

## How to Engage your Guests in your Hotel Sustainability Initiatives

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A recent [study](#)<sup>1</sup> shows guests have negative perceptions of three green hotel initiatives: low water pressure, temperature control, and green products. The authors analyzed comments on the top 10 GreenLeader hotels in the US, as of 2014. Interestingly, they found that an average of 10% of guest comments were related to green efforts, ranging from 4% to 48.7%. In the reviews analyzed, guests made comments to the effect of “I’m all for saving the environmental, but...” It’s a shame that “green” takes the blame, when it needn’t. Let’s consider each.

**Low Water Pressure.** In my own informal TripAdvisor research, I found those with water-saving fixtures have mixed reviews on water pressure. Some had mainly negative, while some had mainly positive. Most had a fairly equal mix of both.

What does this tell us? Something facilities managers already know: water pressure is not just a function of a green fixture. It is dependent on municipal infrastructure; the building’s bones, systems, and age; the floor you’re on; leaks, maintenance, and upkeep; time of day; and personal preference. A hotel has no control over some of those, but whether you have water efficient faucets or not, be sure to manage the others on the list.

Don’t let “green” take the fall for low water pressure when it could be other issues. Consider these tips:

- Ask green product vendors to send free samples and test them out for yourself in different rooms / floors of the building.
- Be sure the installation and maintenance crews follow manufacturer specifications.
- Share water-saving statistics with guests so they can associate with a larger social movement. Upon checkout (before the guest is likely to post a review) include a notice like, “During your stay, you saved 80 gallons of water! Thank you for participating in our efforts to conserve.”

**Temperature Control.** One reviewer on a TripAdvisor GreenLeader hotel mentioned having maintenance come up in the night to adjust the temperature and show her the thermostat “eco button”. There are videos online telling travelers how to “hack” thermostats to override set points.

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<sup>1</sup> Yi, S., Li, X., & Jai, T.-M. (2016). Hotel guests perception of best green practices: A content analysis of online reviews. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/1467358416637251>

As much as we want guests to participate in energy-saving programs, they aren't ready to compromise on comfort. There are ways to communicate temperature options, while promoting eco-friendly behavior.

- Put a small sign near the thermostat. The use of simple language and icons can convey the concern for both the environment and guest well-being.
- Technology makes it possible to gather data on consumer behavior and preferences, especially frequent travelers and loyalty program members. Use this to target information on your green initiatives and a thermostat "how-to" through emails and app notifications.
- Train staff to strike the right balance between caring for the environment and catering to guests' needs. We don't want to encourage (environmentally) bad behavior, but we do want to encourage repeat visits and positive reviews.

**Green Products.** One TripAdvisor reviewer was disappointed to receive his \$30 breakfast in a paper bag and paper containers. Other comments echoed this connection of poor quality with eco-products, specifically citing plates and cutlery. The challenge in this category is that, up until recently, higher quality eco-packaging was more expensive and eroded the business case for sustainability.

As demand increases and technology and materials improve, food service outlets don't have to settle for products that damage brand or customer experience. The global sustainable packaging market is predicted to [grow at 7.7% CAGR by 2025](#).<sup>2</sup> With such increases come more competition and innovation which bring prices down and quality up. In the meantime,

- Check that your green purchasing policy reflects the service level and brand standards guests expect. Higher level properties should be stocked with bamboo and stronger fiber containers, while a mid-range hotel can get away with paper cartons.
- Whenever possible, offer reusable utensils. Just keep in mind the trade-off in water consumption for the dishwasher.
- Find a fascinating story to tell guests. For example, "Did you know bamboo is a grass and some species grow up to 3 feet per day? Enjoy your meal with these sturdy, biodegradable utensils."

Don't let sustainability be an excuse; make thoughtful decisions about your product and service so that both the customer and the environment win. Remember that guest communication is a simple and powerful way to shift perceptions of green initiatives.

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<sup>2</sup> Accuray Research LLP. (2016). *Global sustainable packaging market analysis & trends: Industry forecast to 2025* (No. 3861625) (p. 173). Retrieved from <http://www.researchandmarkets.com/research/xjqic2/global>