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Generation Y: How today's newest travelers are impacting hospitality design

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Hospitality design is constantly evolving and being influenced by trends, technology, and most importantly, the growing expectations of our guests. As the generations change, so do their wants and needs. With the newest population group -Generation Y-coming into maturity, we are on the cusp of another evolution of change in hospitality design.

Gen Y is not a generation that we are preparing for, but a mass population that has already arrived. Born between 1982 and 2001, Gen Y'ers are between the ages of 12 and 31 with a population estimated to be in the 70 million range. They are the fastest growing segment of today's workforce and business travelers, and are on track to be the largest consumer group in U.S. history.

This newest generation has grown up their entire lives immersed in technology and not only view it as a tool, but as an extension of themselves. Armed with smartphones that are by their side from the moment they wake up, they are connected at all times throughout the day-seven days a week. Communicating through email, text messages, and social media, this generation prefers virtual connections to face-to-face communication as it is easier and readily available to them at all times.

Other characteristics of Gen Y are a direct result of the social aspects of being wired in 24/7. As they continue to enter the workforce in record numbers, they are altering the traditional structure of the workplace completely. These new employees place a strong emphasis on work/life balance and prioritize flexible schedules and fewer hours over pay. This is a major shift in priorities when compared to previous generations.

As a highly focused, goal orientated, and extremely ambitious group. Gen Y'ers seek out challenges and are not afraid to speak up and express their opinions. This is a resilient generation with a loud voice that carries very quickly over social media outlets. In addition to being extremely motivated, this grouping of young men and women is extremely collaborative. This is a generation that grew up with team sports and team reassurance. Less emphasis was put on the individual and more on the success of the team. This translates into a generation of people who want to be included and do not shy away from groups.

One of the last major traits of Gen Y that is essential for us to understand is their emotional component. Whether at home, work, travel or play, they have a desire for an emotional connection to what they are doing. They want to be engaged and have a personal experience that resonates with them. This is evident in the celebrity designer brands of goods now being sold at big box retailers. Another example is the evolution of the soft branded hotel that takes on the culture and energy of its location and is flexible with its standards.

So what does this all mean for the hotel industry?

As designers, owners, and operators, we are challenged to reinvent our properties to adhere to the new standards set by the Gen Y traveler. As a whole, we need to recognize the need for Gen Y

guests to connect with and have an emotional attachment to our properties. This emotional component is extremely significant and should not be ignored. As Gen Y seeks out personal travel experiences, it also makes them not as loyal to the typical franchise. When traveling to new areas for short business trips or extended vacations, this group is more focused on staying at a property that provides them with a sense of place and a customized experience that they can take away with them. A thoughtful and more complete grouping of amenities must also be readily available. Remember, this is an instant gratification generation. They are used to answers and responses at the speed of FiOS.

As they travel to new places, this generation is not shy about sharing their thoughts, negative or positive, across their multiple social media networks. We need to ask ourselves at every step of the process - from design and implementation to check-in and room service - how well we are connecting with and servicing our guests.

To accommodate the needs of the Gen Y consumer base, one of the major shifts the hotel industry is making is creating and implementing changes in the guestrooms and lobbies to adapt to Gen Y's new way of thinking and working. The communal table in the lobby was a good first design step but is just the tip of the iceberg. We are now looking at our lobbies, which used to be stopping points on the way to guestrooms, as a new highly interactive and social area for the complete eat/work/play experience. This is now the space for collaboration, social networking, and the work area away from the office.

In the guestrooms, we are thinking less traditionally with regards to the furnishings and looking more towards multi-functional and flexible pieces. This new traveler is not shy about rearranging the furnishings to suit the way they want to work and both the furnishings and room infrastructure must respond to this. We are also strategically placing outlets in areas that make sense for how guests are using the room while increasing the number of outlets so they can plug-in their multiple devices. One example of how a furniture piece can be repurposed in a new manner is the nightstand. Although a small item in the room, it has always been a landing spot for many necessities in the room. With alarm clocks becoming obsolete, room phones being replaced by guests' mobile phones, and bedside lamps being wall mounted or included as part of the headboard, this space is being transformed into a drop area or connection point for guests' devices. Are nightstands even needed anymore? If so, how big do they need to be? As designers, we are now free to ask questions that were not even considered in the past.

Other solid examples of the impact of Gen Y on hospitality design are the boutique collections like Andaz and Autograph being launched and brands like DoubleTree that are uniquely flexible and creating boutique branded elements as they strive to cater to the changing expectations and needs of today's newest travelers.

As we make changes and monitor the responses from our clients' guests, we are seeing that when things are well designed, well received, and the promise of a great experience is delivered, the viral acceptance by today's most vocal generation cannot be taken for granted.

Adhering to the new standards set by Gen Y is a tall order. That being said, if we are learning anything from this new generation it is that we can challenge our standard ways of thinking. When embraced, these changes lead to an exciting time for all of us in the hospitality industry. We no longer have to accept the way things currently are, but can look at the core of the design, the basic function, and reinterpret the way it is delivered.

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As principal of Group One, Wheeler oversees the company's vision as well as the predevelopment and permitting of their urban development projects. Since joining the firm in 1996, he has been involved in all aspects of the design and construction of hundreds of hospitality, residential, and multi-family properties, assisted living and elder care facilities, and retail spaces.

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