

Design Strategy for the Next Phase of Boutique Hotels

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As we roar in the 2020s, what were once perceived as innovations and value-adds in hospitality will soon become expectations that you dare not omit from a quality hotel experience. Such is the course even for the boutique hotel, whereby properties falling under this banner that were viewed a mere decade away with an alluring aura will soon lose that luster that travelers become more familiar with what these businesses offer.

The novelty is gone, the 'lifestyle' concept is now mainstream, and we are about to enter the next phase of boutique hotels where simply launching within this segment is not enough to garner sustained interest because customers have already experienced something similar. Aside from new brand entrants, adding to this elevated level of competition are the numerous high-end apartments offered under the sharing economy umbrella that imitate many aspects of the lifestyle property.

So, in this soon-to-be overstuffed boutique market segment, how do hotels adapt so that guests don't lose interest in any of these ostensibly great properties in favor of the 'next big thing'? How do you innovate a boutique property so that its repeat revenue figures will always be a healthy contributor to the bottom line? Broader still, how do lifestyle hotels continue to reinvent themselves over the course of the next two or three decades so that guests never come to perceive such properties as tired, boring, stale or obsolete?

In essence, you need a plan with both tangible short-term goals and a clear vision for how that can extrapolated over the long run. With a world of possible directions that one can take insofar as capital expenditures, operational improvements and outbound marketing campaigns, a worthwhile endeavor would be to deploy the principles of design strategy to help narrow the focus as well as project where that focus will lead to in the near future.

Brand Strategy from the Ground Up

Design strategy is a term primarily reserved for the graphic design industry, but after a quick definition it should be readily apparent why it also applies to the hospitality industry with specific reference to boutique hotels where design is such a critical point of differentiation.

My first encounter with this phrase came when I entered the world of advertising in the 1980s, only it wasn't generally given such a niche classification and instead was implied through the broader language of brand strategy and business planning. The classic model of how an agency develops the overall look and feel for any client's marketing engine is to start with a logo (assuming a company name has been agreed upon or is already in use). It's at this stratospheric phase where broad design ideas are shopped including how customers experience different colors and how certain fonts feel versus others. If you aiming for a wordmark, you stop there, or you can add some iconography to personify the brand.

Once the logo is locked, then you move onto the development of a mood board or a full-fledged brand style guide that acts as the rubric for all subsequent work, offering parameters so that all advertisements are intrinsically recognized as the company's at first glance. Armed with a flashy new logo and some brand guidelines, it's then time to move to the next phase of ad concepts and iterative works based off of those approved conceptual designs.

Throughout these early stages, it is the agency's creative director's job to guide the strategic design conversation with the client, first by asking the right questions about what the brand represents but also about where the brand is going. Design strategy aims not just to deliver beauty in the here and now but to keep a vigilant eye on the future as well. Marketing campaigns that proceed without a strategic business direction or design strategy are doomed to mediocrity as they'll lack a firm plan for guided growth and nurturing brand advocacy while staying within the budget.

Avoiding Frankenstein

All too often I see hotels that lack design strategy in all manner of operations. It is hard to consider, after all, when managers are habitually bogged down by the daily minutia of running a property with so many moving parts.

You can feel it immediately when you enter a hotel where the public spaces have gone through several interior designers and several more hard goods suppliers who all contributed to different areas at different times. You feel it when you browse a brand.com where a new development team took over

partway through but only reconfigured half of the pages. You feel it when you peruse a hotel's marketing efforts across all channels where some feel harmoniously tiered while others are outliers.

Something feels off, disorienting even. Our bodies are subconsciously primed for good design and it irks us when we encounter a 'Frankenstein' such as one of these three general examples. So named after Frankenstein's monster in the Mary Shelley novel, it's an amusing piece of jargon once you consider how combining parts from different bodies may create an entity that's stronger than any single component but nonetheless rejected by society.

So much of the guest experience nowadays is about creating a strongly positive impression that you cannot afford to present your product in an incongruent manner. It will detract from the desired emotional journey and ultimately prevent you from attaining that much-vaunted wow factor that you get when you stay at a property that actually has its act in gear.

With its particularly keen awareness for how physical design can impact those people who are interacting with a space, the boutique and luxury segments must stay increasingly conscious as to how design trends are changing as well as how brands operating in this niche can effectively move in sync with such an evolution. This is, after all, one of the key reasons why customers choose these properties (and are willing to pay substantially more per night) over business-oriented or select-service hotels. Impressive lobbies, nuanced décor touches to the corridors and artfully furnished guestrooms, to cite three areas, must all be planned at the same time to match the brand meaning and the brand vision.

Step by Step for Boutique Design Strategy

Why does your brand have to exist? What is your brand essence? If you can refine these answers down to a sentence, a phrase or just a few words then your job is already halfway done. By knowing your hotel's essence, you will be able to refer back to it during all subsequent conversations about marketing positioning, upgrades to the physical product, new amenity or service introductions and any promotional plans.

Don't panic if you don't have this figured out already as it is deceptively hard. You must factor in the keys reasons for why travelers choose your specific hotel, what differentiates you from the competition on an emotionally driven scale and how your current raison d'être will remain meaningful as time goes by.

Following these exceedingly cerebral conversations, the next step is to look at every operation to see how well each builds upon this brand essence while at the same time identifying any discrepancies. Thirdly, before you can give any thought to the long-term direction of the brand, you must bring all those discordant elements in line with the core brand. This is where the development of a strategic design roadmap is critical as it will allow you to stay on target while navigating multiyear advertising campaigns or tiered renovations.

The final step always pertains to the future and what it may hold for the hospitality world. While your brand essence may remain immutable, its expression will need constant updating so that your brand can continue to excite guests even as, say, the popularity of certain marketing channels rise and fall or as new technologies become widespread amongst consumers. For this, you must read the trades and attend conferences so that your industry knowledge remains up-to-date. You must also meet regularly with the rest of the senior team to review long-term projects as well as how they are reflected tactically on

the ground. With every new innovation or trend, you must ask your team not only about its relevancy to your product but also about how it might become a part of your brand given the right perspective.

Brand Directions to Consider

Understanding the principles of design strategy may take some time for those of you that don't have any prior experience. Much like building a business plan, however, it requires first and foremost some serious top-down thinking as to the overall direction of where the company – in this case a hotel – will go. For this, I'll offer five comprehensive and highly evergreen possibilities for boutique or lifestyle brands that can be embraced in the present while also having strong potential for successful expansions in the future.

1. **Technologically Avant Garde.** We all know that the guestroom of the future involves smart televisions and IoT integrations, but the majority of hotels are embracing these innovations at a glacial pace. What if instead a property devoted itself to be the vanguard of technological progress in a hospitality environment, all through the lens of improving guest service. We're talking apps, frictionless mobile check-in, machine learning preferences, live chat concierge, intelligent thermostats, sustainable design practices, room service robots and a myriad of other initiatives that together will act synergistically to deliver an aspirational experience that invites guests to ponder what the future holds for their homes. Moreover, avant garde extends to foodservice whereby you might strive to be at the forefront of neurogastronomy by incorporating the latest in F&B like lab-made meats, molecular cooking techniques or liquid nitrogen desserts. In this sense, the essence of forward-thinking tech must extend to every aspect of the hotel.
2. **Service to the Extreme.** While the nature of modern guest service hinges so much on technological underpinnings that can be leveraged to derive further personalization of the hotel experience, it will still require the personal touch of a well-trained and attentive team to make it whole. If you want your brand essence to be that your property is unmatched in guest service, then you will need to reevaluate every department's quotidian activities to see what can be upgraded. The good news is that boutique properties are generally smaller than the corporate brands, meaning that they can be nimbler in amending their SOPs and all consequent retraining. Service often begins even before check-in when the front desk team monitors an arriving guest's flight and either picks the visitor up at the airport with snacks in the car or is ready with a welcome refreshment the moment that customer is in sight of the hotel. Service extends to the minutia of housekeeping gently coiling a guest's laptop power cables or leaving an extra tube of toothpaste when the room attendant notices that the guest is running low. And right through to checkout where a manager is present to say goodbye with a departing gift. There are so many intangibles that contribute to guest service that there is always room to improve if that is your overarching mission.
3. **Funky, Wild and Brave.** Not necessarily eschewing the latest technology or service standards, these properties can get by with being great and not exceptional in these two aspects by aiming to be the coolest, hippest, boldest and most outlandish that there is. Here the interior design takes centerstage as guests are invited to experience a space that is an attraction unto itself and is contemplated by equally provocative artwork, staff uniforms, food menus and perhaps a few unusual amenities. It still must follow a theme, though, which must be reflected in the brand essence and design strategy for any future updates. The key here is that you must analyze how your property will be seen from the buyers' prospective as well as how it will be communicated

second-hand. That is, by sticking with a theme you must focus on being known as the best representative of one particular aspect of design and not a hodgepodge of elements.

4. ***Universally Local.*** Authentically local has been the rage in the foodservice industry for over a decade as intrepid chefs become more conscious of food miles, organic, biodynamic and sustainable crops. It's only recently started to make a serious dent into other hotel operations. But what if you set out to be the top curator of the best and most exclusive facets of your community? What is your brand essence was simply 'everything is local'? Starting with F&B, you might partner with nearby craft brewers or put an apiary on the roof while all your ingredients (and thereby your menu) would slowly transition to farmers from within a certain radius. Spa products would also reflect as would all items should in the gift and sundry shops. Next, becoming hyperlocal also means that you are patron of the artist community by showcasing various works as well as being 'in the know' to all exclusive neighborhood events. This is a game of partnerships whereby you must cultivate a local-friendly culture at your property as well as quid pro quo relationships with all adjacent businesses to encourage reciprocal exchange.

5. ***Wellness for Everyone.*** The current generation of travelers is more health-conscious than ever before. People are demanding ingredient transparency; people are drinking less alcohol and smoking fewer cigarettes; people exercise more often; people want to experience hotels that embrace these ideals and inspire them to do even better when they return home. Embracing the conceit of a wellness hotel or resort means that your fundamentally goal should be to make guests feel significantly better than when they first arrived. To reflect this holistically, it of course means clean eating and perhaps a complimentary vegetable juice bar as well as a full assortment of exercise and meditation programs. It might also mean onsite physiotherapists with a free consultation set up shortly after getting settled. It might also mean workout equipment with instructional booklets (hopefully digitized) already in the guestroom. It might also that your public spaces are cellphone free to give visitors a bit of a 'digital detox'. It might also full-day itineraries built into the room rate that guide guests through a complete regimen of activities to boost the mind, body and spirit. To do wellness right, you must embrace it at every level as well as periodically update each interpretation to stay ahead of the latest standards.

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