

Opinions

How COVID-19 is altering brand standards

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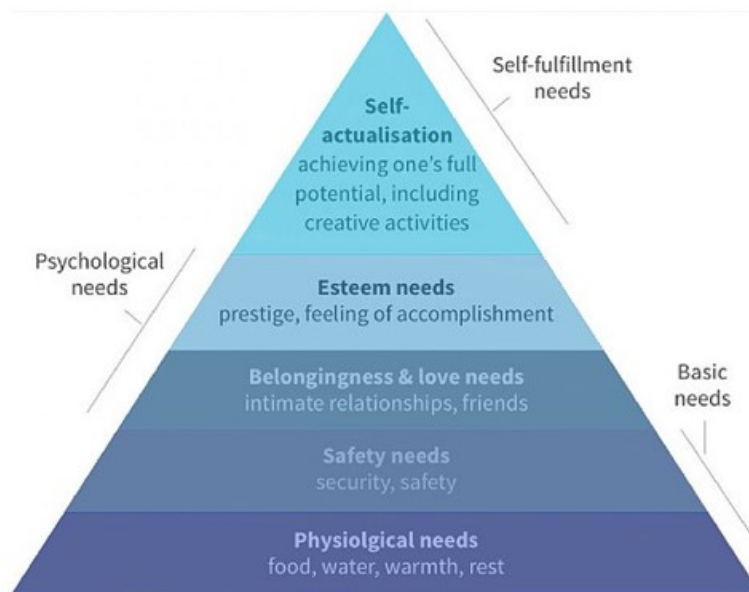
To restore confidence with travelers and guests, industry associations and leading hotel companies have established various safety protocols and policies. Here's a look at how effectively they are being implemented and communicated.



By A.J. Singh

A seminal paper published in 1943 by Abraham Maslow, an American Psychologist, established a theory of human motivation based on a hierarchical classification of five human needs, which drive human behavior.

MASLOW'S HEIRARCHY OF NEEDS



As a human enterprise, major hotel companies have understood these physiological and psychological drivers in establishing brand standards, related to their facilities, amenities, service standards, guest experiences, socialization platforms, loyalty programs and design elements. In keeping with Maslow's hierarchical paradigm, the companies understand that guests are looking for hotels to take care of their basic needs (base of the pyramid) before they will pursue higher level needs.

Over the past several years, the U.S. hotel industry has evolved from focusing on primarily basic traveler needs of clean, safe and secure accommodations—which are minimum guest expectations—to higher-order psychological and experiential needs of the guest. COVID-19 has redirected the attention of hotel brands back to the basic guest need of cleanliness, safety and security. Given the suddenness of this pandemic, both industry associations and hotel companies have reacted swiftly to create policies, programs and protocols to address these basic needs albeit at an enhanced level.

American Hotel & Lodging Association (AH&LA) Safe Stay

The AHLA took the lead in establishing industry wide hotel enhanced cleaning guidelines with their “Stay Safe” initiative, a program developed in conjunction with a representative advisory council. These guidelines were based on benchmarks established by public health authorities such as the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, were designed to instill a sense of confidence for hotel guests and employees that the industry was united behind a common set of cleaning and safety practices. Since its issuance in April 2020, “Safe Stay” has been widely endorsed by the major hotel companies as well as industry and state hospitality associations. It was a timely and great starting point.

Hotel company-specific COVID-19 safety and communication initiatives

Since the launch of “Stay Safe,” all the major hotel companies have launched their own safety protocols to assure their associates and guests that they are taking added precautionary measures as they begin to open for business. [Here’s a look at what some hotel companies are doing.](#)

In addition to the initiatives launched by the hotel brands, several leading third-party management companies announced their own programs such as Aimbridge Hospitality’s “Aim Clean” and “Aim Connect,” White Lodging’s “Stay Confident” and Sage Hospitality’s “Sage Forward” program.

Analysis of key program features: Implementation and communication

An analysis of the initiatives of major hotel company websites noted above helped summarize the key features, of these programs, implementation and communication issues, which are outlined below.

1) Government and private third-party-based guidelines

Major hotel company guidelines were based on benchmarks established by government organizations such as CDC, World Health Organizations, EPA and further supplemented in most cases with either a panel of experts representing the scientific, health or hotel industry. In addition, several major companies partnered with reputable companies or hospitals with expertise in sanitation, cleanliness protocols and infectious diseases.

2) Sanitation and cleanliness protocols

While each company labeled their program differently, they uniformly addressed a set of comprehensive sanitation and cleanliness protocols following the guest journey from pre-arrival to check out. These protocols made clear statements on the enhanced level of hygiene and sanitation at various touchpoints throughout the property.

3) Property safety protocol optics

To instill guest and employee confidence, the programs all had various optics to show concern for safety, cleanliness and hygiene. These ranged from employee face coverings, protective screens, gloves, clear signage, visibly located hand sanitizers in public areas, social distancing, removal of excess materials and exposed surfaces, frequency of cleaning public spaces, contactless service at the desk, room service and in some cases such as Hilton, “clean stay verified” door hangers.

4) Operational practices and implementation

While all hotel companies have established quality, benchmark-based programs, the operational practices and implementation of these programs are difficult to determine. However, a review of the programs did provide confidence that some of the companies were thinking about implementation, such as those who assigned an extra level of supervision or inspection, required employees to undergo training, or identified a key position within the hotel to oversee the program, such as a “Hygiene Manager” or a group of “Cleanliness Champions.” In addition, some companies indicated that they engaged companies specializing in sanitation, bio-risk and infectious diseases to accredit their programs. Furthermore, several third-party management companies supplemented brand and industry association initiatives with their own proprietary safety and cleanliness operational practices. As the hotel industry is heavily skewed towards a franchise model with individual owners operating their hotels based on specified brand standards, it was not clear from a review of these programs whether the franchise companies merely provided guidelines and recommendations or enforced the operational practices. Given the sensitivity of the current environment and cash flow issues, it is suspected that the brands will encourage the franchisees to implement these programs and provide support where needed. Major industry associations, such as AHLA, AAHOA, NABHOOD and LHA, have endorsed these protocols. It is expected they will serve as influencers for the hotel ownership community.

5) Effectively communicating hotel company response to COVID-19

When one clicks on the corporate website of the major hotel companies, their COVID-19 responses are clearly stated in terms of communicating their empathy, revised safety protocols, reservation cancellation flexibility, and in several instances, their social responsibility and assistance for those most affected by the pandemic. Given the sudden onslaught of this crisis, the industry reacted with remarkable speed. As the industry slowly starts to gain control, there are a few additional steps that the hotel companies, both at the corporate and property level, may consider to instill travel confidence.

- a. A video message from the company’s leadership both at the corporate and property level. While corporate written messages communicate a commitment, a personalized message creates a stronger sense of confidence, particularly at the property level.
- b. As the industry is large with fragmented ownership and management business models, it is important that the corporate initiatives in terms of the policies, procedures, protocols, accreditations, etc. distill down to the front-line staff at the property level. Especially those that answer the telephone. In times like this, guests are apt to call the property directly with questions before they make a reservation. A well-informed guest-facing staff can provide the highest level of assurance.
- c. As guests have multiple channels to make their reservations, it is especially important that the safety initiatives at the property level are also communicated through third-party intermediaries such as Expedia and Booking.com. In many cases, those are the guests’ first touch point when making a reservation. Legal implications may need to be reviewed, but common sense would say that if a traveler does not see revised safety protocols for a property presented through these channels, they would not know that they exist.
- d. TripAdvisor has grown to become the largest peer-to-peer travel and destination review site, with over 860 million reviews and 8.6 million travel company listings. While travel is just starting to pick up, it is important that owners and managers encourage, monitor and review guest postings as travelers start to experience the various safety protocols at individual hotels. This will probably be one of the most powerful drivers to assure guests of



the hotel's safety protocols and overall experience.

- e. During times of uncertainty, prudence would dictate that a traveler will pick a branded hotel as it offers a standardized and reliable product. Yet a large percentage of hotels in the U.S. are in the independent lifestyle boutique segment. This article did not review hotels in that category, but given that many of them have a loyal following anchored by their individual "personalities," and have a smaller footprint, those hotels have the opportunity to customize personalized communication to their base.

Conclusion

As a resilient industry, hotels have been through various crises over the years. A common outcome is that the ones who survived emerged stronger, more efficient and profitable. One expects the outcome of this crisis to be no different. The current response to COVID-19 has already provided several examples of leadership and innovation. In 1981, Faith Popcorn, a trend forecaster coined the term "Cocooning," as "staying inside one's home, insulated from perceived danger, instead of going out." COVID-19 forced that upon us. However, it will be interesting to see as we emerge from our cocoon and re-enter the world if the hotel industry will start to emulate some features of our homes, taking us back to a hotel's original definition as "a home away from home."

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