



By Rick Swig

Operators Can Gain Market Share Through Distinctive Brand Images

BRANDING IS A HOT TOPIC REGARDLESS OF THE industry, and it is of critical importance. The hotel sector is no stranger to branding. However, identifying the distinctive characteristics of brands in some cases is a frustrating exercise. Just drive down most cities' hotel rows to see that limited-service, mid-price and upscale hotel brands have become more product-generic in nature, with few identifiers except for price differentiation or suite versus non-suite guestroom configurations. Often lost are the key attributes that reflect a customer segment identity—the link of a name with a service promise or product or the offer of a distinctive social experience.

Creative branding is anything but dead. Look at what Starwood has proven with W, Kimpton is developing with Monaco or the Hilton Garden Inn and Marriott Courtyard

beyond the parameters of their Hilton, Starwood, Choice, Cendant, Marriott, Hyatt, Inter-Continental guidelines to develop “brands of one” within their own geographic service areas.

These revolutions are being realized through differentiated or sub-branded food and beverage outlets, recreational facilities and defining service standards. Decisions on why and how to differentiate are being made through strategic analysis to determine competitive vulnerabilities or product voids for the purpose of filling those cracks with distinguishing and deliverable product benefits.

There is a clear checklist for success, which includes becoming a community center of activity; celebrating and embracing destination-related cultures, icons and brands; and incorporating the destination into the hotel with foods, art, services, spirit, signature elements and, especially, staff involvement. This requires understanding and establishing an identity with target customers and the ability to communicate a message effectively.

Becoming a distinctive “brand of one” requires market leadership that sometimes goes beyond the potential of market share. A 100-room boutique hotel, independent or branded, can develop more identity, importance and positioning within a market than its 1,000-room competitor by discovering the customer impact points that will enable its message to be heard. Developing unexpected and stimulating dialogue plus a distinctive method of delivering messages creates successful branding of one, even when a hotel may already be branded with a commodity name.

Brands can look and feel the same from one hotel to another and deliver common and consistent services throughout a geographic chain of outlets. But in this era of brands as commodities, it is also important that individual hotels become a brand of one for their own local identity. It may not be enough for individual hotels to rely on the generic messages of their brands and their distribution channels to fully penetrate market segments and capture market share. Now, more than ever before, it is incumbent on individual units to make connections and provide value to the customers. ♦

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not Real Estate Media or its publications.

Rick Swig is president of RSBA & Associates, a hospitality industry consulting firm based in San Francisco. He may be contacted at rickswig@rsbaswig.com.

A 100-room boutique hotel can develop more identity within a market than its 1,000-room competitor through customer impact points.

revolution has done to dominate the “upscale-without-food-and-beverage” segment. Branding is also burgeoning in single-unit urban boutiques, specialty resorts and other unique overnight stay experiences throughout the world.

All successful brands have exploited the same fundamental elements: distinct product offerings, impressive features, effective marketing and functional distribution with top-shelf access through Internet optimization and pay per click, as well as strategic price positioning. Additionally, all hotel operators prioritize essentials such as cleanliness, product consistency, prompt service delivery and positive customer responsiveness to match customer expectations.

Brand features now make product and service orientations a priority in order to reflect their customers' lifestyle and to anticipate customer needs. This not only means introducing new technologies such as wireless connectivity for laptop computers, but also programming hotel experiences for customers' everyday life routines.

It is narrow-minded to believe that only independent hotels, boutiques or specialty hospitality products can participate in unique branding. Individual hotel operators of nationally branded hotels are recognizing that they can go