Is Social Hotel the future of Indian Hospitality?

Preetika Chadha Kaushik [a]
Kavita Khanna [b]

Abstract

In the past decade, the hospitality Industry worldwide has seen a wide change in terms of marketing and connecting with the customers. This change has brought a new dimension to marketing i.e. social media marketing. With the social media marketing, the gap between the hotel and the customer has reduced tremendously. The increasing customer, employee and organization engagement to social media compel us to think about the future of this industry. The competition is growing, the customers are now well aware, so how would a hotel connect to the customer in a different way than its competitor? This situation leads us to the question Is social media the future of the hospitality industry? This paper aims at studying the concept of Social Hotel and its relevance in the Indian Hospitality Industry. This paper will help us to understand the future of social media marketing and its use and the need for and importance of social hotel.

Author correspondence:
Preetika Chadha Kaushik,
Research Scholar, Amity University Noida
Email address: preetika.chadha@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Batnitzky *et al.,* (2008), Chand & Katou (2007), Henderson (2007), Social Hotel, a type of hotel yet to be defined by hotel experts is a hotel which provides the social media experience to the in-house guest. A hotel is an establishment providing accommodation, meals, and other services for travelers and tourists, by the night in exchange for money. Social media is websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking. Almost every hotel has its presence on the internet and social media, hence it can be said that these hotels are a part of the social hotel.

The modern traveler does not only want accommodation and meals but services much beyond that. The traveler is connected to the internet through social media 24X7 and expects the same from the hotel services that the connection is not broken. The traveler is not shy to share every conversation, feedback, and experience of a place, hotel, or service. This situation is an opportunity for the hoteliers to connect with the mass audience and benefit its business.

The hotel worldwide are encashing this opportunity and providing the best of services and creating the environment in which the customer is comfortable. Israeli *et al.,* (2011), Lashley *et al.,* (2000), the hotels are providing the best of

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social media facilities to the customers. Few of the hotels have started connecting to the in-house customers through social media. Example, Hotel Sol Wave in Spain, the first twitter based hotel of the world gives the option to the customer to tweet the requirements like refilling of the mini bar on the twitter account and the hotel staff will refill it. The hotels are taking social media marketing to a different level. The Indian hotels are not far behind in the social network race.

How does it work? A hotel which has its presence on the social media and provides social media facilities to the in-house guest can be termed as a social hotel. Providing social media facilities includes the presence of social media in day to day operation of the hotel, like if a customer wants to request for cleaning if the customer is comfortable then he can raise the request through social media and the housekeeping attendant will attend it. Further, in the paper, we will discuss and study the presence of social media in Indian hospitality, the concept of social hotel in Indian hotels with few examples of the best social media practices by Indian hotels.

Background: Emergence of Social Hotel in Hospitality

With the number of customers on social media increasing day by day, Facebook active monthly users in the second quarter of 2016 is 1.71 billion, Twitter has 313 million monthly active user and Instagram has 500 million monthly active users, with the whole world on social media it has become important for hospitality sector to connect to the customers in a proper way and use the social media aptly to benefit the business.

Manaktola & Jauhari (2007), Tsai *et al.,* (2010), the tech-savvy customer of today does not settle easily on any brand of hotel, the customer has access to the worldwide network where everything is open right from good feedback to the worst experiences of the guest. The customer does deep research on the image of the hotel and then makes the reservation. In this whole process, the role of social media is very crucial. The need of the hour is that the hotel should provide a better experience and services vis-à-vis the competition not only in terms of boarding and lodging but also the social media need of the guest. Few of the hotels in the world have started incorporating changes in their operations to meet the social need of the customers. For example, The Sol Wave House in Spain coined themselves a "Twitter-themed hotel" by engraining Twitter into their overall operations. The main engine of the whole experience is a virtual community called #SocialWave, only available from the hotel's WiFi. Two Twitter Concierges are devoted exclusively to meet guest requests via Twitter and generate conversation in this virtual community. Guests can know and chat with each other, experience, flirt, compete in contests, share photos, etc. Every corner of the hotel is designed to engage a new conversation.

Similarly, 1888 Hotel in Australia took the title of the "first Instagram hotel" when they incorporated Instagram photos into the fabric of the property. As guests enter the hotel lobby, a revolving digital mural of Instagram images greets them. After checking in, guests are invited to stand in front of an open frame hanging in the lobby and snap a selfie. The hotel's guestrooms are also decorated with Instagram photos from over 100 Instagram photos submitted by guests. To keep guests intrigued post-stay, send an email with personal anecdotes from their stay and the photos, posts, and comments they distributed via social media during it. Everyone expects the generic "thank you for staying with us" email at this point, but a personalized message that speaks directly to the traveler can speak volumes about how they're going to talk about their stay (both on and offline) afterward. Maybe provide a special "return guest" rate for their next visit, too.

Since 2012 Hotelmags.com is giving the best social hotel awards to various hotel properties all over the world. This has also encouraged the hotels to be different and best in providing the social media experience to the guests. From these examples, we can clearly state that the hospitality is heading to a different level and the future is in Social Hotel only. It is imperative for the hotels worldwide to incorporate social media tactfully.

Statement of the Problem

Therefore, it appears necessary to investigate the future of social hotel in India and its scope of operations.

Limitations

a) With the concept of the social hotel a new one, the research field is restricted.
b) The research work in this field is still restricted so it was difficult to gather all the information.

Scope of the Study
  a) The study analyses the possibility of a social hotel in Indian hospitality
  b) The study could also help the hotel to understand the importance of adapting to social media strategies to engage customers.

Main Objective

Primary:
  a) To study the concept of social hotel in Indian hospitality
Secondary:
  a) To assess the concept used by hotel worldwide
  b) To offer the suggestions to the organization for improvement in social media strategies.

Literature Review: Social Hotel Concept in India

With the presence and growing role of social media in the life of each individual, it is the best time for the hotels to adapt to social media hotel concept. In India, many hotels have started adopting this concept by including some or the other part of social media in it's a day to day operations. For example Trident Mumbai social hotel campaign in India, This campaign was conducted in Mumbai's Hotel Trident at BKC; the lifespan of this campaign was two days beginning from 29th March 2014 – 30th March 2014. They invited 3 social media Influencers to participate in this campaign, where they had to spend the two days in the hotel using Twitter (Mainly) & Instagram to avail all the facilities of the hotel by using the hashtag#TridentSocialHotel and by attaching their Twitter handle as well.

There were two quick activities around this campaign – the #Tweesurehunt and #Instachallenge. In the #Tweesurehunt task, they were given clues, the answers were in the hotel itself they needed to reach each destination in order to unlock the next clue. In the #Instachallenge, they have tweeted the clues and needed to click pictures and post them. They even ran a contest simultaneously on their Twitter handle on 30th March 2014 which was open to all; they had to answer 10 questions correctly (After deciphering the images) by using their twitter handle and with the #TridentSocialHotel. And the winner stood a chance to win a free night stay at the Trident BKC Hotel. This led to a lot of participation, increased engagement and an increase in the number of followers as well.

There are more such examples, like, When it was time for the five-star hotel Le Meridien Kochi to begin renovation after almost 10 years, its executives decided to upgrade the rooms with iPod docking stations, bedside charging panels and WiFi accessibility for more than three devices. Reviews on social media platforms — such as Facebook and Twitter — and travel portals like TripAdvisor motivated these upgrades.

ITC Hotels are also incorporating the social media in a very positive and moving towards adopting the social hotel concept, this can be analyzed as it is the only hotel chain being awarded the Best Social Hotel awards by Hotels Magazine every year since 2012 for their social media strategies. The details of the 2015 award are mentioned below. ITC Maurya has received the best Social Hotel awards by Hotels Magazine 2015 for the best use of twitter account, ITC Hotels is one of the first Indian hotel chains to embrace Twitter as a real-time communication channel. It's dedicated customer service Twitter handle, @ ITCHotelsCares, engages and services guests 18 hours per day, seven days a week. Additionally, ITC's corporate handle, @ITCHotels, was created to spread brand awareness and leverage the company's presence among consumers.

ITC has also used Twitter to hold regular contests to reward followers and drive brand buzz. One of its most successful campaigns was #MyTravelColours around Holi, the Indian festival of colors. Followers were asked to share their most memorable travel moment and ITC transformed them into colorful caricatures. ITC also conducts weekly Twitter chats focused on cuisine and wine.

"ITC Hotels has taken a 360-degree approach to social media marketing and has cemented its presence on all traditional and new age social networking channels, including Twitter," says Baldev Dhir, head of digital marketing, distribution and brand operations for ITC. Results: @ITCHotelsCares handled more than 4,000 queries in under 65 minutes, making ITC one of the fastest and most efficient luxury hotels Twitter handles in India. ITC also received more than 50,000 unique brand mentions on Twitter, a rise of 284% from 2014 to 2015.ITC is the only one Indian brand has been able to grab an award almost every year for their social media presence and strategies. With almost 40% of their businesses being influenced by social media, hotels are getting more serious about the guest reviews on this website. The hotels are going the social way to please the customers. The way ahead is very crucial for the hoteliers as they need to implement a proper strategy to adopt the social hotel concept.

2. Research Methods

Research Design

A Research Design is the arrangement of conditions for collections and analysis of data in a manner that aims to combine relevance to the research purpose with economy in procedure. The research is a basic descriptive research, defined as attempts to explore and explain while providing additional information about a topic. This is where research is trying to describe what is happening in more detail, filling in the missing parts and expanding our understanding. This is also where as much information is collected as possible instead of making guesses or elaborate models to predict the future - the 'what' and 'how,' rather than the 'why.'
Sampling Method:
Census survey was adopted for the study. As it was census sampling, the entire population was taken for conducting the research. Hence no sampling tool/technique was used to choose the elements of the sample.

Data Source

Primary Data: The first-hand primary data was collected through interviews with the hotel e-marketing staff. In addition to it, discussions were held with the immediate supervisors, the managers of the marketing department. Secondary data: The secondary data was collected through the company profile, online studies, and articles.

3. Results and Analysis

Creating a social hotel image is not even that easy as it sounds, it includes a lot of operational changes and not to be ignored the cost involved. The hotel should take such a big decision after thorough study and discussion as if it is done well and incorporated throughout various phases of the booking and staying cycle, a hotel can provide a totally different experience for its tech-savvy guests.
Here are a few ways to create a truly "social hotel" experience:
   a) Engagement of customers at every level: This would involve proper use of social content to reach to the customers with special offers, along with listening and responding to those mentioning the hotel, the destination, area hotels, etc. Rewarding social sharing and hosting contests to facilitate buzz-building is also essential.
   b) Integrate social media into the booking process: the hotel should allow customers to book rooms via Facebook, Twitter, or Google+. Create packages or special offers that live solely on social networks. Also, the hotel should have a proper social media connect so that staff can research and/or interact with guests before they visit. Also, on their confirmation emails, include details about the property's social media channels as well as Twitter concierge options. Before the guest arrives, a team member should research a users' background based on the information those individuals have publicly available on their social networks. An email follow-up should also be sent prior to arrival that re-iterates social opportunities while on-site.
   c) Provide free WiFi to all guests. If the hotel wants to attract the socially-active guest, they have to have the resources to please them else they'll probably complain about it. Complimentary, high-speed internet is a must in a social hotel. The WiFi home page is also vital to host details about incentives for social sharing; Twitter guest service opportunities; and more.
   d) Create on-property experiences. The hotel property must offer a unique social experience for the guest which is available on their property only. For example, the Sol Wave House in Spain coined themselves a "Twitter-themed hotel" by engraining Twitter into their overall operations. Similarly, 1888 Hotel in Australia took the title of the "first Instagram hotel" when they incorporated Instagram photos into the fabric of the property.
   e) Encourage loyalty. If your property offers points for visiting, allow the social-savvy visitor leverage and flexibility when it comes to their points and how they're used. Maybe they can earn more points online post stay by keeping in touch with the hotel regularly via social media. Maybe they can share their points with friends or redeem them for a greater variety of on-site amenities
   f) Mobile Concierge and Room Services at the control of your fingertips: Provide a mobile concierge for an easy stay of the guest. Guests that usually go through a traditional concierge can have access to a mobile application where they can seek information on hotel, dining and transportation needs. A mobile application can have the option of room service along with concierge to provide better services.

4. Conclusion

Hotel chains that are open to 24/7 online social communications with their fan base can sense the power of a free-flowing exchange of ideas, and capitalize on a low-cost marketing channel solution. Communication with customer base via social media channels is now expected as standard, whether these platforms are utilized to shape brand image, facilitate user-generated content or compliment a targeted pay-per-click campaign, social media is vital to the success of a hotel property.

Moving into the future, the presence of the brand profile itself is no longer enough. The hotel needs to include social media in its day to day operations else the hotel will lose the race eventually. There is a need for the hotels to adopt the Social Media-Based Customer Service and provide the facilities the customers are habitual in their daily lives. The customers along with a good room, food also looks for a good social media coverage. The customers are so much addicted to social media that they like to post every move on the net. So how can the Indian Hotels be left behind, they need to grab every opportunity to connect with the customers, understand their need and provide the same to them?

Almost every hotel brand, have dedicated social media teams that monitor and respond to guests 24/7, there is a lot of room for growth in this area. Hotels now have the opportunity to build loyalty and increase engagement further with their guests. In order to differentiate from its competitors and to be able to connect well with the customers, a hotel must include the social media experience in its operations

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Biography of Authors

Ms. Preetika Chadha Kaushik
A research scholar with Amity University Noida Uttar Pradesh, India is pursuing research on social media marketing strategies of hotels in Delhi NCR and its impact on room revenue.
MBA in marketing.
NET qualified.
Bachelor's in Hospitality and Hotel Administration
Have done research work in the field of social media marketing and published paper in the same field. 6 + years in Acamedia and industry

Dr. Kavita Khanna
Ph.D. (Home Science), Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut, India, 2007.
M.Sc (Hotel Management), Annamalai University, Annamalainagar, India, 2010.
M.Sc (Food & Nutrition), Jiwaji University, Gwalior, India, 1993.
B.Sc (Food & Nutrition), Jiwaji University, Gwalior, India, 1989.