Delivering an Omni-channel Guest Experience.
A Benbria Hospitality Solutions eBook
Defining The Omni-channel Guest Experience.

The digital revolution brought many changes to the customer service landscape over a short period of time. Retailers were quick to embrace these changes, adopting the new ways their customers sought to communicate with them. This paved the way for other industries, like hospitality, to quickly take notice.

With the advent of the internet, guests began to shop and book online as well as seek assistance from customer service representatives over email and social media.

Today, many of the world’s most prominent retail brands have teams dedicated to mobile engagement, and with good reason. According to Google research, 71 percent of in-store shoppers say their mobile device has become more important than their in-store experience. As such, apps, messaging, and unique mobile experiences have become as important as the in-store experience in the battle for engaging customers in a competitive retail world.¹

Hotel guests are also doing more on their mobile devices than ever before, with a recent JD Power study showing that “the percentage of online reservations made on mobile devices grew to 25% in 2017, from 14% in 2014”. Further, “hotels with mobile apps get higher customer satisfaction ratings from their guests, making smartphone technology a key part of providing good service”.

However, engaging the hotel guest of the future isn’t as simple as providing a mobile app. The same study showed that “only 19% of all guests have downloaded a hotel app, whereas 70% of rewards members have done so”, making it a challenge for hoteliers without a loyalty program to rely on apps alone as part of their guest engagement strategy. Combine this with guest preferences to engage on social media, via messaging apps, in-room devices, and using web chat; and hoteliers quickly realize that being available in-person at every touchpoint in the guest journey isn’t simple enough for engaging the guest of the future. Instead, it involves engaging the guest on the channel of their choice in a consistent manner, throughout the journey.

This approach to engaging customers in a consistent manner across multiple touchpoints is commonly referred to as omni-channel. It’s a seamless guest experience across traditional and digital communication avenues at every point of the customer journey, whether it’s for research, purchase, or customer service.

The Case For Omni-channel Within Hospitality.

While online travel agents and booking sites have been perceived as mastering the online space for bookings, more and more hotels are looking to retail’s success in delivering a better experience to drive more direct bookings.

Similar to how bricks and mortar retailers have focused on an omni-channel approach to customer engagement to combat online retailers like Amazon, hoteliers are realizing that a similar approach can drive greater loyalty and direct bookings.

The numbers from multiple studies support this new focus on delivering an omni-channel experience. One example by Aberdeen Group in 2013 noted that “companies with the strongest omni-channel customer engagement strategies retained an average of 89% of their customers, as compared to 33% for companies with weak omni-channel strategies”. For hoteliers, that means an immense opportunity for driving direct booking and return visits versus a reliance on online travel agencies (OTAs).²,³

Today, travelers are increasingly using their mobile devices to research their trip, book their accommodations, manage their travel plans, and more. This is why it’s so important for hotels to adopt omni-channel strategies and connect with their guests digitally as well as through traditional means. One-third of guests would rather communicate by
Delivering an Omni-channel Guest Experience.

Key Elements Of An Omni-channel Guest Experience.

A strong omni-channel guest experience has many interconnecting parts. These parts include not only the channels that guests can use to communicate with a hotel, but also the channels they can use at various points of the journey to indicate their satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

A guest, for example, might browse rooms on the hotel’s website, but choose to go to an OTA to book what they want. Or, in contrast, they might book through an OTA, then go directly to the hotel to research activities.

In the example above, there are certain elements a hotel can control whereas some are at the mercy of the third-party the guest chooses to book with. Navigating these can be tricky but not impossible. By focusing on the experience of the guest in the touchpoints you can control, namely the hotel website, app, and on-property service as examples, there are ways to take back the control of how the guest experience can be managed more effectively throughout their journey.

The two main elements in a solid omni-channel guest experience strategy should focus on listening to the voice of the guest and engaging them on the channels of their preference.

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Great Customer Service is Key

97% of global consumers report that customer service is important in their choice of and loyalty to a brand, 76% say they view customer service as the true test of how much a company values them.

Source: Inc.

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Omni-channel Fast Facts

- One-third of consumers would rather send a text message than call.⁴
- Texting now outranks calling as the predominant form of communication for Millennials.⁵
- The average American spends 26 minutes per day texting, but only six minutes on calls.⁶
- Messaging apps are big, with over 5 billion monthly users worldwide and different apps dominating on a region by region basis.
- Retail brands that have omni-channel strategies retain 89 percent of their customers.⁷
- Brands that have omni-channel strategies average a 9.5 percent year-over-year increase in annual revenue, versus just 3.4 percent for those that don’t.⁸

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Consistent Experience. Millennials Expect a

In-stay engagement has evolved far beyond the traditional face-to-face model which hoteliers have been masters at professionally since the industry began. Today’s guests want the ability to access information and services via their mobile device across multiple channels - not simply through face-to-face engagements with hotel team members. Further, they prefer to have access to multiple channels offering a consistent experience. This means that the manner by which a guest engages with a hotel while on-site has become much more complex and driven by their needs versus the preferences of the hotel.

The next few sections of this eBook will outline exactly what an omni-channel experience entails, why multiple channels of guest engagement is an essential part of it, the channels they are demanding and their impact, as well as how to manage this at your hotel - regardless of size.

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Delivering an Omni-channel Guest Experience.

As the above visual illustrates, delivering a superior customer experience relies on two major elements in order to be successful - listening to the voice of the customer or guest, and omni-channel engagement. Both of these two elements have a significant impact on the success of the experience for the guest, which we will explore.

The Voice of the Guest

In a related Benbria White Paper entitled “The New Voice of the Customer”, we provide insights into the best practices of collecting feedback on the customer experience throughout their journey. Measuring the experience is essential to understanding where the guest is impressed by your hotel and where you may be falling short. Without this intelligence, it is difficult to implement operational, service, or procedural changes essential for delivering a superior experience.

The challenge for many hotels relying on OTAs for their bookings is that the measurement of the guest experience throughout their journey is often difficult to properly ascertain, as the guest is contained within a closed experience from the beginning. Many OTAs will ask how the booking process went, send reminders of their reservation and manage pre-arrival activities or requests, ask timely surveys about their check-in or to rate the room, and follow-up accordingly at departure to rate their overall stay. These insights are often hard for the hotel to access properly and difficult to control through the OTA.

However, these same principles of outreach can be deployed for guests who choose to book direct or with OTA-driven guests you engage with while on-site. Unfortunately, few hotels have taken these steps. From a best practices stand-point, a hotel should look at the overall journey and determine ways they can measure the experience to better understand the voice of the guest. These key journey elements include:

**Post-Booking**: For direct bookings, asking for feedback on the reservation process, as a simple example, can help you understand if your process is meeting their needs. Were the rates and room classes easy to understand? Was the booking process efficient? Did they feel they got the best rate? All of these are timely questions to ask a guest to understand how you perform from a research and buy perspective.

**Pre-Arrival**: While challenging to undertake if a booking comes from an OTA, pre-arrival messaging is a great form of outreach to start engaging with a guest. Most hoteliers will use the opportunity to upsell items like airport transportation, in-room enhancements, spa or golf bookings, room upgrades, and more. However, it is also an opportunity to ask if you are meeting their expectations pre-arrival. Are they looking forward to their visit? Have you been able to answer or resolve any pre-arrival concerns? It is an opportunity to get feedback before their arrival which can help you get the visit off on the right footing.

**In-Stay and On-Property**: Clearly the easiest area to measure is the experience while the guest is on-property. However, the degree by which you measure the experience is what really counts for you to gather useful insights. The on-site hotel experience involves multiple guest touch points along their journey and most properties have multiple facilities or areas worth measuring. If you want to truly understand the overall experience, it is important to ask for feedback during both the key touch points (Check-In, Room Arrival, Check-Out) but also the areas they experience during their stay (Restaurant, Spa, Valet, Golf Course, Bar, Fitness Facilities, etc.)

**Post-Stay**: Again, this is a timely point in the guest journey to be measuring the guest experience. If successful in gathering the contact details of the
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Millenials Expect a Consistent Experience.

Source: Inc.

In this infographic, we take you through the drivers of these trends and guest preferences customers in a consistent and reliable manner.

With new technology and evolving customer preferences, businesses have had to adapt quickly. From implementing texting solutions to mobile messaging apps, delivering an omni-channel experience has become more critical to ensure your servicing your guests.

Over Mobile Ads

Source: SDL, Five Truths for Future Marketers

6%

Companies with the strongest omni-channel customer engagement options to reach out.

Omni-channel Engagement

The second major area in delivering an omni-channel guest experience involves engagement. More specifically, the communication channels by which you are open to engage a guest on. Traditionally, this was dictated by the hotel in the sense that a basic set of channels (In-person, Email, Telephone, etc.) were provided to the guest as options to reach out.

Today, the channels considered to be ideal are being dictated by the guest and it is no longer acceptable for a hotel to limit or control the ways a guest can communicate with them. It is no longer a story of which channels to offer, it is about how to manage the many channels your guests want to engage on.

Guests Want More Engagement Options

89% of consumers say it is important to have a variety of options for contacting customer service, including voice, text message, and email.

Source: eWeek

This shift in power from the hotel to the guest means that engagement requires a blend of both in-person and online channels tied to a unified brand experience. If you believe that allowing a guest to text you solves this problem, you may be behind the curve.

Here are some of the channels guests are demanding from hotels and some insights into their prevalence and popularity.

Traditional Channels

In-Person. The most traditional guest engagement channel. Still a very important part of the guest experience, how your front-line teams interact with a guest face-to-face is a major contributor to the guest’s perception of the overall experience.

Telephone. After in-person, the telephone is the most common way for guests to connect with the hotel. Telephone communication has long been a key component of delivering great customer service and while preferences are shifting, it is still a solid channel to keep open - especially in-stay.

Websites. A hotel’s website is a critical channel for both information gathering and engagement, especially in the pre-booking or research phase of the customer journey. However, it is the ability to offer guests real-time chat while on the site which is key. Not offering the ability to speak with an agent in-the-moment when making their booking can be the determining factor in whether or not they proceed.

Texting. Through SMS or texting, hotels can reach guests as long as they have the correct phone number. While most hotels consider this to be a new and innovative means for engaging with a guest, it is actually a channel that is shrinking in terms of consumer adoption and preference.

While an impressive 22 billion SMS texts are sent every day worldwide, it is a fraction of the number messaging apps deliver. Further, it is a challenge for international travellers given data and roaming charges.
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Messaging, Apps, & Social Media Channels

Messaging Apps. Many hotels are beginning to explore the possibilities offered by instant messaging apps like WhatsApp, WeChat, Facebook Messenger, and more. To put messaging into perspective, there are over 5 billion users of messaging apps globally with 60 billion messages being sent daily on WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger alone - almost three times more than the number of SMS text messages being sent.

Messaging is Big!

Over 5 billion monthly users worldwide with different messaging apps dominating on a region by region basis.

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<th>App</th>
<th>Monthly Users</th>
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<td>WhatsApp</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facebook Messenger</td>
<td>1.2B</td>
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<td>Telegram</td>
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Further, messaging apps and usage are highly fragmented by geography which means that hotels with a broader range of international travellers can’t simply be on one channel. WhatsApp is number one in 107 countries and Facebook Messenger is now the leading messaging app in 58 countries - with each having 1.2 billion daily users. However, WeChat and its 890 million users is the leader in China while LINE is the leader in Japan & Thailand. Telegram, another major messaging app, dominates the Middle East market. As the fastest growing channel of preference for consumers to engage with businesses worldwide, messaging apps are not going away any time soon.

Native or Branded App Messaging. The app experience has become one of the most important means of engaging customers, particularly when tied to a loyalty or rewards program. The next phase of mobile app development includes the incorporation of real-time communication tools such as messaging and ordering embedded within them. Further, SaaS technology is making the development of an app easier and more cost-effective than ever before - with companies like Criton making informational hotel app development with messaging and ordering accessible and affordable to hotels of any size.

Social Media. Today, most hotels have embraced social media as an ideal channel for sharing images and inspiring guests to book with them. However, for many, it is a push only activity. With direct messaging available within Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and more - being able to manage inbound responses is not only a growing need, but a preference of social users.

Social Media is Now a Sales Channel

Customers spend 20-40% more when companies engage and respond to customers via social media.

Source: Social Media Today

Further, it is proving to be lucrative in terms of revenue generation, with studies showing customers spend 20-40% more when companies engage and respond to customers via social media.

Physical Device Channels

On-site Kiosk. The kiosk continues to be a significant channel for engaging guests while on-site. Whether as a tool for simplifying access to information, automating frequent requests, providing feedback, or requesting support, kiosk technology continues to be relevant in many hotel environments.

In-Room Tablet Devices. Considered by some to be a costly investment, in-room devices are still popular within hotels. These devices can be used to embed messaging and ordering capabilities in them but do require ongoing updating and maintenance, as well as the risk of theft.

In-Room Voice Devices. Probably the most-hyped channel today is the use of in-room voice devices like Amazon’s Alexa, Google Home, or Apple HomePod. Given their “cool factor”, they tend to
### Pre-Stay

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<th>Listening to the Voice of the Guest</th>
<th>Omni-channel Engagement</th>
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<tr>
<td>Implementing pop-up surveys on your website to ask what a guest thinks of the site.</td>
<td>Having real-time messaging/chat available on your website or in-App to allow potential guests to ask questions at critical moments when they are considering a booking or planning their visit.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implementing a short post-booking survey on your website to ask how you did and the ease/experience of the process.</td>
<td>Incorporating “message us to learn more” calls to action on social media posts and pages - to turn static outbound social posts into opportunities to drive more inbound engagement and bookings.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Following up with a post-chat or agent dialogue survey across all messaging channels to measure how you handled a pre-visit guest’s concerns or questions.</td>
<td>Providing the ability to send an SMS text to ask questions about the property pre-stay.</td>
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<td>Including links to quick surveys in emails used to confirm a booking, to understand sentiment pre-arrival.</td>
<td>Being available on multiple messaging apps to answer questions and support “conversational commerce”, a growing feature in messaging apps.</td>
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### In-Stay

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<td>Sending micro-surveys at key moments during the stay via email, text, in-app or via messaging/social apps to assess performance and sentiment - such as post check-in, within minutes of arriving in their room, after a spa treatment, or following up after in-room dining.</td>
<td>Sending a pre-arrival SMS text or email to notify them that their room is ready - or at post check-in to simply let them know you are available to assist at any time during their visit.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adding self-service feedback kiosks to collect insights on the experience at key areas of measurement - like outside the spa, next to the check-in area, or beside the restaurant.</td>
<td>Offering in-app or web-based messaging and/or ordering services they can access during their stay via their personal mobile device.</td>
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<td>Driving guests to use web based micro-surveys using scannable QR codes they can access from their phone and promoted by collateral, such as an in-room tent card, a note on an in-room dining tray, or on the receipt at a restaurant or spa.</td>
<td>Offering guest services availability on multiple messaging and social apps (Facebook Messenger, Twitter, WeChat, etc.) and auto-routing requests to various departments - for faster in-stay response times, team efficiency, and consistency of experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implementing a back-of-house team feedback solution for entering service notes or issues identified through face-to-face interaction with the guest.</td>
<td>Providing in-room voice technology like Amazon Alexa or Google Home devices in each room for guests to ask a question, order room service, or get local information.</td>
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### Post-Stay

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have a higher degree of engagement by guests in-room and leading hotels are using these devices to help control room settings, play music, or ask questions. Some hotels are even piloting their use in ordering room service or requesting support.

While all of these channels offer an opportunity to engage with the guest, many hotels struggle with prioritizing them. For some, like in-room or physical devices, there is a cost barrier for entry. For others, it is a question of managing the requests. While these are all valid challenges to overcome, the main point hotels need to address is that engaging a guest is no longer considered adequate by offering only a handful of options - especially ones which the guests consider to be inconvenient or dated.

To properly support an omni-channel guest experience, hotels need to be available on multiple channels and strategically align them to engage during the key moments in the guest's journey.

Omni-channel And The Guest Journey.

Within all omni-channel strategies, there is a journey that exists with the customer. The experience the guest has at a hotel from discovery to departure is typical at every hotel, regardless of class of service of location.

A typical journey for a hotel and the guest includes the following three phases:

Pre-Stay. Typically, the research phase. The guest has an idea of what they want and either browses the hotel’s website or calls the property to get more specific information.

In-Stay. For many guests, the in-stay experience is what defines their impression of the property, their likelihood to return, and how they will recommend or rate the hotel to others.

Post-Stay. In most cases, the guest won’t have any need to follow up with the hotel post-stay. However, they may need to do a follow-up if the experience was not quite what they expected. In other cases, the hotel may wish to send marketing emails or post-stay surveys to the guest to promote repeat business or gauge overall satisfaction.

All guests will follow a similar journey with a hotel. An omni-channel approach recommends that in each of the three phases (pre-stay, in-stay, and post-stay), the guest has multiple channels for engaging and providing feedback to support a consistent guest-focused experience.

Considering the two key elements identified as being essential in delivering a superior guest experience, listening to the voice of the guest and engaging with them on multiple channels, we’ve compiled some examples of how to apply basic tactics for achieving both, throughout these key phases of the guest journey, on the previous page.

Implementing An Omni-channel Guest Experience.

Within hospitality, many lessons can be learned from the retail industry, and some major hotel brands are already taking note. The challenge is how to implement an omni-channel approach for smaller brands or independents. While budget may be a concern, the use of an omni-channel approach does not have to be expensive as long as the right solution provider is selected and you have a vision. In this section, we explore the key things to note when implementing an omni-channel guest experience.

Program Goals & Road Map

When starting, it is important to have a vision of what you want the guest experience to be like in the future. A master list of channels and capabilities available in the optimal scenario is a great way to conceptualize where you want to go with an omni-channel guest experience. Create a master list, then begin to prioritize based on ease of implementation and any guest preferences you already know of, then organize them into realistic timelines.

For gathering guest feedback, think about their journey and the different points along it where you want to measure the experience and more
importantly, why you want to measure them. Remember to keep it simple. Long surveys will have a lower response rate. Focus on the 3-4 major key performance indicators that will have an impact on your hotel operations and the guest experience. A simple start would be to measure service quality, comfort, cleanliness, and overall satisfaction with their stay. Next, deploy these metrics into the various areas you want to measure - such as check-in, the restaurant, the spa, golf course, valet service, or simply the guest room.

For messaging, take a review of your existing channels and then rate their usage. After, review your guest persona. Are the majority of your guests coming from abroad? If so, where are they visiting from and what channels are they most likely to use to engage with you? If you are based in Miami and have a large percentage of European visitors, SMS texting may not be the most convenient. They might prefer to use WhatsApp, in-app chat, or a mobile web-browser based solution relying on your hotel wifi, as opposed to incurring roaming charges. Think about usage and then prioritize the new channels you want to introduce and when, using a road map with defined dates and criteria for success.

Millenials Expect a Consistent Experience.

60% of Millennials Surveyed Expect a Consistent Experience from Brands—Whether Online, On-Site, or via Phone

Source: SDL, Five Truths for Future Marketers

Finally, think about the internal processes you are going to need in order to make the program a success. If one of your goals is to drive more revenue by sending timely upsell offers in-stay, determine who will be responsible for sending these, the frequency, and any revenue targets to determine success. If responsiveness to inbound messages is key, set response times and goals and continuously monitor them to ensure you are meeting these service standards across every channel and point in the guest journey. For feedback, think about the guest recovery options and how to immediately notify key team members or departments when a guest is unhappy.

Once you have these high-level goals and a road map for the different channels and elements of the program in place, it is time to start thinking about technology to help you be successful.

Solution Provider Considerations

First, scalability of a technical solution offered by any provider is key. While you may address an initial need, say adding SMS texting to your list of guest-facing channels, you need to think about the future and ensure a vendor can help you with as many road map items as possible. If you are responsible for the IT function, or are working with the IT team to add new communication and feedback technology, start with the goals and road map and begin evaluating vendors accordingly.

Secondly, the ability of any solution provider to deliver both messaging and measurement will be a major cost and time-saving benefit. Having to rely on two separate platforms, one to listen to the guest and another to engage with them on multiple channels, means you miss out on the essential ability of having a single view of the guest, a staple of any omni-channel strategy. If you can get both from a single provider, even if you don’t need all of the features on day one, it is a better investment long-term.

Omni-channel Considerations

With a road map and a short list of solution providers to help you execute, it is time to start thinking about best practices for each channel. The following provides some of the key elements to consider in implementing an omni-channel guest experience with the ideal solution provider.

In-Person. Most hotels already have the in-person strategy nailed down. However, with the rising trend of guests relying on technology and not engaging with on-site team members during their stay, the use of this approach alone is not always as effective as it once was. Adding omni-channel best practices like the ones noted below can act as a door-opener for
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more in-person engagements, and should be viewed this way when implementing.

However, it is critical to note that these additional channels do not replace the in-person experience. Therefore, it is important to ensure proper technology and service training of all guest-facing team members and departments on the importance of guest feedback and responding to messages in a timely manner is a priority. Remember to work with your various internal teams to ensure these are a part of your ongoing training and performance standards for all guest-facing team members.

**Telephone.** The telephone will continue to be a reliable tool for guests to use throughout their journey. Again, most hotels have this channel mastered, though call volumes and required staffing are still a concern. Taking your existing service standards and training on phone etiquette and urgency to respond to guest needs can be easily applied to engaging guests via messaging. So use this as a benchmark for how you will engage on other channels and the benchmarks you want to see in terms of responsiveness and tone.

**Website.** A property’s website is its most powerful tool for pre-stay guest engagement and will continue to be one for many years to come. A website should help the guest understand your property, your brand values, and the experience they can anticipate while they’re on site. Modern design trends state that a hotel’s website shouldn’t be used solely for selling, but also to inspire the guest and promote a differentiated experience.

**Live Web Chat Now the Leading Contact Method**

J.D. Power found that live chat has become the leading digital contact method for online customers, as a staggering 42% of customers prefer live chat compared to just 23% for email, and 16% for social media or forums.

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<tr>
<td>Live Chat</td>
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<td>Email</td>
<td>23%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Media</td>
<td>16%</td>
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Source: JD Power

Again, consider inbound chat requests in the same manner you would an inbound telephone enquiry. The team responsible for managing these inbound calls should be the ones you consider relying on for inbound messages. When selecting a solution provider, be sure that they can set up hierarchies and auto-route messages to the right teams or departments to respond to the unique sales or pre-booking questions often associated with guests during the reservation stage.

**Social Media.** Many hotels have embraced social channels as a means to engage audiences. Thanks to in-app messaging on Facebook or Twitter, social media should also be viewed as a strategic tool for driving inbound enquiries and bookings. Managing and responding to these inbound messages should be viewed as an urgent area of focus for hotels and the implementation of technology to receive, route, and respond quickly to them as a major differentiator to deliver an exceptional experience.

Your solution provider should be able to address this problem by duplicating inbound messages on social and routing them to the right department for management. The marketing team, or in some cases a third-party marketing firm, isn’t equipped to manage reservations or details on a special promotion or offer. They are responsible for the outbound posting on social, engaging with any public comments, and high-level audience engagement. Your solution provider should have the ability to take direct messages from social media and auto-route them to the sales or guest services teams in a timely manner to overcome this.

Once this is done, the marketing team can begin to use social as more of an inbound lead generation tool versus simply a brand promotion exercise. For example, a posting on Facebook regarding a special weekend promotion can go from having a call to action of “visit our website”, where conversion is harder to gauge, to simply “message us to book”. With the right technology, any inbound direct messages through Facebook or Twitter can be auto-routed to the reservations team who can manage the request much like an inbound phone call or email. Marketing does not need to manage these inbound requests and the prospective guest has a seamless and convenient way to simply respond to a call to action and begin engaging with the right team.
member who can help them.

**SMS Texting.** Texting is popular, especially in North America. The only advice when considering a texting channel is again, the audience and their costs to engage. If you have a higher percentage of international guests, where this will be somewhat costly for them to engage, you may see a lower degree of usage. If anything, texting should be made available but you should have alternative methods for communicating that are less of a barrier to entry for select guests. If you add an additional channel to texting, be sure to use a solution provider whose technology can manage all of these messages within a single platform to ensure a consistent omni-channel experience.

**Proprietary Web Messaging.** For international travelers, as noted above, SMS texting can be a barrier to engagement. To resolve this issue, consider having a proprietary web messaging service your guests can access from a simple web address or by scanning a QR-code. Some of Benbria’s clients, like the Celtic Manor Resort in Wales, rely on this type of solution to manage the many international guests they welcome each day. The guest receives an email or SMS text welcoming them to the hotel upon check-in with a link to a messaging solution they can access on wifi via their phone’s web browser. They can send a message or order items for their room without downloading an app or incurring any SMS fees. It is a simple and convenient channel to consider when you want to engage with guests from a broad range of international locales.

**Messaging Apps.** Over the top messaging apps like Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, WeChat, and Line will continue to be the biggest growth area in terms of communication channels in the coming 1-2 years. As these preferred channels for guests to communicate with friends and family evolve to become ways to communicate with businesses, hoteliers need to begin thinking about how they will take advantage of the over 5 billion users globally on these apps.

When choosing a solution provider, it is important that they have a clear road map in place for adding these new apps, whose B2C programs are currently being piloted and released at various stages. Most should have Facebook Messenger already and in the process of releasing WhatsApp, which was recently opened up for use.

From an internal road map perspective, the nationality of the guest should be considered when choosing which messaging apps to prioritize. For example, if you have a larger guest audience from China versus Japan or Thailand, you’d be better served with prioritizing WeChat over Line. A reputable solution provider should be able to help you understand which messaging apps should be prioritized based on your guest persona and goals.

**Branded Apps:** Branded hotel apps will become even more popular as electronic key and self check-in becomes an expectation of most global guests. If you have plans to offer electronic key technology or have a loyalty program, a branded app is certainly worth exploring, even more so if you have multiple properties.

If you have an existing app and want to include messaging and/or ordering capabilities, then you should ensure that your solution provider has an SDK (software developer’s kit) available. This allows you to embed messaging within the app while receiving and responding to guests through a central inbox or team communication interface. If you don’t have an app, consider using an out-of-the-box solution like the one offered by **Criton**, where you can build and design a branded app with messaging and ordering built in, at a significantly lower cost to a custom developed solution.

**In-Room Tablets:** Tablets and portable e-devices available in the guest room, designed to give guests an alternative to their personal mobile device while travelling, will face challenges in terms of use as free wifi becomes plentiful and international roaming and data plans become even more affordable.

These two trends are already starting to see a shift in behaviour in the US market, where over 70% of U.S. travelers agree that they “always” use their smartphones when traveling, up from 41% in 2015. Further, Google Consumer Insights indicates that “these same travelers most frequently use their mobile devices to research activities or attractions, to locate shopping areas and restaurants, or to look up directions”, which is essentially the value proposition these in-room tablets were designed to provide.
Delivering an Omni-channel Guest Experience.

However, not all is lost. Many new in-room tablet companies are changing the design and user experience to make these devices more attractive and heavily customized to reflect the hotel’s unique brand experience. Better yet, the leading ones are incorporating proprietary messaging and ordering into these devices, adding extra value. Again, if you have these devices and want to add messaging and ordering to them, consult your solution provider to ensure they can manage this functionality.

**Feedback Kiosks and Web-Surveys:** For this channel, it is important to differentiate between a pushed or timed survey and that of an open inbound guest feedback experience. For all of the channels listed above, the most basic channels in terms of outbound pushed surveys is via email, SMS text or if applicable - within your branded app. These are the surveys you want to send out at key moments to gauge the experience in real-time. Feedback Kiosks and Web-Surveys, in this context, refers to the channels a guest can access at their convenience to provide feedback, when they feel inclined to share a concern or provide praise.

For feedback kiosks, it is important to consider the capabilities of your solution provider versus the insights you want to gather. If a kiosk answers a single question, say “how was check-in”, it might not be enough for you. If it is a simple rating, with no means for providing comments, you will miss out on the all important “why” when trying to determine what the guest liked versus disliked. In terms of where to place your kiosk, try moving it around to the key areas where guests congregate to see where you get the most feedback and interaction. A kiosk with little guest feedback means less data for you to identify trends and issues to improve the experience, so keep trying new areas of your property to see where guests are more inclined to interact.¹⁰ ¹¹

Mobile web surveys should be able to deliver the same series of questions and collect comments as a free-standing public kiosk through the convenience of the guest’s mobile phone. Deploying this type of survey is probably the easiest and most cost-effective as there is no need to invest in any hardware. You can add web links or QR codes to a receipt, signage, or business cards. You can even add the link to a guest folio upon check-out. The guest simply visits the mobile site and answers the questions along with their comments. Remembering of course that the easier it is for the guest to complete, the more data you will receive, so keep it short and of value to them.

Finally, both your kiosks and mobile surveys should have real-time connectivity and the ability for a guest to provide contact details. This ensures that your team members or departments can be alerted and respond to the guest in a timely manner, if there is an issue. Not having the ability to quickly respond and recover a guest means that you risk any service issues lingering and influencing their review on third-party sites like TripAdvisor or Google. When evaluating a solution provider, consider the ability to immediately be alerted of negative responses to engage and recover a guest in the moment to be a major strategic advantage.

**Voice Devices:** The final channel to consider are in-room voice devices. The leader thus far in this space is clearly Amazon, who recently announced a hospitality-focused initiative to see their Alexa devices be a major tool when it comes to in-room voice experiences. Amazon is currently partnering with several technology companies within the hospitality space to find creative use cases for these devices to control things like the room temperature, order room service, request a car to be brought up by valet, and more.

You may be skeptical of the adoption of such technology, but studies are revealing it is something guests are finding to be perfectly natural to use. In fact, a recent study showed that “70% of requests to Google Assistant are expressed in natural language”, meaning that guests are getting more comfortable having conversations with computers like Google Home and Amazon Alexa devices, among others.

These are early days for this new technology and there are several solution providers working on solutions. Again, working with a single solution provider that can receive an incoming request by a voice device, convert it to text, and route it as a message to the right team on a unified platform with other channels is worth considering. Further, being able to pull any PMS data through integration to know the details of the guest in a room where a device is located is a smart longer-term objective.¹²
Delivering an Omni-channel Guest Experience.

System Integration Considerations

This is the topic most hoteliers dread when considering any guest-facing technology. However, integration to two key systems, Property Management Systems (PMS) and Service Optimization Solutions are worth exploring. While integration to these two standard hotel systems is not required for delivering an omni-channel guest experience, they do have their benefits and should be a part of your road map.

First, integration with your hotel’s PMS can help you personalize any messages as well as the opportunity to send pushed messages to engage the guest or measure the experience during the pre-stay, in-stay, and post-stay stages of their journey. Benbria, for example, integrates with over 60 different PMS solutions for two major reasons: 1) It allows guest details to be pulled from the PMS so that hotel staff using the platform know the name of the guest, their room number, and more to immediately personalize the response, and 2) It allows the Loop platform to send messages at key moments in the guest journey to ask for feedback, or invite them to engage.

However, as noted, integration to a PMS isn’t necessary in the early stages of your journey towards delivering an omni-channel guest experience. Inviting guests to engage with you or providing outlets for leaving feedback can be as simple as providing in-room or on-site collateral promoting these programs. While reactive in nature, it can still be successful with the right degree of promotion. If you do wish to push pre-arrival or in-stay messages to engage guests in a more proactive manner, it is best if your solution provider can upload a customer data file, say an export of daily arriving guests from your PMS, and send out broadcast messages to all or a subset of guests. This is a basic functionality most solution providers should be able to deliver and is a sensible alternative to full-integration, should there be budget or IT resource constraints.

If your road map includes the ability for guests to request amenities or order services (i.e. towels, valet service, booking a tour, or in-room dining) within your app or through a mobile web interface, it is important to consider any back-end ticketing systems in place, or that you may be considering to implement. Having a solution provider capable of pushing these requests directly into a service optimization system greatly reduces the time to respond and deliver. The more systems the solution provider works with, the more flexibility you have long-term.

This type of integration means that any operational processes already in place within key departments, such as housekeeping or maintenance, do not require any significant changes. They simply continue to use the existing service optimization system to service the guest’s inbound requests, while the solution bypasses any operator need for intervention, saving time and resources.

Conclusion

Omni-channel is no longer the purview of retail brands alone. It is an approach that all brands, regardless of industry or audience, must adopt. Especially those businesses working in the ever competitive hospitality industry.

For hotels, omni-channel programs give today’s guest the ability to provide timely and valuable feedback as well as connect with hotel team members via the communication channel that appeals to them most, regardless of where they are in the guest journey.

With a set of goals, an understanding of your guest personas and needs, along with a sensible road map taking a phased approach towards an optimized experience, most hotels should be able to build a solution that works for their brand and guests. Of course, technology does play a major role in the delivery of an omni-channel guest experience. As such, working with the right solution provider, be it a consultant or technical platform, that is capable and experienced in helping you scale and deliver multiple deliverables in your road map over time is key.

Especially in hospitality, an industry that revolves around giving guests an exceptional experience, an omni-channel strategy must not be underestimated.
About Benbria

Benbria® is a leading customer experience management solutions company, helping the world’s most customer-centric brands deliver a superior experience that goes above and beyond their competitors. Using a variety of mobile, online, and on-property technologies - including SMS, email, web, in-app, social media, messaging apps, as well as kiosks - the company’s Loop® platform enables brands to capture real-time insights into the customer experience as well as message with them to engage or recover. The platform also directs this real-time customer feedback, requests, concerns, suggestions, and positive input to the right team members to deliver a timely and informed response - and includes a wealth of analytical tools for gaining insight into what matters most to the customer.

With over 1,000 client locations in 20 countries and a network of 10 global sales partners, Benbria offers both global reach and local expertise within multiple markets and verticals.

For more information, visit www.benbria.com.

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Hi Karen, just a friendly reminder that check out time is at noon today. If you’d like a late check out at 4pm, we can do so for an additional $50 fee. Simply message us back.

Just at the pool so yes, please add a late check-out!

Consider it done! Enjoy the sunshine!

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