

WHITE PAPER

Technology, culture, and the new hotel guest experience

Hospitality

Technology is constantly changing to match emerging consumer expectations and values. Those values are also shaped by technology, creating the cyclical momentum that drives industries forward. Hospitality businesses are tasked with the challenge of keeping up with innovation to prevent falling behind the competition. Getting a handle on the relationship between technology, culture, and guest expectations that define the modern hotel stay is the best starting point for investing in the right technology to ensure future growth.

In what way do technology solutions impact the views and common practices that shape the guest experience? How do modern technologies reflect and support the cultural expectations held by emerging generations of guests? And how do those cultural forces impact how hotel, resort, and casino organizations interact with their guests? This paper addresses these questions and more.

Leaning into the cultural shift

The development of game-changing hospitality technology reflects an evolving consumer culture. The demand for more empowering technology has led to the replacement of processes that place limitations on guests. This is a question of who has control, and who should have it.

This shift in cultural values around technology and process is the key principle behind all mobile technology. It's why mobile has continued to evolve beyond being a communication tool. Today's smart devices serve as hubs that give users control over all manner of transactions, with organizations simply providing a stable and secure platform that will scale as trends emerge. This power shift has helped to shape how business is done, and how technology itself continues to evolve in response.

Like all technology trends that impact the hospitality industry, movements toward mobile devices aren't primarily about the technology. They're about what the technology enables guests to do with a greater level of comfort and convenience and without necessary intervention from hotel staff. To the guest, it means freedom of movement and freedom to follow one's own schedule during a hotel stay, sometimes even before the stay begins. Scalable success for hotel organizations is best achieved when hospitality organizations are aligned with these important ideas of freedom, flexibility, and fluidity in mind.

Mobile technology—part of the cultural wallpaper

Hospitality industry leaders began responding to the impact of mobile devices years ago. By now, driven by emerging consumer expectations, leaders in the space have supported the idea that guests should be able to manage the check-in and check-out process, plus upgrades, reservations, and more, using their own personal devices. Mobile functionality is a cultural norm today, integrated with hotel property management solutions that allow travelers to manage processes in the same way that they order take-out, download music and books, and do their banking. With the disruptions caused by the pandemic that require consumers and staff to minimize contact, this set of values around mobile-based autonomy over the guest experience has only deepened.¹

Mobile-friendly platforms allow guests to skip traditional check-in lines altogether, often by way of a downloadable app. When it's time to check out, that process can be managed via a mobile device in a similar manner. Today's guests don't have to wait. They don't even have to be in the lobby. They're in control wherever they are. This reflects values as much as it does emerging technology. Leading hotel chains are responding to the ubiquity of mobile technology by delivering experiences that reflect the flexibility and control of mobile interactions. This includes mobile booking and vacation planning.²

Modern guests want their individuality to be acknowledged, with personalized services a given. Like all aspects of Millennial and Gen Z life, even consumption patterns are perceived as a reflection of the self.

Essential elements to serving the modern hotel guest

What does the modern hotel guest really want? Here's a selected list:

- Mobile-friendly environments that provide guests with visibility and control over their experiences
- Up-to-the-minute information delivered in real or near-real time, often well before the beginning of a stay and at any point up until arrival
- Support for a guest's preferred means of payment, including mobile payment options
- Self-driven and contactless processes that help to reduce face to face contact: e.g., apps, web-based UI, kiosks, etc.
- Paperless receipts and other digital alternatives for convenience and sustainability reasons
- Freedom of movement at all times, with every transactional process being seamless with movement within a physical space: e.g., the way they pay for their stay should also be the way they pay for a meal in the hotel restaurant, or the reservation they make at the spa or golf course
- "Bleisure" travel to blur business with leisure by supporting both work and comfort, with a recent Hilton survey revealing that 61-63% engage in leisure activities when on business trips⁵

Understanding the modern hotel guest

The relationship between the modern consumer and the development of technology has typically functioned as a two-way street. With the emerging digital natives in Generation Z, these powerful consumer cohorts place a greater emphasis on experiences over material goods.³ They are ideal candidates to be the prime focus of the hospitality industry in the current decade. Digital natives want to be welcomed in a personal way and have memorable and rewarding experiences while at a property.

Elegant and modern technology can ensure that the guest experience is exceptional. Because digital-native generations like Millennials and Gen Z have come to expect frictionless, personalized experiences, they expect those features from hotel technology. This, in turn, has enriched hospitality software—which has evolved to provide frictionless, personalized experiences that benefit guests across all age groups. This mutually beneficial relationship between technology-driven culture and culture-driven technology development is vital to understand.

In this environment, modern guests want their individuality to be acknowledged, with personalized services a given. Like all aspects of Millennial and Gen Z life, even their patterns of consumption are perceived as a reflection of the self.⁴ Embracing and strategizing around technologies that enable freedom of movement, more control, and personalization is the key to communicating effectively with current and emerging generations.

Communications and dialogue enabled by hotel technology

There are a few select channels for connecting with modern hotel customers:

- **SMS**—Bolster the guest experience by welcoming guests by name, sending messages to ask how guests are enjoying their stay so far, and providing recommendations for restaurants and other sites of local interest throughout
- **Chatbots**—Add a level of personalization based on information about a guest from past visits
- **Push notifications**—Let guests know when their rooms are ready, or provide reminders of reservation times

These kinds of communications make for a more personalized experience, transforming the traditional front desk and concierge into virtual assets for hotel organizations instead of limiting them to fixed locations. In turn, guests are empowered to use their own devices to engage with hotel services via text or interaction via app whether they're on the premises or out and about. Technology keeps guests connected, informed, and in control.

This wider spectrum of communication also means that if there is a problem or issue that affects the quality of the guest's stay, organizations can be made aware of them right away instead of reading about them in a poor review after the fact when an issue cannot be resolved.

Creating a successful, scalable technology platform

There are a few technologies that are necessary for supporting a modern guest experience in hotel locations:

- **Cloud environments and SaaS**—Investment in cloud computing environments and “as a service” subscription models have increased in budgeting priorities last year, with 66% of hotels saying that they're considering SaaS models that scale as new technology is introduced and as guest expectations evolve, especially in light of the disruption caused by the pandemic.⁶
- **Mobile-friendly integration**—Mobile guest experiences enable new ways to engage with guests wherever they are,⁷ convenient solutions to manage communications via SMS, and even to open doors using mobile-based room keys.
- **Expanded mobile processes and payment support**—With the rise in importance of contactless payments as social distancing to minimize the risk of a viral spread, the popularity and demand of mobile-based options that include Google Pay™, Apple Pay®, and others on an international scale have accelerated considerably.⁸ This also includes contactless check ins and check outs. Mobile-based payment processes will continue to define a new normal, relating to the guest experience and expectations even beyond our current paradigm. Building a technology platform in support of mobile-based transactions are key factors to success as the industry enters a new era in the 2020s.

Using technology to communicate with guests allows locations to be more proactive than they were in the past. Staff can work with guests to address issues big and small, or to quickly pinpoint the minor but important factors that make a hotel stay special.

Good communication throughout a stay boosts quality and makes for great storytelling for the brand and the guest alike. Better communications via technology help to engender a sense of trust, which is the basis of any sustainable effort to build a brand and retain guest loyalty.

Preserving empathy in a technology-driven era

With automation, AI, and self-directed processes shaping the hospitality industry, it's important to consider the importance of human care at the center of the industry—which still plays an important role in the modern hotel guest experience.

Technology infrastructure and solutions are helping organizations learn more about their guests, helping them stay connected to guest needs. Still, it's important to balance the use of technology with empathy. Guests want to feel welcomed as individuals, and not be reduced to a set of factors in an algorithmic equation. In this era, face-to-face contact has taken on a new definition when it comes to great service. While guests want to avoid the queues and impersonal interactions that often accompany face-to-face check-ins, they still need staff to be friendly and available when help is needed.

In terms of investing in technologies to help support that sense of availability, it's important to leverage hospitality solutions that make staff jobs easier, less stressful, and more supportive of their ability to serve guests. This way, they can continue to do what all organizations in the industry are there to do as their primary mission—be hospitable.

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Technology and culture will change—but the mission stays constant

The shift toward giving guests more personalized and mobile-friendly control of their services is not just a technology trend. It's a reflection of how technology transforms culture and vice versa.

Even as the nature of the modern hotel stay changes throughout the 2020s and beyond, some basic questions will remain. What do guests want? What processes will make the most sense to them in a variety of cultural contexts? What is it that defines comfort when it comes to a process enabled by technology solutions? How can technology solutions empower staff to be better at their jobs, and enjoy those jobs more?

Tools and platforms may change, but the core mission of hospitality won't. Hotel organizations that continue to address these essential questions will make a positive and lasting difference right now and in future eras.

¹ Seema Mody, "What to expect the next time you check in to a hotel," CNBC, May 7, 2020.
² Brodd, Perrilla, "Why the Mobile Guest Journey is the Way Forward in the 'New Normal'", HospitalityNet, August 12, 2021
³ Corris Little, "How Hoteliers Can win with Gen Z, Millennials," Hotel Business, Feb 26, 2020.
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⁶ Jonathan Greig, "66% of hotels and hospitality enterprises considering SaaS models in COVID-19 response," TechRepublic, Aug 12, 2020.
⁷ Varsha Kumari, "How Mobile Technology Is Changing the Hospitality Industry," Qyutech, June 7, 2020.
⁸ Infor, "Contactless Technology, Hospitality Services, and the Cloud," Hospitality Net, July 14, 2020.
⁹ Infor, "Contactless Technology, Hospitality Services, and the Cloud," Hospitality Net, July 14, 2020.

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INF-2382302-en-US-0222-2