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Keyword: The Montcalm



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'Non-standard', 'trendy' and 'unique'. Just three of the words used to describe a boutique hotel at yesterday's Boutique Hotel Summit in London. But with larger chains beginning to take a grip of the sector with the emergence of so-called lifestyle brands, how can independent boutiques stand out in an increasingly crowded seament?

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During one of the discussions at the Summit, which took place at the five-star Montcalm hotel, a video was played; members of the public were asked to define exactly what they thought a 'boutique hotel' was, and to name the last boutique property they stayed in.

Hotel Trends. Hotels

All were pretty consistent about what a boutique hotel was, but when asked to name the last hotel they'd staved in, not one member of the public could remember.



(L-R): Robin Sheppard, Peter Taylor rman, Niki Leondakis, Gerard Greene moderator Russell Kett spoke at the Boutique Hotel Summitt yesterday (23 May)

So it's all very well being an independent boutique hotel operator that provides a 'unique' experience, but clearly something more is needed to ensure your brand is going to be remembered against the big players such as Starwood Hotels & Resorts' W Hotels or the expanding Hotel Indigo

Another session at the Boutique Hotel Summit saw a panel of the boutique and lifestyle sector's leading players discussing the future of the industry and identifying the keys to success for independent operators.

Provide an emotional touch



Niki Leondakis, chief executive of Commune Hotels & Resorts – which owns Belgraves under it's Thompson Hotels brand - said: "What it all boils down to is how people feel.

"You have to understand the values and lifestyles of your target customer and how you reach them emotionally. says a They're making that decision to buy from an emotional customer's place. They might intellectualise why they like the food and feelings should be at the heart of beverage or the design or other aspects but, at the end every hotel of the day, why they return is an emotional decision. business

"You need to appeal to a customer's needs - this may an aspirational need or a simple sense of belonging with the personal interaction with staff - it just all boils down to how that hotel makes that customer feel."

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Gerard Greene, chief executive of the New York-based hotel concept Yotel, added: "Competing with the larger chains can be tough but all the way along the chain – from the consumer, to the management team, to the developer – everybody involved in the process has to have an emotional contact with the brand.

"If you have that emotional contact then the project will succeed."

2) Encourage repeat custom



Robin Sheppard believes customer engagement will create repeat husiness

Robin Sheppard, chairman of the UK-based hotel management company Bespoke Hotels, said: "You have to have a touch point with the customer, you have to connect. This can be in the form of a personal card of welcome, or by using the points system or some form of technology which gauges exactly who they are.

"You can't just allow a customer to come in and not leave a footprint or engage with them."

3) Create a social space



The moderator of the panel discussion – HVS London's chairman Russell Kett, said: "The bedroom used to be the focal point of every hotel. Now it's not - the public space is much more important.

Kett thinks the focus for hotels has shifted away from the quality of the bedrooms

"You used to be able to guarantee a good night's sleep, a decent shower or bath, a comfortable bath and blackout curtains – but everybody can replicate that

So you need to be quirky, you need to constantly adapt and change and you need to provide an active social space for your guests.

4) Get the F&B right



Gerard Greene says outsourcing F&B is the best option for many boutique hotel operators

Greene from Yotel gave a word of warning. "That entrepreneurial spirit and creativeness that boutique hoteliers have can sometimes lead to the emotion getting the way of the financial side of things.

"If you've got a 100-bedroom townhouse property in London and you're thinking about operating the F&B yourself, forget it. Rent it out, bring in an operator, work closely with them -that's where the value is.

"At a time when finance is so important, there isn't really room to start squandering away 20 per cent of your value

because you want to operate your own restaurant."

Leondakis from Commune Hotels & Resorts added: "The boutique sector has traditionally been more successful than the big hotel brands when it comes to running restaurants because the people in the sector are, by their very nature, more entrepreneurial. They approach it from a 'how can we do it different' perspective.

"There are more creative F&B solutions in the boutique sector, but the big brands are starting to figure it out. Restaurants in hotels are always going to be a bit of a problem, though, because the business itself is very low-margin."

Kett added: "The problem with larger hoteliers operating F&B is the focus just isn't there, on the local neighbourhood, the target customer. The focus is on the hotel guest because the margins dictate that.

"That's where the boutique sector still stands out – they think of themselves as a local amenity." $\,$

5) People power



Peter Taylor, owner and founder of The Town House Collection which has The Bonham hotel in Edinburgh and Blythswood Square hotel and spa in Glasgow in its portfolio, said: "The hotel design, the F&B and the branding – they're all important, but remember that it's not all about bricks 'n' mortar. It's all about the people."



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The Town house Collection's Peter Taylor says 'it's all about the people'.

When asked for one piece of advice for UK boutique hotel operators, Greene added: "You need to invest in younger people. You've got to find great staff and the only way is to invest time going into schools and colleges. You can't

keep talking about finances and design, you must spend an equal amount of time going to colleges, speaking to students and encouraging them to join this industry."

Keywords: Commune, Yotel, Boutique Hotel Summit, 2013, Montcalm, hotel, boutique, London, brands, Bespoke, Robin Sheppard, F&B, restaurants, Russell Kett, people, staff, panel



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