

2020-12-21

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Suzanne Bagnera, Peter Szende, Alec N Dalton. "COVID-19 Creates Trust Concerns in the Lodging Industry." Boston Hospitality Review, Issue Winter 2020-2021, <https://hdl.handle.net/2144/42456>

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## COVID-19 Creates Trust Concerns in the Lodging Industry

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Source: Westin Houston Medical Center as published in USA Today (Laban, 2020).

Hotel housekeeping is no longer about being “flawless yet invisible” (Mogelonsky, 2020). While cleaning has traditionally happened behind closed doors, sanitation and the communication of new cleaning procedures now take center-stage to benefit the overall guest experience. Hotels need to develop consumer trust by overtly exposing cleanliness practices to assure guests that their safety is a top priority (Szende et al., 2020).

Guests’ quality perceptions and loyalty are driven by cleanliness, which has a significant impact on overall guest satisfaction. While surfaces in a hotel room may not be perceived as equally touched, prior research has identified sixteen common high-touch areas for hotels to focus on. The three areas that are most frequently touched by guests include bed sheets, blankets, and television remote controls (Haelk et al., 2019). In present-day pandemic conditions, Hilton Hotels, through the creation of the Clean Stay program, identified their top ten

high-touch areas in guest rooms that are deep cleaned before check-in (Hilton Corporate Communications, 2020).



Source: Hilton

### Cleanliness is Critical to Customer Trust

Consumer trust can be defined as “the expectations held by the consumer that the service provider is dependable and can be relied on to deliver on its promises” (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002, p. 17). Trust is a prerequisite for strong customer relationships; in fact, trust and customer satisfaction complement, reinforce, and fuel each other (Hsu et al., 2010; Purnasari et al., 2015; Webber et al., 2012).

Now that COVID-19 has created uneasiness to the idea of traveling outside the home, guests want to feel safe, physically and emotionally. As a result, cleanliness theatre has become increasingly widespread; seeing the actual cleaning taking place restores consumer’s trust (Mogelonsky, 2020). Developed by industry leaders and public health officials in response to COVID-19, the American Hotel and Lodging Association (AHLA) announced their “Safe Stay” program in May (AHLA, 2020).

The Safe Stay program provides hotels with specific safety measures as new industry standards. Building off the Safe Stay foundation, the major hotel brands then developed their

unique safety measures. While the programs vary from company to company, all brands have implemented some form of physical distance requirements, a face-covering requirement of both guests and employees while in public areas, and additional hand sanitizer stations in common areas.

There have been many technological innovations that have become very popular in hotels throughout this pandemic, ranging from electrostatic sprayers with hospital-grade disinfectants to mobile check-in and check-out, and keyless entry via mobile phone applications. While advancements in technology will certainly help, consumer trust in travel will not be restored with these alone. Cleanliness theatre will also need to be adopted and incorporated in all hotels as guests will now expect that the cleaning practices will be done more publicly.

### **Top Tips for Hotel Managers**

This past Fall the authors conducted a research study of frequent U.S. travelers. The online survey asked travelers a range of questions regarding their sentiments and cleaning preferences with lodging accommodations. The results from the survey reveal the following helpful strategies for the lodging community to combat COVID-19.

- **Convey cleanliness in advertising.** In photos and video clips, depict the use of cleaning technology and the abundance of safe human contact (or lack thereof). Show the availability of contactless service solutions (e.g. mobile apps and websites). Avoid depicting multiple parties in the same visual – instead suggest guests can escape to accommodations that are exclusively theirs.
- **Leverage brand equity to foster trust.** Large, established brands have stronger trust developed over many decades: between their expertise, their scale, and their customer-brand relationships, guests give them higher average safety ratings. Smaller brands and

independent hotels may be disadvantaged in this regard, but the hope is not lost: partnering strategically with cleaning product brands can help to acquire brand equity and foster trust.

- **Communicate protocols proactively to guests.** Direct methods, like pre-arrival emails and verbal acknowledgments at the front desk, are preferred over passive, delayed explanations like in-room letters and general tent cards. An exception is the use of stickers at key touchpoints that describe that the feature has been cleaned; these are appealing.
- **Emphasize protocols for key guestroom touchpoints.** Hotels should have extensive cleaning protocols, but they are not necessarily equal in the minds of guests. Must-touch features like beds, television remotes, nightstands, and bathroom features have the highest average rankings for sanitation importance, compared to the lower-ranking features like desks, television sets, and luggage racks. Give proper priority when acknowledging or listing protocols in emails, letters, signs, and verbal communication.
- **Enforce the visual cleanliness of key touchpoints.** Building on the last point, ensure those must-touch features appear perfectly clean. They must be free of stains, fluid traces, tears, marks, or other visible irregularities that would suggest a guestroom feature is defective from the cleaning protocols.
- **Use thoughtful cues to trigger trust in sanitation.** Using stickers to seal cleaned rooms or furniture and wrapping certain items in plastic – such as cups, utensils, and extra linen – can also provide guests with an added sense of security in knowing that an item is uncontaminated (Szende et al., 2020).

- **Remove non-essential features from guestrooms and public areas.** Non-critical items like magazines and throw pillows should be removed from the operation; not only do they reduce the features that need to be cleaned, but they also offer guests assurance in the precautions taken by hotels. Be mindful of guest feedback, if an overwhelming number of guests complain about absent coffeemakers or hairdryers, consider restoring such items.
- **Show-off the use of cleaning technology.** Unlike the past, when housekeeping activities were preferred to be out-of-sight, guests want greater assurance in sanitation. Use advanced chemicals, electrostatic sprayers, and UV lights in public areas during peak times (and even in advertisements), in addition to using them in guestroom housekeeping.
- **Recognize the importance of human-centered practices.** Guests rate particular trust from the enforcement of mask-wearing by both employees and other guests. The abundant presence of hand sanitizing stations is also critical. Signs and ground markings that indicate social distancing can also reinforce the role people play in co-creating experiences and understanding the expectations of different parties in a service experience.
- **Avoid self-attestations, if not required by the government.** Further to the last point, the use of self-attestations is not remarkably effective at developing trust: less than half of respondents (43%) perceive that it builds their trust, while nine percent say it actually diminishes trust; perhaps being another instance where guests lose comfort from being made too aware of risks.
- **Be conscious of inconveniences, especially with F&B.** The closure of food and beverage and recreational facilities builds trust in just over half of respondents, but the

closures also result in higher rates of diminished trust. This suggests that some measures may go too far – either inconveniencing guests and underestimating their risk tolerance or making too visible the signs of abnormal times and evoking the "spillover effect" (making guests too uncomfortably-wary of safety risks in public establishments).

This list is neither complete nor exhaustive, but based on the authors' research it highlights some of the more meaningful tactics a hotel could deploy to develop guest confidence and trust in travel accommodations. Each recommendation supports the pretense of "cleanliness theater" that can guide hotels to market and operate effectively amidst and in the recovery stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many practices may also normalize well beyond that as guests acclimate to cleanliness consciousness in this new world.

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## Bio



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