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BED, BORROW OR STEAL

Has The Branded Bed Run Its Course?

By John S. Fareed

As a marketing consultant, I am continually scanning the media for creative, innovative, and interesting hotel ads. Most recently, an ad in USA Today promoting Marriott's Residence Inn caught my attention. Primarily because the half page, four color message evoked nothing more than a yawn.

The headline read, "Luckily, you can stay as long as you like," while the body copy read, "We apologize if you have trouble getting out of our new beds. With crisp, white linens, a thicker mattress, and plush pillows, they are as comfortable as beds get."

Unfortunately, this message has become tired. It has been overused and is no longer fresh. It's time for hotels and resorts in the battle for the 'good night's sleep' mind space to give it a rest.

The battle began nearly seven years ago when Starwood Hotels and Resorts introduced the Westin Heavenly Bed™ concept. After conducting market research on the desirability of experiential dimensions associated with a hotel stay, the company was able to gain an understanding that comfort, a good nights sleep, and consistency were high priorities for consumers.

When it was first launched, the 'heavenly' concept provided the chain with both a genuine benefit to consumers and real brand differentiation. It was a major undertaking both from a financial and implementation standpoint, but it certainly paid off. When Westin first introduced the branded bed in 1999, consumers were willing to pay a twenty-dollar a night premium to sleep in a Heavenly Bed and Westin's chain wide occupancies experienced a significant lift.

In fact, Westin has sold thousands of its now-famous Heavenly Beds to consumers, who are literally bringing their hotel beds home with them.

The innovation has since fallen to imitators though, as the major chains have begun unveiling new branded bedding products, including Starwood's own Sheraton brand of hotels Sweet Sleeper Bed™ and Four Points by Sheraton Four Comfort Bed™. Others include the Radisson Sleep Number Bed™, the Hyatt Grand Bed™, and Marriott's Revive Bed™. This has taken a lot of the spring out of Westin's original innovation.

Crowne Plaza has rolled out the most aggressive new snooze strategy however, called the Sleep Advantage™ program. On the advice of WebMD sleep expert Dr. Michael Breus, a co-branding initiative, it has upgraded its beds with better sheets, more pillows, and set aside an entire floor at each of its North American locations as 'Quiet Zones' from which families and groups are banned. They even promise that none of the friendly folks from housekeeping will knock on your door between 9 p.m. and 10 a.m., and guarantee your wake-up call. Also included is a satchel stocked with earplugs, an eye mask, lavender spray, a drape clip, and a complimentary sleep CD.

Hilton has created an interesting bedtime story of their own. The company first followed suit with the Sleep Tight Room™, which ultimately featured similar amenities to Crowne Plaza's, but later chose to scrap the program. The company first reported doing so because of guest feedback that the rooms gave them a sort of 'sick room' feeling, but Hilton later conceded that expanding the Sleep Tight Rooms was simply too expensive. More recently however, Hilton had a change of heart and has introduced the Hilton Serenity Bed™ which features a Serta Suite Dreams® mattress and box springs, a Pacific Coast® Super Topper mattress pad and a Pacific Coast® Down Comforter.

Other competitors within the 'suite sleep' category, include The Benjamin Hotel in New York. At The Benjamin, a luxury hotel owned

and operated by Affinia Hospitality, guests checking in are presented with a pillow menu, offering eleven different pillow selections to make their stay more comfortable including an anti-snoring pillow. They also have a 'Sleep Concierge' on staff to aid the business traveler in getting a good night's sleep.

A number of hotels have given this a go too. For example, The Ritz-Carlton in Key Biscayne, Florida for a short while offered twelve different pillows including one with an adjustable internal hot-and-cold pack to treat neck pain.

While Loews Hotels does offer various pillows to their guests, they have also introduced their idea of a 'sleep category' innovation with an in-room menu of sleep aids that includes air purifiers; chenille throws and sound machines that generate soothing ocean noises.

Of course, after all that good sleep, guests may need help getting up in the morning. And as luck would have it, Hilton recently introduced another innovation, the new Hilton Family Alarm Clock™ at all of their North American properties. The clock features an easy-to-set alarm, four pre-set music selection buttons, and an MP3 jack so that guests can plug in their music device and listen to their favorite selections. In fact, for a while, visitors to www.hilton.com could download a virtual replica of the clock for their computer desktop.

Now that we have leveled the 'brand differentiation' field on the better sleep category, perhaps we can get back to providing outstanding guest services as a competitive advantage. I know I would sleep better.

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