

Sales & Marketing: Customer Loyalty

Make the “G” and the “E” in GREEN Stand for “Guest Experience”

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



Rob Rush As the definition of “green” intersects with “sustainable” and both mature in the marketplace, and it becomes abundantly clear that a “green” hotel needn’t detract from the guest experience, it will behoove hospitality professionals to a) Get on the bus, as sustainable practices will be a required “cost of entry” practice in the future, not a marketing initiative; and b) Figure out how “green” can actually enhance the guest experience.

To be perfectly honest, it should not be too difficult. As both business and leisure travelers increasingly look to their lodging accommodations as a provider of mental, physical and financial well-being, the sustainable hospitality movement is well-positioned to enhance the guest experience on all three fronts.

A few cases in point on how “green” can make hotel guests healthy, wealthy and wise (yes – as a Philadelphian, I am duty-bound to paraphrase Ben Franklin):

Physical

A few years ago, the hotel industry collectively woke up (potentially after a poor night’s sleep) and recognized that a good night’s sleep might be meaningful to a hotel guest. (Imagine that!) Led into the breach by the Westin Heavenly Bed, a slew of branded sleep products and experiences flooded the market at all price points. A brand’s apparent concern about the quality of your sleep was an appealing promise and its ability to actually deliver quality sleep crucial to future lodging decisions.

The next frontier in the concept of “a good night’s sleep” has particular relevance to green practices and perhaps even greater potential – air quality. As a recent article in HR Management posits,

...a “green” guest room can help reduce the stresses that typically accompany us on business trips. Natural cleaning products, non-toxic materials and equipment designed to generate an abundant supply of fresh air create better air quality, resulting in fewer allergies and a good night’s sleep.⁽¹⁾

Realistically, people put a lot more thought into the quality of bedding in their homes than they typically do the air quality. So while the Heavenly Bed and its kin may have made the guest feel at home, like efforts to improve air quality through green practices have the potential to make the guest get a night’s sleep that is better than home. The guest may not have any idea of the environmentally friendly products or practices at work, but there may be a noticeable difference in their overall comfort.

Mental

Let's face it – for the Average Joe (or Rob) there are no shortage of news stories, issues, causes or people out there in the cold, cruel world that can make you feel bad on any given day. Or scared. Or apprehensive. Or anxiety-ridden. (I can think of one, in particular, that has dominated the national consciousness of late – I don't want to discuss it specifically, but it rhymes with "The Neckonomy.")

Let the hospitality industry step into the breach by providing the guest something to feel good about, both on a personal level and by feeling connected to the larger issue of environmental stewardship. Some airlines have started down this road, but as Christopher Elliott explains, have fallen woefully short:

Don't allow a travel company to cash in on your conscience. Several airlines, including Air Canada, British Airways, Virgin Atlantic and Virgin America, now offer programs that allow you to offset your share of carbon dioxide emissions from a flight — for a small fee. Sounds awfully tempting. But it's absurd. Think about it: Would you be willing to voluntarily pay an extra \$30 to your pharmaceutical company to clean up one of its toxic dumps? Travel companies should be offsetting their own carbon, not guiltting you into paying yet another surcharge for it.⁽²⁾

Why not take it one step further and offset your own carbon...in the guest's name. Might that make the guest feel good personally and enhance the guest experience at the same time? I think it might. Some resorts – Vail comes to mind – have famously pledged to purchase enough renewable energy from various sources to offset their entire carbon footprint. Why not do so one turn of the wind turbine at a time in the name of the guest?

Financial

Once upon a time, the notion of building and operating a green hotel came with a premium attached to it. Supplies were more expensive, green building practices less widespread and – quite frankly – companies on the leading edge of the green wave capitalized on the opportunity to make a premium. Those days are quickly receding, as the costs associated with "green" have aligned with the traditional marketplace.

If fact, "green" as a potential cost-savings initiative has grown exponentially in lieu of "green" as an added cost. On a very basic level, this reduction is intuitive. The vocabulary of a green hotel operation oozes of savings.

- Conserve
- Reduce
- Buy Local
- Serve in Bulk

When light bulbs use less energy...you'll have to buy less energy. The local rack of lamb might be cheaper than the one flown in from New Zealand. And the mega-box of Cheerio's at Sam's Club can be scooped from a jar at your breakfast bar for weeks for less money (and far less wasteful packaging) than a handful of single-serving boxes. The savings inherent in these "best practices" are the tip of the iceberg. They are potentially dwarfed by those offered by technology solutions that promise to "monitor water flow, energy consumption, HVAC systems, and many other property issues" in real time, serving as a de facto "24x7 maintenance wizard on the property...[and] be like a self-healing hotel technology."⁽³⁾ Clearly there is an initial investment for this type of system, but one that will be earned back over time by mitigating each wayward faucet drip or beam of light.

Previous research in the field indicates that a significant percentage of travelers sought out accommodations that were environmentally friendly; a subset of those was willing to pay more for their "green" stay. Given present economic conditions, the latter group has eroded understandably, but the number of "environmentally conscious" travelers has not.

Rather than the premium traditionally associated with green lodging, might these travelers appreciate a discount driven by green practices? Could your room rates fluctuate downward based on real savings recognized by “greening” your operations.

It may seem a bit gimmicky, but if the savings to the guest were driven by real reductions in operating costs driven by meaningful environmentally sound practices, then it couldn't be dismissed as a mere marketing ploy.

And your guests would be participating in an environmentally sound hotel stay that would make them a bit healthier, wealthier and wiser without sacrificing comfort.

Unless they want an “authentic” green experience, in which case they would need to bring their own burlap.

References:

⁽¹⁾ <http://www.hrmreport.com/currentissue/article.asp?art=268509&issue=172>

⁽²⁾ <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/28425799>

⁽³⁾ http://www.economicallysound.com/technology_and_green_hospitality.html

Rob Rush is President & CEO of LRA Worldwide, Inc. a leading consulting and research company that specializes in Customer Experience Management (CEM). Rob co-founded the company two decades ago, and has helped grow it to its position as a leader in CEM consulting. Based outside of Philadelphia, LRA relies on an integrated suite of services designed to help organizations measure and improve service quality, employee performance, customer satisfaction, retention and profitability. LRA's service offerings include customer experience strategy and design, customer and employee research, the design and development of corporate standards and practices, customer service training, and quality assurance. Mr. Rush can be contacted at 215-449-0301 or rob.rush@lraworldwide.com.