TECH TALK

Hoteliers are leveraging the power of technology to drive operational efficiencies as well as improve and personalise the guest experience

BY BINDU GOPAL RAO

Technology is an important driver as far as hospitality is concerned, as this is an aspect that hoteliers are betting big on. Rapid access to real-time information by new-age software empowers people to contribute to profitability. The utilisation of technology has helped eliminate bottlenecks, and the associates can focus on their core job roles faster and in a simplified manner. Some other benefits of new-age software include less human interaction; real-time availability of information and reduced manpower.

DO THE NEW
Artificial Intelligence/Machine Learning (AI/ML) is now being deployed in hotels to churn thousands of data points and make sense of it all. The industry is moving towards paperless technology post COVID. Remote working and management are trending post-COVID; therefore, technology such as Ecobillz, which digitises everything that is printed and makes all documents/data

➥ Ameet Patil, Founder & CEO, Ecobillz

available remotely via the cloud, is being adopted. Ameet Patil, Founder & CEO, Ecobillz, explains, "Ecobillz ensures smooth operations in the hands of less-skilled resources. It uses AI to provide a great guest experience in terms of online check-in/check-out, payment reconciliation, bank reconciliation, and performing mundane and painful income audits within minutes and is completely automated. Automated Online Travel Agencies (OTA) reconciliation technologies are trending. Back-office automation using technologies such as AI/ML to reduce manual work and improve efficiency are trend-

ing." Technological advancements for the guest experience interface where a guest can scan a QR code available on the television screen for information on the hotel and tools that allow guests to order food via in-room dining are also widespread. Digital Signage has been a game-changer for the hotel. The ability to showcase time-based, relevant and appealing content is easier and helps increase awareness about offerings, and in-house guest captivation has seen a visible growth.

NO-TOUCH FACTOR
Facial recognition technology is used for keyless entry systems, to identify VIP guests, and to screen people who have been problematic in the past. Sandeep Singh, Director of Operations, JW Marriott Mumbai Sahar, adds, "One of the technological advancements the hotel set up is a digital guest experience interface, where a guest can scan a QR code available on our television screen for information on the hotel. The tool also allows guests to order food via in-room dining. It has helped reduce physical and telephonic guest interaction whilst making it seamless for guests to view and engage with the team. The hotel has also replaced all printed collaterals with

➥ Marthesh Nagendra, Country Manager - India, ME & SAARC, Netgear.

➥ Smart technologies, provided by companies like Netgear, have vastly influenced the overall services of hotels.

digital signage, allowing us to schedule content for various time slots."

CONTEMPORARY VIBE
The key focus now is on emerging and alternative forms of payment and new developments in integrated payment systems. Alternative forms of payment include anything beyond the typical card and cash transactions. Technology is not only a pivotal step towards providing information in a timely and accurate manner but is also important in easing out processes. Conrad Bengaluru also has IoT-based real-time monitoring for STP water quality. This takes care of real-time monitoring for chilled water systems and hot water systems. "Real-time monitoring of STP and other key parameters of chilled water and hot water systems are already installed with IoT. Installation of an in-house system is in the pipeline for cold storage monitoring. Sensor-based energy and water-saving initiative in all the washrooms and guest rooms is also a part of this technological overhaul. BMS helps monitor major services like HVAC, kitchen ventilation and firefighting. We can schedule the operation and maintain the IAQ efficiently with it.

"Additionally, there is better tracking of guest profiles and preferences. There is a decrease in check-in and check-out time. A reduction in the time between receiving the request and closing it. Lastly, there is an availability of a common database for consistency in service delivery," says Natchimuthu Subbaraj, Chief Engineer, Conrad Bengaluru.

PANDEMIC CUES
According to consumer survey statistics, contactless payments are on top of the list of tech adoption in the hospitality industry post-pandemic. A few hotels are also accepting cryptocurrency as a payment. COVID-19 has accelerated the infusion of emerging technology and software into hotel operations. These self-service systems help personalise guest stays in the middle of a pandemic; integrating state-of-the-art technology has been paramount for

hotels to keep in operation. The pandemic has also had a powerful impact on contactless technology, such as mobile check-ins and advanced cleaning technology to minimise direct human-to-human contact. Using their mobile device, guests can now check-in, check out, control the temperature of their entire room or even order in-room dining. Chatbots and communication apps are just a few of the new technologies that have helped improve the guest experience. "The chatbot tool is gaining significance as guests can now post a query directly on the system, and the hotel associates can then provide them with access to what has been requested. Innovative hotel applications are offering interesting capabilities that can grant guests increased ability to engage with hotel staff with the comforts of their smartphones," says Shibil Malik, GM, Sheraton Grand Bengaluru at Brigade Gateway. The pandemic has transformed the idea of using robotics from a novelty concept to an efficient one. For example, robots can provide contactless room service delivery and room cleaning, reducing the chances of spreading Covid.

BOOSTING THE BOTTOM LINE

Enhanced forecasting and revenue maximisation is vital in today's unpredictable market conditions. These platforms help focus on demand factors and accordingly help forecast revenue with better accuracy. These smart tools help hotels determine

➲ Natchimuthu Subbaraj, Chief Engineer, Conrad Bengaluru

➲ Shibil Malik, GM, Sheraton Grand Bengaluru

what their demand will be for every day as far as 365 days into the future. Forecasts help each department in the hotel make smarter operations and decisions. "Smart technologies have vastly influenced the overall services of hotels. From operations to guest experience to marketing, these technologies offer a variety of cost savings and revenue opportunities. These advanced technologies facilitate the hotel owners to reach new levels of profitability while providing the guest with more personalised experiences," says Marthesh Nagendra, Country Manager - India, ME & SAARC, Netgear. Technology can help organisations streamline their processes, lowering expenses, reducing worker workloads, increasing income production potential, and improving the level of customer service provided.

➲ From operations to guest experience to marketing, these technologies offer a variety of cost savings and revenue opportunities. (Image courtesy: Netgear)

⮕ Technology can help organisations streamline their processes, lowering expenses, reducing worker workloads. (Image courtesy: Netgear)

TECHNOLOGY MATTERS

Chatbots, virtual and augmented reality, digital signage, block-chain and IoT are driving the technology used in hotels. Hoteliers are using machine learning-based technologies for managing inventory and rates, as well as tools for mapping guest journeys. When engaging with the hotel directly on the website, guests would have a journey that is easy and convenient to navigate and having a 360º photo journey for the accommodation and facilities as a key element. Ideally, the guest journey should culminate into a booking in only three steps. Abinash Manghani, CEO, WelcomHeritage Hotels, explains, "Our travel agent-partnership platform, Onefinerate.com will be launched shortly, following which all listed/non-listed travel agents will be able to make reservations using the OFR platform on our website, with rates and commissions as applicable to them. One clear advantage for agents and guests will be receiving confirmation within 45 seconds. Partners with special rates will also be able to view their rates against market rates to maintain price integrity across channels. All commissions due will appear on confirmations, and a dashboard of commissions due for materialised reservations will soon be a key part of the service."

GUEST GOALS

The hospitality sector has been gradually evolving and developing in many aspects, including food, service delivery, and hotel struc-

⮕ Abinash Manghani, CEO, WelcomHeritage Hotels

⮕ Nishant Nishoo, Director of Sales, 75F - India

tures. Contactless/touchless experience, keyless entry enabled locks, digital apps and QR codes, e-menus, advanced PMS software that is enabled with loyalty programmes, F&B preferences of their guests, preferred rooms, cloud-based IoT for energy management and automation are all tools aimed at improving the guest experience. Beyond addressing critical connectivity needs, investing in wireless can help hotels and restaurants develop new and differentiated service offerings that can help meet critical business objectives such as increasing revenue and customer loyalty while improving operational efficiencies. There has been a lot of emphasis on technological advancements, particularly over the past two years. These advancements have been seen across multi-folds, providing ease in operations to focusing on customer needs. There is a seamless experience for every hotel guest, al-

⮕ The digital signages have been a game-changer for JW Marriott Mumbai Sahar, giving them the ability to showcase content that is relevant and has also reduced paper usage at the property.

lowing each guest a more personalised service with the available date. Automatically, each guest feels connected to the property, building a brand loyalist.

Green fingers

Smart hotel chains are listening and changing how they operate to reduce their environmental impact. Nishant Nishoo, Director of Sales, 75F, India, says, "The current trend is toward sustainability and energy management, for which we have IOT-based energy savings gear and software that can save up to 20% on HVAC energy consumptions. In terms of guest comfort, we have our innovative thermostat – Hyper stat – which can provide eight

parameters, including VOC level, CO_2 level, PM 2.5/PM 10 in addition to temperature and RH. We have occupant software that can be used with the existing PMS to create a platform. Furthermore, with an automated system in place, we will have fewer human errors and a more reliable system, which can lead to more satisfied and repeat customers while saving energy and making the building more efficient and healthier." Araiya as a brand has seamlessly integrated effective and efficient technology solutions into the ecosystems to enhance both the guest brand experience as well as the operational team efficiency. "At Araiya, we have been very agile with our technology stack, and we are 100% cloud-ready and already on SaaS models. Our technology and design efficiently deliver a luxury experience to guests defined by the

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UI/UX. We are almost 60%+ cheaper on technology costs for owners with their one-time investment compared to some of the leading brands in India. Operationally also, we are close to 35% lower, and our efforts are moving towards a fully cloud-managed hotel to reduce the capital cost by 80%," explains Murlidhar Rao, COO, Araiya Hotels. Technology is the way forward, and investing and upgrading it can help hoteliers get a competitive edge. ⊞

⮕ Murlidhar Rao, COO, Araiya Hotels