

How Great Survey Design Impacts Hotel Operations and Long-Term Hotel Value



As consultants who are often brought on by hotel owners to represent their interests as asset managers, one of the first tasks we undertake to familiarize ourselves with the brand or property is to peruse the reviews and other feedback data. And we mean ‘peruse’ in its literal definition; we read through the entirety of TripAdvisor, OTA reviews and other survey channels, never settling for the aggregate metrics as presented. What we’re looking for in all this is, in a word, ‘significance’ or what’s truly meaningful for the guest.

Working as asset managers, our primary goal isn’t simply to move the online rating from, for instance, a 4.5 out of 5 to a 4.6 or a 4.7, but to figure out what guests like the most about a hotel and what factors are its weakest links. We want to embellish the good and eliminate the bad in order to maximize occupancy, loyalty, return visits and the ability to grow rate. As every hotelier knows, however, guests

perceive hotels in a highly emotional way, which means that what may negatively affect satisfaction doesn't necessarily correlate one-to-one with cost.

Perusing reviews and surveys gives you a far deeper sense of a hotel's 'value-engineered ROI' – that is, the fixes, be they capex or opex, that will give you the most bang for your buck. For example, from a former assignment several years back for a West Coast resort, we discerned from reviews that the walls between guestrooms were rather thin, which hindered return visits for some guests due to it being 'noisy' at certain times during the night. Without tearing the place down to cram in more insulation, the most cost-effective solution was to festoon the rooms with heavy drapes, carpets, door sweeps and other soundproofing materials, and then monitor comments to see if the problem went away (it did).

From these types of value-engineered solutions, it follows that the more feedback a hotel gets, the more of this 'significance' a management team can leverage as insights to best decide what capital or operational improvements will deliver the most positive impact from the perception of the guest.

With this in mind, it was a delight to sit down with Jeff Robbins, founder of [GuestInsight](#), to learn about what hotels can do to rapidly scale their total guest engagement so that management can make more informed decisions as to which projects will have the most ROI.

Yes, GuestInsight offers a great platform to help hoteliers collect, analyze and automate their guest feedback. But what really excited us about talking with Robbins was learning about the people behind the product. They bring with them over two decades of deep experience in survey design – something that's seldom taught in hospitality school – and apply this expertise daily via ongoing customer support so that hotels can realize the benefit of asking the right questions that engage guests in the right way.

The Great Review Reset

Like any conversation we have with hoteliers and others active in hospitality technology, it starts and ends with a state of the industry. Where we began with Robbins is something we all experienced; the big 'P' word causing a before-after schism in how reviews are perceived. Notably, in our post-pandemic world, guests are much more sensitive to craving good reviews within the near past.

First, this was out of fear of COVID-19 and wanting to know about how hotels were keeping guests safe. Next, this morphed into using reviews as a litmus test for how service levels were changing during the recovery period. Now, in late 2023, it is guests wanting to know if the onsite experience is keeping pace with the inflation of nightly rates. The pattern throughout is that the hospitality world is moving a mile a

minute, and with this 'Great Review Rest' hotels need a persistent stream of fresh reviews in order to raise customer confidence and spur new bookings.

The problem here is and has always been engagement rates. How do hotels keep pace with the speed of society where the desire for fresh reviews remains at an all-time high? Besides the post-departure guest-facing side of all this – namely, engaging guests who've had a positive experience to elicit more positive reviews online with TripAdvisor or one of the OTAs – the flip side of the coin for engagement is completed surveys directly to the hotel, which will ultimately influence capex and opex decisions. Either way, hotels need a 'quantity of quality' in engagement in order to attain a better 'decision efficiency'.

Great Survey Design to Fight Feedback Abandonment

As aforementioned from the nighttime noise example, oftentimes the best solution from an ROI perspective doesn't involve a full-scale renovation or adding elaborate new amenities. It's about addressing those issues that guests perceive to be particularly irksome. But you can only prioritize these with a large enough sample size of feedback and by asking the types of questions that will generate relevant responses or data.

Without formal training in feedback design, survey psychology and statistical analysis, most hotel brands (and both authors included!) have largely treated feedback abandonment rates as something that cannot be sizably improved – a kind of 'it is what it is' challenge. Moreover, for most hotels, once the actual survey content is set, updates to said content are infrequent or there isn't much thought about A/B testing questions or prompts to optimize for engagement and abandonment reduction.

Some survey design tips that Robbins suggests based on current work with GuestInsight clients include:

- Messaging that demonstrates a respect for the guest's time and inbox
- Messaging that clearly defines the ask in terms of reason and time expectations
- Stating outright how important the effort of collecting feedback is for the hotel
- Being transparent about recruiting an experienced outside agency to manage the process
- Mentioning how the guest's anonymity and privacy will be protected
- Having a responsive survey interface with reliably quick load times
- Not bundling the feedback request with a sales effort
- Having an alert mechanism in place so that teams can immediately tackle an error recovery situation or when the surveys are used for post-departure requests like making another booking

- Being cognizant of a team's overall 'alert fatigue' when setting up said alert mechanisms

Above all, Robbins emphasized that surveys must be structured in a way that accomplishes the research goals with the least amount of effort required by the guest according to these three principles:

1. Question sequencing that prioritizes specified feedback goals
2. Question wording or question format selection with precise and concise language to elicit results
3. Flexibility in adapting the survey with seasonal or monthly updates to the questions in order to test new ideas as well as stress certain facilities or services

Any Tool Still Needs Human Judgment

With any discussion of feedback, it's inevitable for AI to enter the picture, either as natural language processing (NLP) to help scale sentiment analysis or another form of machine learning (ML) that finds patterns in the multitude. And as any IT professional knows, the amount of data hotels currently have is becoming overwhelming; AI will be pivotal to help guide the judgment of managers. From the above tips, though, what's apparent is that these technologies are just tools; they belie the need for veteran oversight to help hotels maximize the usage of the totality of data for any algorithm to chew on. Hence, the act of setting up then updating questionnaires shouldn't be the sole responsibility of the hotelier who isn't formally trained in survey design and cannot provide this oversight or human judgment. While one option can be continuing professional development to provide this internal education, oftentimes the more accessible route is to get external help in guiding, shaping and continually adapting a brand's surveys.

The risk nowadays is that if feedback response rates remain low, then the data won't be big enough for an AI to accurately interpret. Simultaneously, of course, some of that 'significance' also won't rise to the top to present those value-engineered solutions that will inform operational planning and future investments in a meaningful way that will increase long-term asset value.

Californian Case Study

To close, Robbins offered one generalized case study worth going through. Working with a 120-room independent property in Silicon Valley, the GuestInsight platform was able to drastically ramp up the number of completed surveys, with a year-to-date total of 819 internal completed surveys compared to 12 reviews on TripAdvisor, 67 on Google and 193 on Booking.

With over 20 times the number of surveys versus TripAdvisor reviews, this uptick in both the quantity and pace at which data was accumulating meant that the hotel was able to rapidly spot a significant trend from its declining scores and guest comments. Specifically, the breakfast offering was changed

during the pandemic and was initially positively received, so the hotel kept it in place. But during the late spring months of 2023, this perception shifted and was quickly spotted by the metrics which started to trail off at the same time.

From this observation, amidst the hectic summer period the team was able to upgrade its breakfast service back to and beyond its pre-pandemic levels, with this positive, cost-effective change reflected in the post hoc responses. Overall, these sorts of minute-by-minute inferences are only possible when there's proper survey design in place to maximize response rates and the amount of data received. And when you are able to spot enough of these trends, you ensure that no issue goes unnoticed and that the hotel is maximizing satisfaction to thereafter influence brand advocacy, the ability to grow ADR and, specifically for owners, long-term asset value.