

Today's Luxury Customers: What do they know?

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What seems like a long time ago — when people wanted to go on vacation or business trip, have a special-occasion dinner, or sought-out a top-tier culinary experience — they called their travel agent and asked for suggestions, ideas, and recommendations. A conversation might go something like this:

"But, Betsy, have you been there?"

"No, but Brad in our office heard from a client that it was super, really luxurious."

And so the booking would be made, usually based on a color brochure, the travel agent's recommendation, or the suggestion of someone who had actually visited a location. Bookings were often made thanks to word of mouth: A traveler had to trust someone's perception of elegance, luxury, comfort, or even location. Sometimes you put your faith in a guide book or a rating service: You read the Zagat's guides or browsed the Michelin guide and studied the Mobile or American Automobile Association ratings. Other times you might have read a copy of Conde Nast Traveler and scanned their Gold List in your dentist's waiting room.

The rules have changed: Today's traveler is well armed and dangerous! Observe the myriad sources of information and the avalanche of available details to which today's consumer are privy — or are buried under — depending on your prospective:

1. There are scores of magazines that are dedicated to travel, new destinations, old beaten paths, great discoveries, and everything in between. Some publications are really good and informative. Some want to be Conde Nast Traveler, and some are just destroying forests to print glossy car, fashion, and jewelry ads!
2. Thousands of newspapers feature weekly — or even more frequent — travel sections, food and wine sections, restaurant critiques, and, oh, a lot more.
3. Countless television channels dedicate their content to travel and hotels: You now can actually visit destinations, tour cities, and understand what views from which windows are best when visiting the Himalayas — all without ever leaving the comfort of your armchair! Food channels are devoted to cooking far-flung meals: We all now know not only how great dishes are created, but how they should taste, how they should look and are presented, and where to find the rarest of ingredients and access the most private distribution channels — from white truffles plucked in Alba, or maybe you prefer black truffles from perigot? No problem, they are all now available commercially and are easily accessible — as is duck breast, foie gras, 100 different kinds of salt, the most aged vinegars, herbs and spices, from every corner of the planet and whatever else a celebrity chef wishes to inflict upon us in an endless quest for a competitive edge over his cronies on the other channels!

4. Then, of course, there are tens of thousands of websites that display every hotel or resort's best rooms, offer top-to-bottom tours of the properties, and present each rate category available — as well as their best sales pitch on their facilities and amenities. (Where were these tools when I was a hotel sales rep?!)
5. Not to be outdone, you also have the representation sites — the Expedias of the world and its thousands of sister sites that represent everyone and their cousin and in every segment of the market and at every price point. These are the supermarkets of the lodging industry, if you will, complete with price comparisons, reservation links, and instant confirmation to boot!

So, what does this all mean?

Are these things good or bad for the hotel business, and — particularly — the luxury and full service segments of it?

What does the evolution — nay, the revolution—in information purveyance to a very wide audience mean to the customer, the hotelier, and the restaurateur?

Let's start with the fact that information and knowledge create a much higher level of expectation and, more importantly, extensive points of comparison: This new and more informed customer wants at least as much — and usually more — of the big three, the three most important parts of the luxury experience:

1. **Architecture:** The consumer now seeks distinctive, creative, timeless, and visually pleasing architecture that also evokes a sense of place and reflects its location. New builds should reflect these principles. Existing buildings can reflect this sensibility through such tweaks as changes in facades and the employment of new materials and finishes and judicious additions and deletions to make the physical plant more reflective of the location and product within. Gone is the thought that the box is less important than the contents! Both are now critically important to this new consumer.
2. **Interiors:** Hotel interiors are so much more than furniture and the high-thread-count bedding wars that the chains are currently waging. Owners and hoteliers must now analyze every aspect of a property's interior architecture and design, including the ever-forgotten terries, towels, lighting, and even laundry... The impact of the myriad of high tech gadgets, must also be analyzed, let's remember this customer compares not only to other hotels, but also to their own homes, and their life style, the residential feel, look and comfort level, must be more than a slogan.
3. **Service,** we all know is the most critical component in a hotel. Once the customer has finished admiring the architecture and appointments... ogled the artwork and enjoyed the bedding, furniture, and soft towels... and sampled the new showerheads, high water pressure, flat screen TVs and entertainment centers, and high-speed wireless Internet, service usually is the missing link! The service style and consistent delivery of a high-caliber service component is what a guest sees, touches, feels, and experiences every moment of his or her stay. And by service, I am distinguishing between the "canned" manual driven service approach with its memorized phrases and robot-like qualities and a "personalized" style of responsive and anticipatory service that is based on guest recognition and "need" recognition: The recognition of each guest's unique needs as a one-of-a-kind individual means the difference between sustained success — along with its financial and operational rewards— and status quo. The customer's newly acquired and extensive knowledge includes a much better understanding of a hotel's service component: Today's guest can differentiate between

a well-selected, well-trained, and well-supervised staff who will take the initiative and are empowered to look after their needs, and a staff that lacks a soul and does everything according to the manual. I repeat: Service is the soul of a luxury hotel!

One of the most memorable guest comments I received while managing a luxury hotel and resort company referenced a bellman. A guest informed me that he felt the bellman in question "took personal responsibility for their well being" and was referring to the fact that the bellman went well beyond his usual duties to take care of their needs. I couldn't teach this, and a manual certainly can't teach this.

So, let's reflect: Thanks to the existence of a well-informed new customer and the challenge to meet a much higher expectation, and thousands of points of comparisons, the hotelier must rise to the new challenges and place exceptional emphasis on creating a superior physical plant and on delivering a personalized, creative, consistent service style imbued with passion, intuition, grace, and personality. And then allow the service teams to take care of each customer's needs in a personal and personalized manner.

And that, my dear colleagues, is easier said than done. But herein lies the element that separates the truly great hotels from the merely mundane.

Atef Mankarios is considered one of the most renowned and respected professionals in the luxury hospitality industry. Over the course of more than three decades, Mr. Mankarios has established an outstanding reputation as a pioneer, a visionary and a business leader who has developed iconic brands and properties, as well as redefined the prevailing concepts of personal experience, personalized service, residential hospitality, elegance and sophistication and, above all, "sense of place." He believes that a hotel must embody and convey a unique character, which encompasses ambiance, architecture, environment and, most importantly, inspired service, enduring style and creative amenities. Currently, Mr. Mankarios is head of the Dallas-based Mankarios Partnership, a leading visionary provider of asset management and technical services for the world's finest independent hotels and resorts. Mr. Mankarios formed the company in January 2004, after stepping down as President and Chief Executive Officer of St. Regis Hotels and Resorts. He can be contacted at atef@mankarios.com