



Flipping the Script on New Hotel Construction and Renovations

Significant Investments Create More Impact When They Start with a Big Idea

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Does an author write a book without a plot? Would a sports team win a championship without all the players aligned? Would a pilot fly a plane without knowing the destination?

The answer is a resounding no. While this may seem intuitive, frequently this same logic isn't applied when it comes to renovating or building a new hotel.



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These significant investments will have the greatest impact when you first define the big idea that brings everything together into your unique story. Your story is not an ad campaign or a promotion or something to be written after all the construction work is done. Your story is the strategy that encompasses the entire guest experience, and it should inform all that you do.

Many times, architects and designers start to go down a path before there is a clear story that unites their work. There is an eagerness to get moving with bringing the project to life, but the business must first understand what insight and inspiration gives the project life.

Start With a Unique Insight and Get Everyone on the Same Page

A good story gives the project life by authentically representing what the property stands for, what human need it satisfies, and by creating an emotional connection that sticks with the target customer. This sounds like a lot to achieve in one story, but when it's done right, it is like an impeccably choreographed Broadway musical. It captures the audience right from the start, and it leaves a lasting impression.

According to a Broadway insider I know, most plays and musicals are reflective of a deep human need, feeling or desire. For instance, the musical "A Chorus Line" is rooted in the need for belonging and acceptance. "Dear Evan Hansen" reflects the need for friendship and being part of a family and "Waitress," originally a film, is about finding strength within yourself — by way of uniquely crafted pies. The big idea, along with the basics of the story concept, is what launches the development process. The magic then starts when the songwriters, the set, lighting and costume designers and the choreographers work together to bring the story to life.

In hotel design — just like a musical — a strong story should foster collaboration. For instance, when architects, designers, operators and marketers understand and embrace the story, they can manifest it in the work they do. All the pieces come together in both obvious and subtle ways, and flow seamlessly together. The experience feels harmonious — from the messaging to the landscaping to the décor to the service delivery. While each player brings specific expertise and deep knowledge of their area, they should refrain from pursuing their own creative approach or story in a vacuum. Their work may be beautiful but would feel disconnected from other parts of the guest experience.

Make It Meaningful and Unforgettable

Recently I was at a luxury hotel that had the expected luxury finishes, but overall my experience felt ordinary and disjointed. There was nothing that unified the experience or made it memorable.

As I walked down a side hallway, there were pictures lining the wall. The captions told an intriguing backstory about the location and the history of the hotel. It piqued my curiosity and made me want to learn more.

Unfortunately, nowhere else in the entire experience was there an effort to build out this story or a true sense of place. Many travelers these days are yearning to feel more connected to the history and the locations they visit. It seemed to be a missed opportunity for the hotel to foster greater guest engagement.

This brings me to something else I learned about Broadway musicals. There are two keys to a successful musical:

1. Every song is written so it moves the story forward in a carefully crafted journey.
2. The audience should leave humming at least one song, creating a powerful, long-lasting connection.

So, a meaningful story and a carefully crafted journey that leave their mark make up the secret sauce.

The journey extends beyond construction and design into all aspects of the experience including the food and beverage concepts, the scents and sounds throughout the property and the nomenclature used. Every employee should understand the story and the role they play in bringing it to life. Both the big and little details should be considered.

Earlier I mentioned the play “Waitress.” When the audience first entered the theater, they were greeted with the aroma of real pies and pies in mason jars were available for sale in the lobby. These are incredible sensory moments and just like the music, they not only immerse the audience in the story, but stay with them long after they leave.

Bringing it All Together

Many hotels tend to focus on listing just the features they offer: the restaurants, bars, health club, meeting space and location. This may “check the box” for some customers, but why would someone choose your property versus a competitor who also has a list of those same features or a similar location? You end up competing more on price, like a commodity. Rather than talking about the “stuff,” focus on telling the story of what you can do for your guest.

Stories that engage are impactful and can deliver rewards. According to Gallup, engaged customers will spend 23% more than the average customer. This can happen when you move their stay from a transactional experience to a meaningful one.

If you have been going about this backwards, it may be time to flip the script. If you are developing a new property or have a renovation planned, you can get in front of it now. If there is no renovation on the horizon, you can still gain insight for your big idea by first understanding your marketplace. Then identify the customer you want to attract and the human need, desire or feeling your property can uniquely address. You can then craft your story and start to deliver a more meaningful and unified experience in your operations, programming and services.

It’s time to define your big idea and get the entire team on board. Your audience is waiting.

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