



Customer experience in the new reality

Perspectives from the hotel sector

Global Customer Experience
Excellence research 2020



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Introduction

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has had an enormous impact on hotels and the hospitality industry. Essentially a 'people' industry, the hospitality industry stands to lose if people continue to fear travelling and meeting other people. One of the most significant obstacles hotels will have to overcome is regaining guest confidence in the safety, health and hygiene standards maintained by hotels.

Many hotel groups have acted with great integrity and social conscience during the epidemic, providing beds for key workers, ensuring that the homeless and vulnerable had shelter and providing meals and support where it was needed.

The pandemic has however left the hotel sector in a difficult state as travel business, leisure, and in particular long-haul business travel to large hub cities, is curtailed for the foreseeable future.

Cleaning and sanitization will be front of mind for guests. It will need to be demonstrable and overt to restore confidence.

The very nature of the hotel experience may need to change.

For luxury hotels where staff interaction is critical to the experience, this will likely be more difficult as customers seek to minimize staff touchpoints.

For sanitary reasons rooms will be decluttered as luxury amenities, stationery items such as pens, notepads and in-room menus are removed from rooms and replaced with digital alternatives or providing them only on request. Leisure hotels may suffer from restrictions with second and third waves of the virus possibly driving impromptu lockdowns and movement limitations.

Cleaning and sanitization will be front of mind for guests. It will need to be demonstrable and overt to restore confidence. Furnishings, air conditioning systems, minibars, gyms, pools and spas, and touch screens will all need to be assessed and upgraded as necessary.

Digitization will reduce previously important interactions and become core to many processes beyond booking and paying.

While currently many tasks on arrival at a hotel are performed by a human, there will be a need to avoid human contact. In future more individuals will likely want to check-in and check-out using digital services - and there could also be the opportunity to use mobile room keys and other digitization technologies. The roll out of these technologies will likely be accelerated as result of the pandemic.

The operational workflows of staff, especially in kitchens for example, as well as the movement of guests and staff around the hotel will need to be scrutinized and optimized for social distancing.

The future experience

Hotels are preoccupied with the near-term experience as they change processes and protocols to restore confidence and increase occupancy.

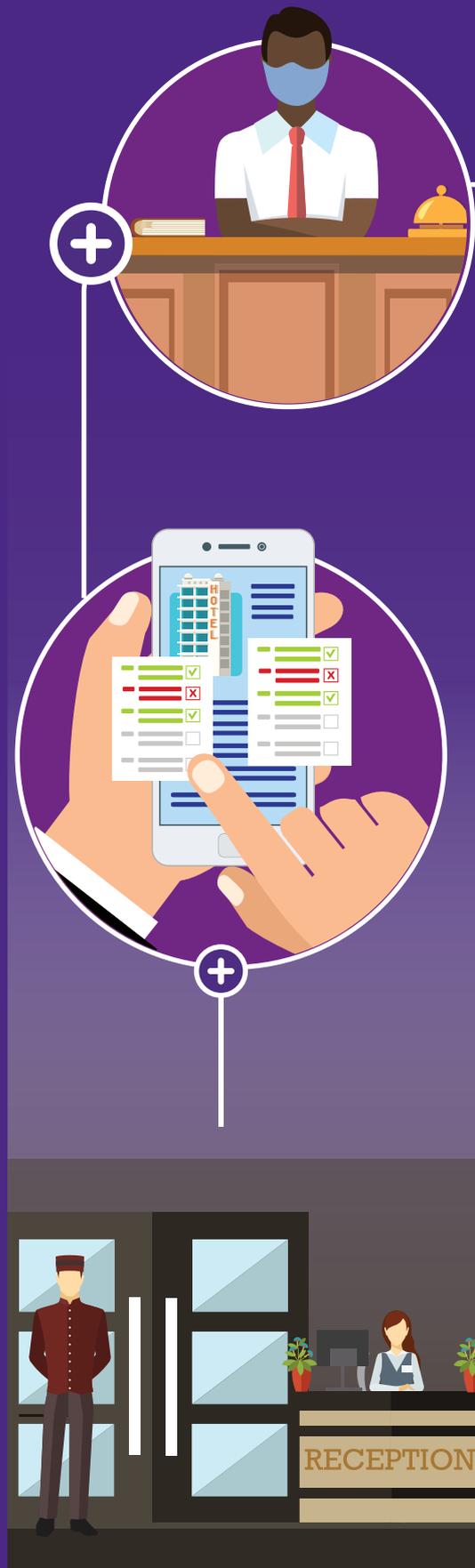
Front-desk agents will be equipped with face masks and gloves as standard to complete check-in and checkout procedures as well as handle guest requests, signaling immediately the hotel is taking the safety of its employees and its guests seriously. These protocols are generally more usual in Asia than the West currently and can also impact consumer’s confidence negatively.

There is likely to be pause in guests handing over their credit card and ID, and payments may be limited to the card listed on the original reservation made online, so cards don’t need to be exchanged and handled by multiple people.

Hotels will likely set up touch-free hand sanitizer stations in lobbies and throughout their properties, and disinfectant wipes located outside elevators so guests can wipe down the buttons.

Apps will be developed for contactless arrival and departure with mobile check-in and digital keys. Check-in and door-key apps have been implemented in a somewhat piecemeal fashion over the past several years, but the pace will need to accelerate quickly so guests can more easily open doors in public spaces and complete check-in and checkout procedures digitally.

A hotel’s defense against the spread of germs will begin before a guest even enters a hotel. At midrange or lower-end hotels, this could mean automatic sliding doors which many already have and bellhops wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) at higher-end properties to open and close doors for guests. Hotels may require guests and visitors to be screened for temperature checks as they enter the hotel.





The recovery pathway

Undoubtedly hotels and hospitality companies need to reassess their business models. If the worst-case scenarios materialize and the world will have to learn to live with COVID-19 for some time what does that mean for our business? Several strategic questions emerge:

- How do we stimulate demand by bringing back consumer confidence?
- What do we need to do to show we overtly care about the wellbeing of our customers and staff?
- How do we create a touchless experience, that delivers the warmth and passion that typifies our unique experience?
- How do we transfer that offline experience online in a way that continues to promote our brand and differentiators?
- What change initiatives are required to secure our business model and economic drivers?
- How do we introduce new levels of flexibility that reflects the sudden changes guests may need to make to their travel arrangements?
- What further digital transformation is required in order to meet the level of personalization that guests will demand?

The Six Pillar model was developed to provide a precise and practical definition of the kind of emotional outcome a successful experience needed to deliver. Based on over 4 million detailed customer reviews, The Six Pillars have been validated in 27 markets this year and modeled against the commercial outcomes of retention and recommendation. The Six Pillars are inextricably intertwined and, in combination, provide a powerful mechanism to help organizations understand how well their customer experience is delivered across channels, industries and company types. The leading organizations demonstrate mastery of these pillars and are outstanding at all of them. [Click here for more information.](#)

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The very nature of the hotel experience will need to change in response to COVID-19. One of the most significant obstacles hotels will have to overcome is regaining guest confidence in the safety, health and hygiene standards maintained by hotels. The use of digital tools to empower customers across the life cycle of a hotel stay could be the answer to meeting customer’s demands.”

Will Hawkey

Global Head of Leisure & Hospitality

The Six Pillars of Experience provide some useful guidance.

Integrity

Trust in safety measures may be paramount for both staff and customers. Offers of 24/7 medical care and insurances will be welcomed by customers.

Resolution

Fixing customer problems reacting quickly to changes in restrictions that affect customers travel plans.

Expectations

Being able to provide the right information at the right time as to the hotel’s current situation, and expanded information on security measures, concierge services, transfers to and from the airport, babysitters for children, museum tickets, explanations and advice on local measures pertaining to Coronavirus social distancing and restrictions

Empathy

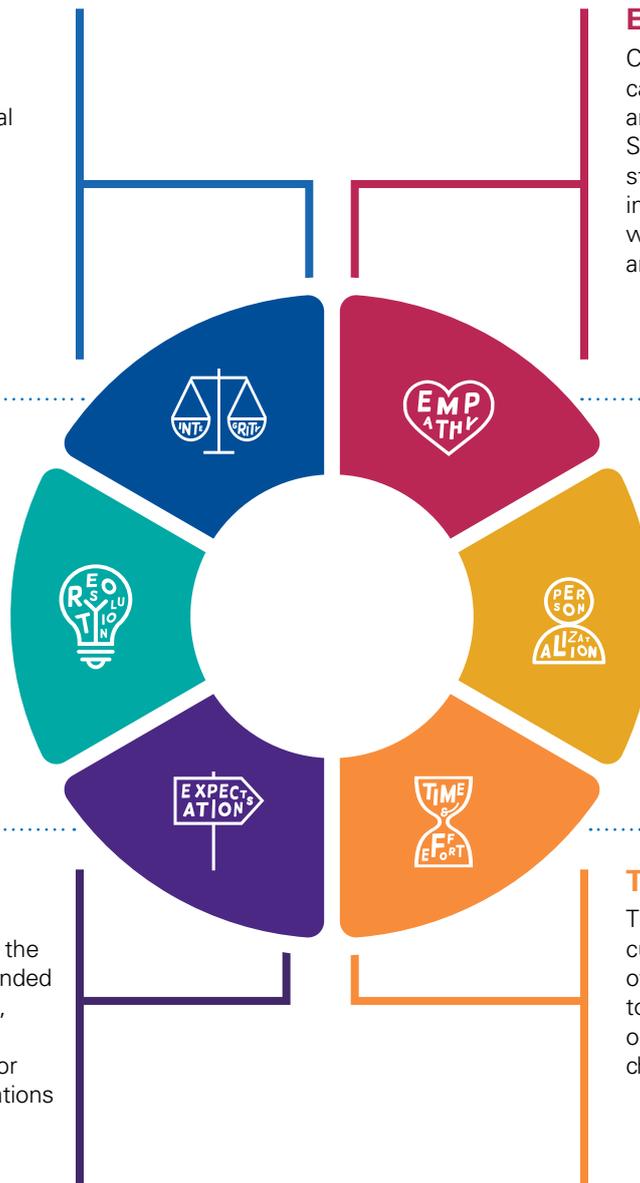
Clear protocols that show the hotel cares about its staff and guests and their wellbeing is paramount. Staff training to ensure that staff can deal in an emotionally intelligent way with customers who are experiencing difficulties and concerns.

Personalization

The use of digital tools to enable guests to personalize their experience without recourse to concierge services or staff interactions.

Time and effort

The use of digital tools to empower customers across the life cycle of a hotel stay, contactless and touchless booking, check in, check out, keyless entry, flexibility and change and payment.





Case Study

Hilton

Hilton Hotels have focused on innovation and making their customers lives easier. The launch of its app incorporated many new desirable features, such as digital keys that meant that customers no longer had to wait in line to check in or check out.

But central to their success has been their engaged employee base. Any furloughed employees will continue to receive health benefits from Hilton, which hopes to hire them back when demand and service resume. In the meantime, Hilton is looking to expand the employee-sharing program globally and add new partners.

Meanwhile Hilton are focused on improving the health and safety capabilities of their hotels with stringent new policies and procedures.¹



¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rachelsandler/2020/06/16/hilton-laying-off-22-of-corporate-workforce/#19a1438e12bc>

Case Study

Marriott



Marriott responded to COVID-19 by providing hotel assets for emergency services and the caring professions to use during the lockdown period. CEO Arne Sorenson forfeited his salary for the year, and the rest of its executives pledged to cut their pay in half to reduce the financial burden on employees. It is an organization that is very focused on its integrity.²

Marriott has examined the minutiae of a customers' end-to-end journey and set perfection as their expectation at each stage and infuse their brand pillars into the journey design to deliver a distinctive experience. Marriott allows their guests to have a seamless experience by offering mobile keys and mobile check-ins which not only save guests time and effort but also create a much more comfortable and easy experience.



² <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/09/13/marriott-built-its-airbnb-before-coronavirus-crash-did-it-help.html>

Hall of Fame 2020

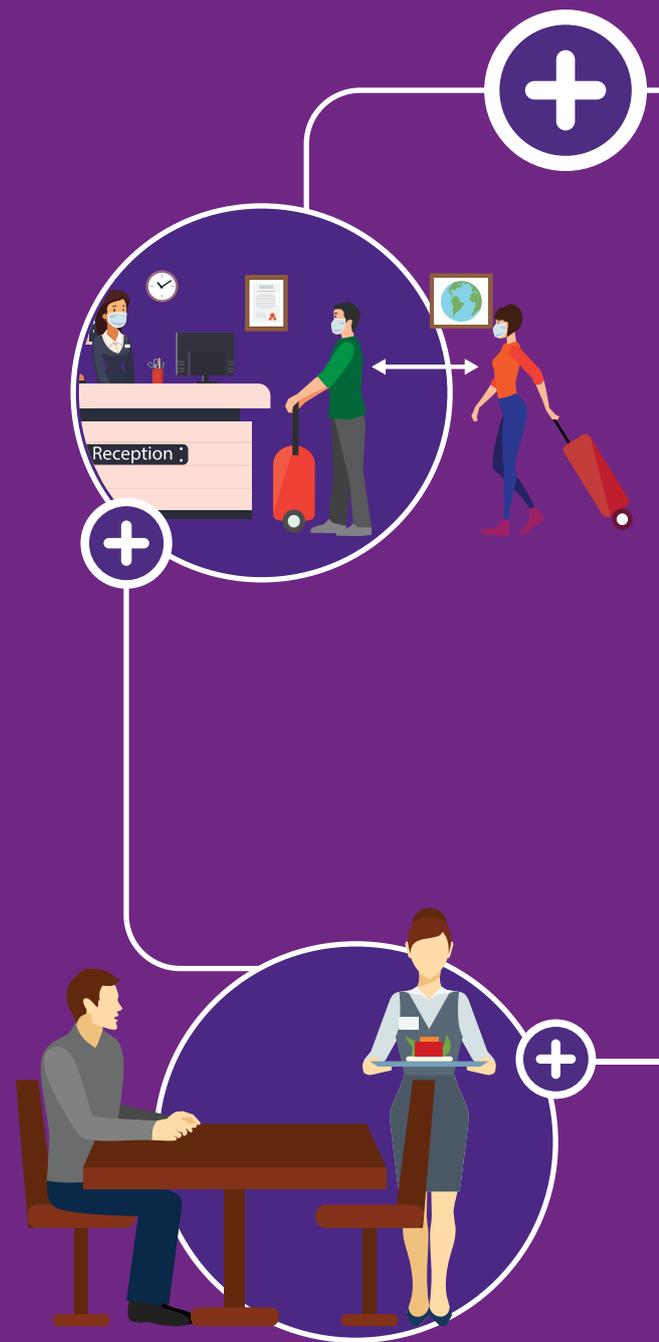
The leaders in this year's global CX research are well adapted to respond to new and emerging customer requirements. Each of the companies in this year's hall of fame are united by their desire to continually improve and innovate. They realize that digital services require a human touch and are mastering the art of highly personalized service across channels.

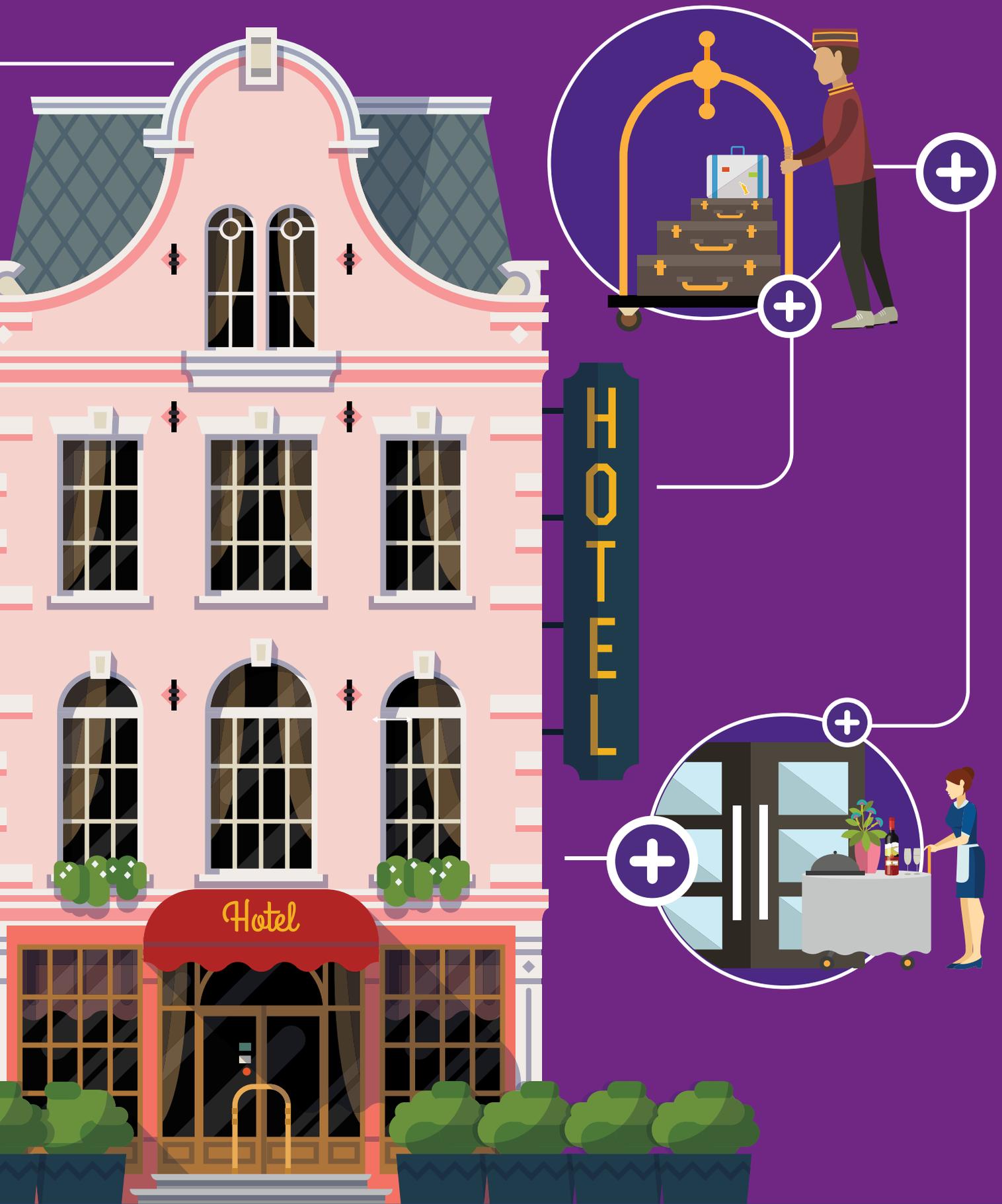


Note: Hall of Fame based on brands' CEE performance relative to their market, according to consumers in the market specified.

Summary

Out of necessity hotels have had to focus on reducing costs as much as possible, but in the coming weeks and months, this situation is the new “normal” and hotels will have to begin implementing measures that not only increase reservations but also assume that COVID-19 is with us for some time to come. It is a unique situation where hotels must react quickly and in a socially responsible way whilst always being on the lookout for the safety of guests and employees.





Get in touch

COVID-19 presents challenges to businesses — but also opportunities. It throws light on the need for organizations to put the customer at the heart of the business and have a coherent, consistent intent across their Front Office functions — and indeed connect the entire enterprise. It highlights the importance of digitalization and robust data collection so that organizations make decisions based on evidence, not instinct. And it foregrounds how essential it is for organizations to consider how each function fits together.

To flourish rather than flounder, businesses must determine the correct investment strategy across the Front Office by considering their customers, their brand and their place on the economic curve, so they can invest with greater certainty of return. All companies will be physically constrained during the measures to contain and limit the impacts of COVID-19 and their values will come under close scrutiny. However, they must leverage their ability to adapt and be resilient, embrace technology and, above all, trust their teams to put their customers' needs first and foremost — as this will bear fruit long after the pandemic is over.

If you have any questions regarding the possible impact from COVID-19 or are looking for help to position your customer experience strategy to be resilient in the face of future threats, please do not hesitate to get in touch with our global network of consultants.

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