Is South Africa ready for the "smart" hotel room?

By Danny Bryer   23 Jul 2018

There's a race on internationally among big hotel groups to unveil hotels that feature rooms equipped with the Internet of Things (IoT) devices that can carry out a variety of tasks for guests. This state-of-the-art hotel experience will likely become commonplace globally, the question is, is South Africa ready for such a development?

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To test the waters, Marriott International has already worked up a version, the IoT Guestroom Lab – powered by Marriott's Innovation Lab at the company's corporate headquarters – creates a "smart" hotel room using multiple responsive IoT systems, devices and applications to communicate with one another to serve guests and optimise hotel operations. The technology inside the lab, for instance, allows a user to ask a virtual assistant for a 6.30am wake-up alarm, start a yoga routine on a full-length mirror, request additional housekeeping services and start the shower at the desired temperature stored in their customer profile – all by voice or app.

Following the three-month-long IoT Guestroom Lab, Marriott, Samsung and Legrand will analyse feedback. Consumers will start to see elements of the technology in international hotel rooms within the next five years.

The evolving consumer

Already, local consumers have grown accustomed to, and, indeed, expect, new technology to facilitate their relationship with brands, whether that's via chatbots on websites or apps, or in the ways they experience hotels, such as keyless entry and mobile check-in, for example. Naturally, these developments are tested on a live market as brands want to ensure that they're fully functional and integrated with all other systems and channels before going live on their properties.

The benefit to smart hotel room systems is that they can be implemented in both new builds and retro-fitted to existing properties. The playing field is level across the board, although different properties will have different requirements, so each one would select a portfolio of features according to its needs and the needs of the market as well as the end consumer.

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Since international visitors are a major driver of business into South Africa's hospitality sector, it makes sense that this race among hotels to implement smart hotel rooms will have a direct impact on the hospitality experience locally. Local hotels must continue to evolve their guest experience in accordance with changing preferences. Conversely, the South African traveller heading to other countries will encounter smart hotel rooms and not want to return to old-school, static experiences.

There's a concern that implementation costs may be high, however, since this is a long-term strategy that will likely only unfold after five years. Hotels have time to prepare, especially in terms of allocating budgets. It's exciting that we're seeing this happen in our generation – up until recently, the hotel stay experience was fairly predictable, from check-in to check-out. With the rise of digital and mobile, opportunities to enhance this experience have grown exponentially. This, in turn, has driven a competitive spirit among hotel brands to ensure that they're ahead of the game.

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A further indication of evolving customer expectations is that customers are using voice-operated devices such as Alexa in their own homes and are growing used to doing so. In South Africa, the market for this is relatively small, but growing. We're late adopters, in terms of global technology, but this also has the benefit that we're not a test market. By the time these kinds of solutions are rolled out, the initial bugs have been addressed, so even if we're only seeing version 2.0 when these solutions are eventually rolled out, we're actually catching up with the rest of the world quite quickly.

The race for the smart hotel room must never compromise on guest experience, so ensuring that at all times, the best possible stay experience takes place must be prioritised above flashy technology. As with any element of business strategy, it must be aligned with ROI and efficiency, along with listening to guests to hear what they want and experience.

ABOUT DANNY BRYER

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