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The Challenge of Hotel and Restaurant Sustainability: Finding Profit in “Being Green”

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Abstract

No industry is more exposed to the public’s inspection than is the hospitality industry. Guests at hotels and restaurants have made it clear that they want the industry to operate in a more sustainable manner (although the guests themselves often don’t behave that way). Sustainability initiatives involve improved operations, as well as new facility designs and retrofits for existing properties. Presenters at the Cornell Hospitality Research Summit outlined the challenges and benefits of sustainability in several presentations and speeches. Held in October 2010, the CHRS brought 225 industry leaders and academic researchers to the Cornell campus in Ithaca to address the topics of greatest concern for the hotel and restaurant industry. In addition to sustainability, key issues included analysis of the industry’s market prospects, social media, revenue management, and hotel valuation.

Keywords

Cornell, reservations, online travel agents, hotel pricing control

Disciplines

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Comments

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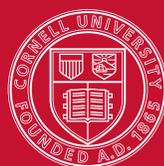
2010 Cornell Hospitality Research Summit



The Challenge of Hotel and Restaurant Sustainability: Finding Profit in "Being Green"

Cornell Hospitality Research Summit Proceedings

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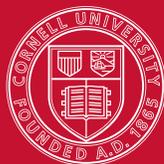
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by Glenn Withiam

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Glenn Withiam is director of publications for the Cornell University Center for Hospitality Research. This report could not have been prepared without the assistance of the following students at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While many hospitality operators are scrambling to improve the sustainability of their operations, many guests are doing nothing of the kind—even though they expect hotels and restaurants to be as “green” as possible. Taking note of this contradiction, speakers and presenters at the Cornell Hospitality Research Summit urged the hospitality industry to move ahead on sustainability, more because it can provide operating savings than because guests demand it. Key points raised during CHRS included the idea that sustainability includes not only environmental issues but also the preservation of local cultures. Design needs to be as efficient as possible, but the environmental aspects of design need to be implicit, since guests are not interested in being expressly educated about “green” operation. No sustainability program makes sense if it does not have a favorable cost-benefit ratio. An efficient design not only conserves resources, but it can make a hotel more viable (and profitable). Energy management should be integrated into hospitality operations so that it responds to actual building use. However, the industry is still struggling to find measurements and benchmarks for “green” operations generally and energy conservation specifically. Guest room energy management is at the forefront of sustainability efforts, but again there is no indication that guests wish to be inconvenienced in any way by a hotel’s energy-saving programs. Food-service operations also face sustainability issues, complicated by guests’ interest in healthy food and local sourcing.

The Challenge of Hotel and Restaurant Sustainability:

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by Glenn Withiam

No industry is more exposed to the public’s inspection than is the hospitality industry. Guests at hotels and restaurants have made it clear that they want the industry to operate in a more sustainable manner (although the guests themselves often don’t behave that way). Sustainability initiatives involve improved operations, as well as new facility designs and retrofits for existing properties. Presenters at the Cornell Hospitality Research Summit outlined the challenges and benefits of sustainability in several presentations and speeches. Held in October 2010, the CHRS brought 225 industry leaders and academic researchers to the Cornell campus in Ithaca to address the topics of greatest concern for the hotel and restaurant industry. In addition to sustainability, key issues included analysis of the industry’s market prospects, social media, revenue management, and hotel valuation.



Sebastian Escarrer, of Sol Melia, called environmentalism the backbone of tourism, since travelers seek to learn about other cultures.

Tourism Is a Force for Good

Keynote speaker Gerald Lawless, executive chairman of Jumeirah Group, issued a clarion call for the hotel industry to improve the sustainability of its operations, both in terms of environment and local cultures. Lawless built his call for sustainability on the core concept that tourism is a force for good—and he urged governments worldwide to eliminate regulations that interfere with the flow of tourists, notably, by air.

Lawless gave the example of Jumeirah's cultural sustainability efforts in Bali. When Jumeirah builds a luxury hotel in a rural community, Lawless views it as important to engage local residents in the travel and tourism industry. At the same time, resort operators can expose visitors to the local culture. In this way, the hotel's development provides benefits to the community. Through the Jumeirah Foundation, the firm can evaluate the needs of the local community.

He explained that one benefit of new construction is the opportunity to minimize a hotel's carbon footprint by applying the latest, most efficient technology, and complying with LEED standards (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design). Guests are included in sustainability efforts, by rewarding them for enjoying their luxurious hotel stay in a responsible fashion.

The Importance of Culture

Sebastian Escarrer, vice chairman of Sol Melia Hotels, who chaired a breakout session on industry sustainability, struck a similar note to the concept that Lawless presented. Escarrer suggested that environmentalism is the backbone of tourism. Invoking his experience in Europe, Escarrer echoed Lawless's concept of sustainability as having both environmental and cultural aspects. He added that social responsibility is essential for hospitality companies. This includes respecting human rights and promoting the best possible working conditions.

One reason that Escarrer highlights the cultural aspect of sustainability is that a location's cultural identity and heritage is what makes that destination stand out so that people find it desirable to visit. That is, discovering a culture is a chief reason that guests are willing to travel thousands of miles. Drawing again from Sol Melia's approach, Escarrer suggested that sustainability is not a program but should become the DNA in corporate culture, value, and strategy.

Future Proofing the Hotel

Pointing to his company's multiple-year record of environmental programs, David Jerome, senior vice president of corporate responsibility for InterContinental Hotels Group, pointed out that sustainability in the hotel business involves a balance. Guests probably would not want to stay in the "greenest" possible hotel, so the question becomes one of what exactly constitutes a green hotel that also works for



Based on his company's long record of sustainability, InterContinental's David Jerome suggested that sustainable operations "future proof" a hotel.



In a keynote speech, Gerald Lawless, of Jumeirah, suggested that sustainability includes both environmental and cultural aspects.

guests. Since IHG runs a substantial portfolio of hotels and is constantly opening new properties, the firm is acutely aware of the challenge in sustainably operating an existing hotel, as well as the need to develop a “green” hotel to begin with.

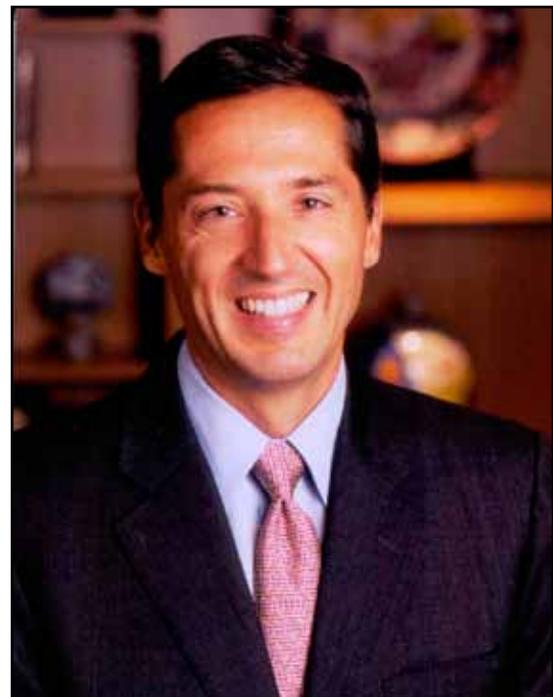
Jerome echoed a key point raised by other speakers—namely, sustainability isn’t charity. Instead, it’s part of running the business. So, energy savings, including ways to engage employees and engage guests, are all a part of the business operation. He rejects the premise that sustainability is expensive. Instead, he considers it an investment for “future-proofing” a hotel business. Noting that customers usually do not put their money where their mouth is when it comes to conservation, he warned that hoteliers should not assume that everyone has the same definition of sustainability, or even understands what sustainability means. Jerome urges shifting to a win-win mentality instead of offering trade-offs to guests. Towel-reuse programs are an example of a trade-off that leaves guests in an awkward position. In effect, the typical towel-reuse program involves asking the guest to compensate for the hotel’s problem. Instead, he suggests focus on guilt-free luxury and well-being that is by definition sustainable.

Effective Sustainable Design

Sustainability starts with hotel design. If the design is inefficient, the hotel operator will face continual challenges to

operator in the most appropriate and economic fashion. Scott Woroch, executive vice president worldwide development for Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, explained the continuous effort his firm makes to ensure that their hotels are designed as efficiently as possible. This approach not only conserves resources, but it makes operations more efficient and allows the hotel to ensure Four Seasons’s high standards. Thus, the company provides input into how the hotel should be programmed and designed to ensure that the integrity of the brand is respected, customers get the experience and level of service they expect, and owners get the return on investment that they are seeking. The key is to assess each feature intended for the hotel to ensure that it is adding value, as driven by customer expectations. Thus, a key design challenge for maximum efficiency and guest value is to have the correct mix of front-of-house areas that generate revenue and back-of-house areas that provide support for revenue generating functions.

As an example of “value engineering,” Woroch cited the Four Seasons development inside Walt Disney World. The property is a 445-key hotel that includes forty residential



Scott Woroch, of Four Seasons, explained the importance of efficient design, both in terms of maintaining customer service levels and for overall operating benefits.

units. The initial hotel design called for nearly 630,000 square feet, but a reconsideration of space for support functions resulted in a final, modified design with just under 565,000 square feet. Woroch explained that this reduction of nearly 65,000 square feet—just over 10 percent of the original total—resulted in a reduction of approximately \$40 million in construction costs, without diminishing the customer experience.

Award-Winning Design

In another design presentation, Raj Chandnani, director of strategy for the design firm WATG, explained how designing properties for sustainable operation is a long-term strategy that can combine money-saving operating efficiencies with green operation. In conjunction with Palo Alto-based IDEO, WATG designed the “Haptik” hotel suite, named after the Greek word for “touch,” which won a design award from the U.S. Green Building Council. As Chandnani explained it, the Haptik idea is more than just a design, since it met the competition’s criteria for education and an overall aesthetic approach, in addition to the sustainable design elements.

Perhaps the keenest insight for the Haptik design process came from IDEO’s research on guests’ attitudes, which led the designers to an unexpected and counterintuitive conclusion. Instead of designing a room for “green” customers, their goal became to design a hotel experience for all customers—an experience that innately includes sustainable principles. By focusing on “green” customers, Chandnani warned, it’s possible to alienate others who are not so interested in sustainability. Thus, the design elements for the Haptik concept were targeted at a goal of establishing a quality indoor environment, even as the design included energy-saving attributes, such as water efficiency, energy and atmosphere controls, and appropriate materials and resources.

With regard to Haptik’s design, WATG reasoned that the greatest resource consumption involved constructing the room itself, so their idea was to make an efficient space that used a minimum of materials. One-third of the room is outside the building, and the suite has separate functional zones for arrival, sleeping, and dining. Instead of an in-room minibar, the concept offers guests a coffee press and locally produced pastries. In the end, Chandnani explained that the room is intended to be an overall experience that includes sustainable principles. The room doesn’t include an expressly “green” educational message, because outright efforts to “educate” guests with regard to sustainability constitute a design failure.

Finding a Sustainability Benchmark

Throughout the CHRS presentations on sustainability, a recurring theme was the problem of measurement, and,



WATG’s Raj Chandnani explained that sustainable design is a long-term strategy for efficiency.



Paul Hamilton, of Schneider Electric, suggests that the best approach to energy management is to integrate it into corporate management.

Nitin Joglekar, of Boston University, explained the need for sustainability measurements and benchmarks.



more particularly, benchmarking. Nitin Joglekar, associate professor of operations and technology management at Boston University School of Management, suggested that the measurement challenge is one of the greatest issues for sustainable hospitality. This problem embodies both a lack of information about resource consumption patterns and a lack of standardized benchmarks for resource consumption. Joglekar proposed that the boundaries for a hotel's sustainability efforts are wide, because they should include all players in the service process. Those three players in to a hotel's service operations, Joglekar noted, are the operator, the customer, and the owner. For the operator, he proposed a sustainability index, comprising behavioral and operating scores, that managers could use as one benchmark. Given the observation that customers will behave more or less as they please, Joglekar suggested encouraging guests to be conscious of environmental issues. He stated that "green" customers increase profitability. To owners, Joglekar added that reducing consumption enhances profitability, but each hotel needs to find its own path to sustainability, since one size doesn't fit all.

The benchmark which Joglekar presented, was based on the results of a study that was intended to begin the effort of establishing measurement standards. With Jie Zhang and Rohit Verma, Joglekar examined actual hotel expenditures, as recorded in the *Uniform System of Accounts for Hotels*. They identified two sets of expenses. One set, which they termed a "behavioral factor," was influenced by the number of guests in the property. This factor is largely driven by laundry, linen, and supplies for both rooms and F&B operations. The other set, termed an operating factor, was inherent in the hotel's design. This was based primarily on electricity, water and sewer, and maintenance expenses. Thus, one set, the operating factor, could be controlled by management and the other set, the behavioral factor, was more difficult to control. More details of this study can be found in the CHR report: "[Developing Measures for Environmental Sustainability in Hotels: An Exploratory Study](#)," by Jie J. Zhang, Nitin Joglekar, and Rohit Verma.

Integrating Energy Management

Energy management is a large portion of sustainability strategies, and Paul Hamilton, vice president of energy

efficiency at Schneider Electric, foresees no likelihood that existing energy challenges will abate. Indeed, as energy demand escalates (doubling from current levels by 2050), we need to find ways to produce sufficient energy while cutting CO₂ emissions in half by 2050. The most likely approach to this challenge is a combination of cleaner energy generation and energy efficiency. To help hotels operate as efficiently as possible, Hamilton suggests that energy management must become a corporate commitment, just as quality assurance did in an earlier day. If that seems like an odd suggestion, he points out that ten years ago no hotel had a quality management person on the executive committee, but now quality management is a mainline part of management. In the same way, hotels should add energy management to their executive committee.

Hamilton sees a parallel between energy management and other management issues, suggesting a life-cycle approach similar to that used for finance, quality, and safety. Although hotels and restaurants have been tightening up their energy conservation efforts for decades, there's still room for more conservation. Hotels can use software that integrates energy use into business practices—for example, a wireless heating (or cooling) and lighting system. Hotels can also work with vendors to encourage sustainable operations. Walmart, for instance, is doing this with its supply chain, to the point where the company knows exactly where its products and raw materials come from.

Like other speakers, Hamilton emphasized the importance of integrating sustainability, rather than simply trying to add a few energy-saving or recycling programs. Although it's appropriate to state sustainability initiatives as a matter of fact, guests are sensitive to the possibility that a hotel is overstating its environmental commitment. He pointed out that guests are nonplussed, for instance, when they see the card that invites them to reuse their towels. Instead they want to know what that particular hotel is doing to make a difference.

Guest Room Energy Conservation

In another set of presentations focusing on implementing energy conserving practices in hotels, two Cornell University professors explained their work on energy retrofits. Lindsay Anderson, an adjunct assistant professor of biological and environmental engineering at Cornell, has been examining ways that hotels and other businesses can integrate renewable energy into power systems. This includes so-called “smart buildings,” which integrate energy infrastructure with the data on the user preferences and occupancy levels. As a practical matter, the generally accepted concept is that conservation retrofits must not affect the guest's experience.

Alex Susskind, associate professor at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration, presented preliminary findings of a

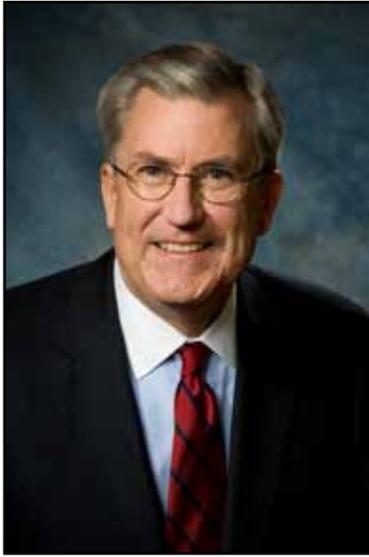
Cornell's Lindsey Anderson, below, and Alex Susskind, left, outlined their study on energy saving changes to guest rooms at the Statler Hotel.



study that manipulated guest room energy use in a way that is intended to go unnoticed. Cornell's Statler Hotel, which is both a commercial hotel and a laboratory for student education and academic research, hosted the project to see what type of energy saving treatments can be implemented without interfering with guest satisfaction.

Explaining the methodology involved in that project, and its outcomes, Susskind pointed out that as a fundamental principle, no sustainability program or energy treatment can be implemented unless it also makes economic sense.

With support of the Philips Corporation, the Statler project installed energy-efficient bathroom lighting and televisions in the hotel's guestrooms. The televisions are set up with one of three possible settings for different levels of energy savings, with the idea of determining whether guests notice the different settings. In particular, the project seeks to determine whether there is a connection between energy treatments and the guests' overall evaluation of their hotel experience. That is, they may not specifically notice an energy conservation treatment, but they might comment that the bathroom lights are inadequate (in rooms where the bathroom lighting was manipulated to one of four settings). Guests are randomly assigned to the rooms with the energy saving treatments. They are asked to evaluate several dimensions of the room (bathroom, technology, bed, and linens) to disguise the actual intent of the study (which is, of course, to find out their reactions, if any, to either the TV or bathroom lighting manipulations).



Hudson Riehle, of the National Restaurant Association, tied together the many trends that are involved in sustainability for the restaurant industry, in particular, local food sourcing.

Although the study was still underway at the time of CHRS, initial findings are that guests' satisfaction levels with the television and the hotel in general has not been affected by any energy treatment. Guests report being satisfied with their rooms in all cases—not a surprising outcome, given that the hotel just upgraded all 150 of its rooms and was recently awarded a four-diamond rating from AAA.

As other researchers have discovered, Susskind's survey has found that even though guests expect hotels to save energy and operate sustainably, the guests themselves generally make no particular effort to conserve energy in their rooms, nor are they willing to pay more for an energy-efficient room. Moreover, they do not use the presence or absence of sustainability programs as a factor in their decision set to select a brand or property. This finding supports the suggestions made by several CHRS speakers to the effect that sustainable practices must be integrated into hotel operations. Although guests want to see sustainability, that alone is not sufficient to encourage guest bookings.

The Challenge of Food-Service Sustainability

If anything, sustainable operation is an even greater thicket for restaurants and other food and beverage outlets. Susskind said that 58 percent of restaurant companies identify implementing green operation as a strategic initiative. In addition to energy costs, F&B facilities also face ingredient and

material costs and production and packaging costs. However, the main barrier to sustainable operation for restaurants is similar to that of hotels, namely, money, or, more specifically, quantifying a return on investment, the cost of green technologies, and the necessary capital requirements for sustainability initiatives.

Focusing more directly on the restaurant industry, Hudson Riehle, senior vice president of the research and knowledge group, National Restaurant Association, pointed to the many interrelated trends that complicate sustainability in F&B operations. In many instances, consumers' major concerns are the sustainability of the food supply, as much as the restaurant operations themselves. Those concerns about sustainable food supplies, blend in with guests' desire to eat a more healthy diet (reported by three out of four adults surveyed), and concerns about food allergies and ingredient issues, such as celiac disease.

As examples of food-supply sustainability, Riehle said that consumers are now expecting to know the source of their food, and they are seeking locally grown produce and (to the extent possible) locally sourced meat and seafood, not to mention locally produced wine and beer. Riehle identified the half portion or bite-size dessert as a major trend for many restaurants. Operators can take advantage of these trends by identifying the source of menu items, offering half portions (often as tapas) for a smaller price than the full entrée, and emphasizing fresh products. Riehle said that three out of four restaurateurs reported that fresh products bring more customers to restaurants.

Hospitality Research in Practice Award Acknowledges Wyndham's Sustainability Program

A highlight of the Cornell Hospitality Research Summit was the inaugural Hospitality Research in Practice Award, which acknowledged successful research-driven business innovations by four companies: Best Western, McDonald's, Taj, and Wyndham. The Wyndham program, which won honorable mention, was an example of sustainability in action.

Having established a six-point sustainability program called Wyndham Green, Wyndham Worldwide assisted in the development of one of the first eco-friendly uniform programs in the hospitality industry. Working with its existing supplier, Cintas, Wyndham developed uniforms made with recycled polyester, such as from plastic beverage bottles. The effort required numerous "wear tests," and the chosen fabric had to have a proper hand, as well as resist pilling and abrasion. The result was two uniform lines that will gradually be phased in systemwide as existing uniforms are replaced.

By selecting a recycled polyester apparel program, Wyndham helped divert nearly 70,000 water bottles from landfills. Not only does this process keep water bottles out

of the waste stream, but it reduces energy consumption by as much as 33 percent compared to manufacturing virgin fibers from crude oil. It also reduces carbon dioxide emissions by 47 percent and helps decrease harmful air emissions. As an additional benefit, the fabric requires no special laundry treatment, and can be washed in conventional machines.

In addition to the uniform program, Wyndham utilizes several ecologically friendly practices including the use of energy-efficient compact fluorescent lighting, low-flow water faucets and shower heads, an “Earth Smart” guest linen reuse program and numerous recycling efforts. Wyndham Hotels and Resorts was also the first national upscale lodging chain to mandate allergy-friendly rooms systemwide. ■



Faith Taylor, vice president of sustainability and innovation for Wyndham Worldwide, accepts honorable mention in the 2010 Hospitality Research in Practice award from Professor Gary Thompson, past executive director of the Cornell Center for Hospitality Research. Wyndham developed a program that creates uniforms recycled from plastic beverage containers.

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