service, especially to brand-loyal customers. Many brands are extending loyalty status programs through 2021 and communicating regularly with loyalty customers. These brands are looking to 2021 for gains in occupancy and more regular travel from their most frequent guests.

7. Increased customer service

Our consultants are reporting a noticeable uptick in overall warmth and a willingness to "go beyond" by everyone in the hospitality and service industries. While customer service has always been at the forefront of the industry, the pandemic has made it even more important as guests today not only want to feel welcome but also safe and cared for during their stay. The industry seems to be embracing the "we are all in this together" notion and showing solidarity with their guests through a difficult time.

While pandemic concerns will eventually abate, we expect a focus on excellent customer service to remain as hotels compete for guests that are returning to travel. In addition, hotels will work to retain and support existing guests who have helped to see the hotel through the pandemic.

8. Limited capacities

As hotels opened back up and began welcoming guests again, many were affected by capacity restrictions mandated by the state and county. Hotels could no longer allow guests to congregate in shared spaces, which negatively impacted the meeting and conference center spaces in hotels, as well as other areas where people congregate, such as pools, bars, restaurants and nightly receptions.

Post-pandemic, these limited capacities will not remain. As soon as it is safe, and guests are willing to gather in groups, hotels and resorts will begin operating at full capacity. This will be positive for driving occupancy to allow group demand to climb back to historic levels.

9. No daily housekeeping

While additional cleaning measures have become essential, daily housekeeping has started to disappear in many hotels. Elimination of daily housekeeping means fewer people entering a hotel room on a daily basis, mitigating the risk of spreading the virus. While guests have generally had the option to forego housekeeping during their stay, the pandemic removed the choice altogether.

For hotels post-pandemic, the elimination of daily housekeeping makes sense financially and is likely to continue at the economy through upscale segments. The upper-upscale through luxury-level hotels will likely return to offering daily housekeeping.

10. Catering to remote students

With so many schools around the country switching to a remote-learning model for at least the beginning part of the school year, many children can log in from anywhere with an internet connection. Some hotels and indoor waterpark resort properties have capitalized on this trend to capture distance learners whose families see this as an opportunity to vacation during off-peak times. Some resorts have taken otherwise unused conference rooms and turned them into remote-learning stations. Children are encouraged to complete their studies at the appropriate time of day and enjoy the amenities of the property afterwards.

While this has been a clever way to capture demand, as many schools go back to a more normal model post-pandemic, properties will likely lose these students and remote workers. Hopefully, they will be replaced by group and corporate demand that had formerly used the hotel properties.

In all, 2020 has shown just how dynamic and responsive the hospitality industry is in the face of unprecedented disruption. We expect that as we move into 2021, we will see even more innovative solutions as the industry moves into eventual recovery.

Heidi Banak is the Marketing Coordinator and a Research Analyst for Hotel & Leisure Advisors (H&LA). Heidi would like to thank her colleagues at H&LA for their insightful contributions to this article.

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