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How Many Stars are Too Many? The “Star Tsar” Knows

By [Rob Rush](#), CEO, LRA Worldwide

Do you remember the arguments you had when you were six years old about anything involving numbers? It could have been about a batting average, who could count the highest or who was going to collect the most Halloween candy - it didn't really matter. The one-upsmanship would volley back and forth until someone dropped the ultimate argument-stopper:

Little Rob Rush: “I can count to a million!”

Little Friend: “Well, I can count to a billion!”

Little Rob Rush: “Oh yeah...well I can count to INFINITY!”

Once the I-Bomb had been dropped, there was little the recipient could do, other than stammer and sputter something about “Infinity plus one”...which was very lame, as everyone knows that infinity is the highest.

Which leads me to wonder...are we headed in this direction in the hospitality industry? With the proliferation of self-proclaimed six- and seven-star resort properties, are we hurtling forward in the race to infinity? Will Steve Wynn's grandson step onto a construction site in Dubai in 2032 and proclaim it the world's first Infinity Star property, leaving the fuming grand-niece of Donald Trump to lamely announce her property in Macau is Infinity...plus one?

A system that was originally created to set some standardized expectations for the hospitality industry and inform and educate the consumer has now mutated into one that does exactly the opposite. While Mobil will proffer its Star system and AAA will offer the comfort of the Diamonds, the truth of the matter is that it's the wild, wild west out there. Any property with an overeager public relations firm and an on-call poolside perspiration valet can stake a claim to star-driven fabulousness.

Compounding the issue is the influx of travel review sites, where the unwashed masses can proffer their opinions on the merits of a particular property and – perish the thought – assign it their own star rating. Naturally, these ratings are based on no set of standardized criteria whatsoever, other than the personal preferences of the traveler in question. While guest Johnny Drinksabunch may rate any hotel with a well-stocked minibar in the room as a four-star property, Susie Teetotaler may use the very same criteria – the presence of a minibar - to automatically default to a two-star rating.

Add emerging international markets such as Russia and China to the mix, where there isn't even a AAA or Mobil to bring some order to the chaos, and you're left with the fundamental question asked by former Marriott executive Bernadette Dennis at an industry roundtable in Asia: "Who decides what is Five Star?" ¹

Or six. Or seven. You get the picture.

And into this mess steps the potential guest, trying to decipher which stars are which. Did the property earn them via excellent performance against an underlying set of standards and criteria? Are they part of a slick marketing plan? Or are they the result of Johnny and Susie waking up on the right side of the bed...literally?

Regardless, this confusion in the marketplace defeats the purpose of having standards to begin with, much less a meaningful, universal ranking system. With this void, the hospitality industry is ripe for a hyperinflation of sorts, where the stars are doled out so haphazardly, that their very concept becomes meaningless.

What to do?

When considering the possibility of convening some sort of industry task force to help shape and enforce a universal ranking system, the phrase "herding cats" comes to mind. Historically, self-interest, tradition, logistics and inertia would have ruled out an effort of this type. But as the distinctions between the traditional rating systems, traveler-reviewed ratings and hyperinflated, self-proclaimed ratings blur, the timing has never been better to make another attempt. In short, to answer "who decides what is Five Star?"

An industry colleague of mine, John Hendrie, has long shouted from the rooftops the need for such an effort. As he notes, "The US has led the way with a plethora of Rating Companies, because we have no universal Standards of Quality and Service, a major flaw and presumption from our Industry Leaders and Associations."² In Europe the infrastructure exists, but the "star system" often has no correlation to the quality of the guest experience. Instead, it can mean "...just about anything, but probably not what you're thinking...most of the ratings...will be a quantitative measure used to determine the price range (and sometimes the tax obligation) of a hotel."³

These issues apply doubly to other regions of the globe, many of them lacking even the "plethora of rating companies" or methodologies cited. Forget inconsistency and confusion. Just imagine a big, gaping void.

Too often, the associations that play leadership roles in this industry are paralyzed into inaction based on a fear of the hue and cry that would be raised by rank and file membership – i.e., hotel companies, brands and locations. Our focus is placed on not upsetting that apple cart, rather than where it belongs - on the engine that drives the hospitality industry. Guests. Invités. Huéspedes. Гости. 客人.

It may seem overly simplistic, but the hospitality industry needs to govern itself always with the guest in mind, regardless of region, culture or language. Ultimately, they're the ones that pay the tariff, and any system that allows us all to better set and deliver on guest expectations is an improvement on the current state. On the flip side, any system that requires a user to pull together research from more primary sources than they would normally use to select a heart surgeon could probably use some streamlining and a dose of common sense.

The various national and regional hotel advocacy and marketing organizations need to collectively appoint a guest standards and rankings ombudsman to shepherd the process, and then assign delegates to serve on this person's task force. This "Star Tsar" could then solicit the needed operational and cultural subject matter expertise to begin committing some universal standards and ranking criteria to paper and commence the (admittedly tortuous) process of vetting them through all of the interested stakeholder groups. To borrow from several clichés at once,

Rome wasn't built in a day and you have to start somewhere. This undertaking may be the hospitality industry equivalent of the snake swallowing the antelope – it looks physically impossible at the outset, but with a little time and dedication, you can force it all down.

(Me for the position? Really, I'm flattered. But I'm tied up for the next year researching accommodations for my next family vacation. Thus far I've downloaded 704 traveler reviews, Mobil and AAA rankings, chatted online with experts at Expedia and Travelocity and read a magazine feature on the area. I think I've narrowed it down to a gorgeous, self-proclaimed seven-star property that travelers unanimously laud for its fantastic "beachfront views." In Scottsdale.)

Ladies and Gentleman, start your delegates. Someone with a respected voice in the industry make the first move and organize a global meeting of the minds to determine how best to proceed...but be sure to proceed. And if you're looking for a venue, I've heard about a super-secret nine-star resort in Turks & Caicos where Justin Timberlake goes to relax. Just don't ask them what they did to earn that coveted ninth star...

¹ http://www.hotel-online.com/News/PR2007_3rd/July07_AsiaRatings.html

² Remarkable Hospitality, February 2008

³ http://goeurope.about.com/cs/hotels/a/hotel_stars.htm?p=1

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