

Key hospitality technology trends to watch in 2021

By **Andrew Metcalfe, Chief Technical Officer, Guestline**

As we start to look forward to the new year, there are two key trends which we have already begun to see emerge throughout the course of 2020. Both have been driven, in the most part, by the advance of the Coronavirus pandemic – digitisation and the use of data.

However, as the industry seeks to work towards recovery, I expect each will continue to accelerate at pace. Much of this acceleration will be led by not only the increased need to prioritise a different mix of revenue streams, but also the need to continue to enhance the guest experience as the way to meet the marked shift in guest expectations. Another significant and seemingly enduring consequence of the pandemic.

Faster and broader digitisation across the industry

The need for urgent hygiene and process changes to prevent the spread of Coronavirus meant 2020 saw a big surge in technological change, accelerating many years of adaptation alongside other physical space concessions such as perspex screens.

The need for social distancing has meant many spaces have had to meet the requirements of a restricted capacity, which in turn has helped speed up more of the administration of hotel stays (food ordering, invoice retrieval, for example) to go online. I see no reason why this will slow in 2021. Many guests who may have been reluctant to adopt mobile check-in for example, have not only grown used to it, they now demand it. I expect this sudden increase in adoption will in turn lead to a number of further adaptations:

- **Experience enhancement** – Many hoteliers were worried that digitising or putting the check-in and check-out process into a mobile website would damage the guest experience. The warm, human welcome of a stay could be lost and guests might perceive the service was reducing. I think this concern has subsided but to ensure this shift is a successful one, each

hotelier needs to understand how to marry the digital experience with their particular customer expectations. Luckily, they have had an opportunity to test much faster and guests understand why. It is not just to replace expensive staff with cheaper kiosks, it is to make everyone safe. However, making sure this experience is truly seamless and not riddled with errors caused by poor system integrations behind the scenes will become critical. This could easily put pressure on the multiple open API standpoint the hospitality technology scene has pushed which can cause a lot of complications. Fewer but deeper and higher-grade integrations will be a change to this landscape as a result.

- **Diversification** - Longer term, this recent increased demand for a digital service offer has fuelled resource for further research and development of an even more streamlined, enhanced guest experience that will long out-live Coronavirus. At least we hope. Right now, whilst many hoteliers are suffering as a result of significant losses in bed revenues, there is the opportunity for some to leverage other revenue streams within their properties. More often than not, digitisation has provided the means to make that possible and online F&B ordering to offer takeaways to the local market is one popular example of that. Once you have eyes on your digital experience, it would be wise to offer more services, again enhancing the guest experience rather than complicating it, but also with the very real potential to secure a much-enhanced and much-needed range of revenues.
- **Booking platforms** - Hotel websites are integral to showcasing new service and package offers and bolstering the booking engine side of its content and operation again will become even more important. Much hotel website content is brochure-themed with imagery and key information. However, hoteliers have a real opportunity to utilise digitisation and leverage their websites to ensure that all aspects of their inventory and experience are included *and* supported by a direct booking function that goes beyond bedrooms. Making the brochure more integrated with the new digitised processes will become more urgent. Consistent branding and promotions being available at every relevant customer interaction can also pay real dividends in terms of bookings and revenue. For example, seeing a restaurant promotion solely at the time of booking - and staff not even being aware it existed - will start to become more of an issue and an annoyance to guests. Therefore, consistency across all booking platforms is key.
- **Integrated payments** - Integration will be the theme that dominates this increased digitisation to ensure it really delivers. In the case of payments there is now a real focus on

how to better streamline payments to make them seamless and easier to process both for the guest and the hotelier. Certainly, payment before arrival benefits both the guest who can then enjoy a much easier check-out experience and the hotelier by supporting cashflow. The domino effect of this increased efficiency can then be felt throughout all operations. Lastly, an erroneous key stroke around a payment balance through a lack of automation is the fastest way to erode trust in your digital experiences so getting it right all the time and not relying on conversations at reception will be a priority.

Data is set to take centre-stage

As an industry, we have been overhauling all of our reporting gradually over the last three years and will continue to add more and more information and tools to analyse performance, however we have one request this year that we hope is a one off - "Can you remove 2020 from our data comparisons?". We created that exception but it highlights the different challenge of using data in the coming year. Couple this shock with the need to be ready to adapt to the new trends, many are seeing more local travellers, less business travellers, shorter lead times. Understanding how this will evolve as we come out of the pandemic will be at the forefront in 2021 and probably last for a few years to come.

- **Short term data analysis** – When you are faced with so many unknowns and instant changes to lockdown policies, the need to have a clear view of the current bookings, markets and rates, becomes even more important. Short term decisions by the market mean you need to be looking more frequently at your immediate positions. This is multi-dimensional across F&B, bedrooms, events and other operations likely to be affected such as spa and golf. If you can see all are suffering you can react quickly with packages to attract locals rather than those further afield, or maybe you need to close and take advantage of furlough. If your data is across 15 systems this becomes a lot harder. Bringing things closer together and looking at other data points such as payments in and out can be more immediately useful rather than long term trends.
- **Holistic approach** - In short, for any data analysis to really deliver for hoteliers in the future it must synchronise and have touchpoints across all operations. Existing metrics more closely tied to bedroom revenues are already recognised as not the only thing be aware of. Guests are often more local, or certainly travelling with a different purpose compared to 18 months ago. The result of this is the need to look more broadly to make sure overall revenue targets

are hit. I also think new performance data, detailing how well our recently digitised offerings are working, will be something to start tracking. We will also need to keep an eye on planning for 2022 and the likely bounce in areas like events, particularly weddings and similar, and to make sure this rapid switch in mix is something hotels are ready for.

The increased adoption of both data analysis and digitisation will both be driven by not only the need to manage operations correctly, but also the need to manage operations more efficiently. In order to do that, hoteliers need a clearer understanding of the facts and figures that drive their operations and the technology available (such as contactless payments) to digitise and deliver a first-class guest experience. I am certain both will have key roles to play in the recovery of the hospitality industry in 2021 and beyond.

And if you have an extra 5 minutes, check out Andrew's thoughts on what technologies would be key in 2020 and see if his crystal ball rang true! Click [here](#).

-ENDS-

Notes to Editor:-

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About Guestline

Established over 28 years ago, Guestline provides innovative property management, guest engagement and distribution software to the hospitality industry. Founded on cloud technology, Guestline's revenue generating solutions enable independents of all sizes and small hotel groups to achieve maximum occupancy at the most profitable rate.

With offices in the UK, Germany, The Netherlands, Ireland and Thailand, Guestline's property management software is currently growing revenues in businesses in 25 countries across five continents. The range of solutions include Guestline PMS, CRS, C&B, Channel Manager, EPoS, IBE and GuestPay. Additionally, Guestline's PMS can be integrated with nearly 200 third-party solutions via an API.

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