

We Must Keep Our Own People Engaged in the Complex World of Guest Services

By [Mark Ricketts](#), President & Chief Operating Officer, McNeill Hotel Company | April 03, 2022



When we speak of guest services, what do we really mean? Is it a catalog of all the things we provide for our guests?

Convenient parking and a secure building with safe hallways; an inviting lobby; a clean room with all the creature comforts of the modern hotel, from comfy sheets to wide screen televisions and state of the art Wi-Fi; breakfast and other food services from self-serve market to sit-down fine dining; a pool, fitness center, business center or meeting room. Amenities galore.

Or is it more genuinely the sum of our human interactions with the guests we serve as hoteliers? Here, we can offer a welcome smile and kind voice at the front desk; take the time to learn the preferences of a guest, from where in the hotel they like to stay or what they like for breakfast. We can even, without a computerized cheat sheet, leave a special treat for a couple celebrating an

anniversary. It takes understanding to know when a guest needs to be coddled and when to be left alone. How we "care about" and "care for" others, unscripted and genuine, is what ultimately defines the guest experience.

Amidst all the challenges we now face in the contemporary hospitality world, some pandemic-spawned, some pandemic-illuminated, bridging together all the features and amenities that appear on a hotel property web page to the actual guest experience remains our greatest challenge, no matter the asset class. Our people are the intermediary or translator of this remarkable process. Our goal is to deliver on a promise that exemplifies our brand.

In this article, we will consider many of the challenges now faced by hotels of all types as they relate to the delivery of guest services, from extended stay and select service hotels to full service luxury properties; ways in which guests themselves are redefining the hotel stay; and ways in which we can eliminate as much as possible the gap between the full range of services that we must provide guests and the people whom we need and trust to fulfill those requirements.



Hyatt Place, Bloomington, IL

Our Own Hotels Now Have Many Moving Pieces

Adjustments. Adjustments. Adjustments. Hospitality has always been about making financial, strategic, operational, and human resource adjustments, but they are coming faster and faster these days. Operational procedures, staffing, even how we revenue manage or market a property have all been dramatically impacted by the pandemic, presenting new challenges in some cases, an acceleration of pre-pandemic trends in others.

Let's consider housekeeping. Even before the pandemic, many in the industry were thinking about offering alternative housekeeping options. The pandemic hit and we had to instantly adjust to housekeeping on steroids to meet stringent Covid protocols from the brands, local jurisdictions, and ourselves. Guests were already starting to think-do I want daily housekeeping or not and we started to give them the option of when to select housekeeping.

Certainly, in an ironic way, some operators did realize cost savings and some relief from labor pressures. Flash forward and variable housekeeping is NOW. Given continued difficulty in attracting labor in some markets and rising labor costs, it has often become a necessity. However, the potential savings when less personnel and less time are spent on housekeeping must be balanced with guest preferences and guest satisfaction scores.

As another example, we have "trained" guests well to appreciate a quality hotel breakfast, complimentary at many or most properties. Thus, it is only natural that limited grab and go breakfasts or, even, no food service at all during the pandemic, did not sit well with many guests. Here, again, we are adjusting. Many operators have gradually brought back a hot, freshly cooked breakfast. The brands have also helped us by significantly reducing the number of standard breakfast items. This makes for a more rational service, quality over quantity, and should also help with cost structures. As with housekeeping, we are working our way towards a balance between staffing, cost structure and guest satisfaction.

The pandemic has also impacted our human resources universe dramatically. This doesn't just apply to our front-line team members who more directly deliver guest services, which we will discuss later. In addition, there have been important developments with our management and executive teams.

For example, some property managers chose or had to furlough property general managers, assistant general managers, and directors of sales during the pandemic, as well as revenue managers and other higher-level specialists. On the other hand, other operators placed a premium on retaining property level executives - as strategic resources allowed - to ensure continuity of operations and to be able to quickly respond as new business opportunities presented themselves. A third path of resource management included such strategies

as consolidating the general manager position among near-by properties. Going forward, property management entities will clearly be guided by what worked-and what didn't work quite as well-during this era of contingencies.



Hampton Inn, Germantown, TN

Are Today's Guests Cocooning?

In addition to taking advantage of our openness to a more customized approach to housekeeping services, which while saving labor and materials does require some scheduling magic, guests are helping to define the hotel stay in other ways.

Overall, we are seeing that guests like having the freedom to come and go as they please and, in many cases, enjoy having all the creature comforts that they have at home or in their formal offices. No need to leave one's room. Who would have thought of it!

Several industry trends are helping in this regard, especially the digital key where guests need not visit the front desk to check-in or check out. In concert with this, many guests are taking advantage of brand loyalty programs with mobile apps and hotels are employing staff to connect with guests via texting apps and systems. Now, who was that guest?

Next, the Smart TV packages are also proving very appealing to guests, where they can even pick up where they left off with different shows from their home entertainment devices. Getting hungry after some screen time? No worry, especially when it comes to today's extremely popular extended stay products. Just heat up something from your in-room refrigerator or order in from a service like Door Dash or Uber Eats.

Another adaptation that is proving extremely popular with brand support is pet-friendly policies, especially for extended stay guests or those visiting our hotels to get a break from the home office. To a certain extent, even after considering the wear and tear factor, these pet-friendly practices can be valuable revenue generators.



Courtyard, Manhattan, KS

Keeping Our People Engaged

In each case, as guest habits evolve, we are further challenged to find innovative approaches for sales and marketing to guests, both leisure travelers, families hosting special occasions, sports groups and re-emerging larger business and corporate accounts. At the same time, and most importantly, we must train and inspire our team members to successfully execute these evolving service demands, regardless of the variability in labor supply we now encounter.

Beyond essential training, there are two key aspects to engaging our team members: helping instill in them a devotion to hospitality; and regular, meaningful communications that clearly say that "you are important to us" as people.

We all belong to this incredible and exhilarating, yet often challenging, world of hospitality. It's an elixir, a "special sauce" that encompasses understanding of how to serve others and care for them as we would our family or friends. We must acknowledge that at the end of the day a hotel room is basically a hotel room. We can renovate or open a new property, but someone will do the same thing shortly thereafter. We must be hospitable; it is what distinguishes any given entity and our industry. We must never dilute that message to guests.

Next, we must communicate regularly with team members to "keep them in the loop" about our organization and reinforce shared values and our corporate mission. This can take many forms, including daily team huddles at each property, video sales meetings, regularly scheduled associate's meetings, a company newsletter, and special activities like a Diversity Council or corporate sponsored, team member selected community activities. Each organization will have its own fine-tuned approach that builds solidarity and reinforces the corporate mission.

Yes, it is important to be competitive with compensation, scheduling and practical needs like health care benefits or childcare for front line team members. Hospitality organizations are working diligently to be creative in that respect.

However, there is clearly change afoot in our industry, and elsewhere in our society, with respect to factors that include the pandemic, our overall economy, the changing nature of work and evolving consumer tastes and trends. At the same time, the modern worker is more vocal about how they wish to be engaged in the immediate term and with respect to career expectations. We welcome this challenge, as it represents people who want to contribute to what our organizations stand for. If we listen carefully and respond thoughtfully, we can keep our people engaged and ensure a strong future for guest services.



Mr. Ricketts

Mark Ricketts serves as President and COO of McNeill Hotels. Prior to joining McNeill Hotel Company, Mr. Ricketts spent the previous seven years serving as Vice President of Hotel Asset Management in the Realty Management Division for Goldman Sachs in Irving, TX. In his capacity, Mr. Ricketts provided hotel asset management oversight for a portfolio of over 300 properties, spanning 10 brands and 27 flags while working with nearly twenty (20) management companies. Mr. Ricketts has nearly 35 years of experience in the hotel industry, starting as a Hotel General Manager at the age of 23 years old. Mr. Ricketts previously worked as Vice President of Asset Management for Equity Inns, Inc., a publicly traded Hotel REIT based in Germantown, TN. At the time of its sale to Goldman Sachs, Equity Inns was the 3rd largest Hotel REIT in terms of number of hotels owned. Mr. Ricketts can be contacted at +1 901-322-4806 or mricketts@mcneillhotels.com

[Extended Biography](#)

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