

GRAND PARK CITY HALL

Grand new approach to hotel stays

Grand Park City Hall's multi-purpose mobile app aims to tackle existing challenges and take the hotel into the future.

WITH its latest redevelopment, Grand Park City Hall has not just transformed physically, but gained a digital edge too. The hotel on Coleman Street reopened at the start of 2018 with a brand new look – and a brand new mobile application which guests can use to check in, access their room, and enjoy their stay.

When refurbishment plans began in 2016, the hotel was already over two decades old. Park Hotel Group chief executive officer Allen Law wanted to bring it forward and renew it “for its next 25 years”.

The group thus studied available technologies in the market that they could adopt.

They hit upon an idea that could both tackle existing challenges and take the hotel into the future: a multi-purpose mobile app.

“Our whole starting point is from the guest experience,” says Mr Law. “We’re trying to give the guests convenience and control when they come to the hotel.”

Before arrival, guests receive an email notifying them about the app.

Upon downloading it, they gain access to hotel information and an instant messaging function that puts them in touch with the reception.

They thus know they have “full support from the hotel even before they arrive”, says Mr Law.

The app can be used to make new bookings or change existing ones.

Guests can also use the app to scan their passports and enter their credit card details in advance, which will speed up the check-in process on the day itself.

Admittedly, few people show up with the app already downloaded.

“Most of the guests may not actually know we have this app yet,” says Mr Law.

But when the app is introduced to them upon arrival, most people do want to give it a try, he adds.

Those who do not wish to download it on their own devices can instead borrow mobile phones – with the app pre-loaded – from the front desk.

Replacing the traditional hotel keycard, the app is used to access the lifts and unlock room doors. In the room, it can be used to control the lighting, air-conditioning, and even the television.

Room service orders and front desk requests can also be made via the app instead of the traditional telephone call.

BACKEND BENEFITS

Besides providing guests with a high-tech experience, the app also aims to provide greater efficiency and customer insights for Grand Park City Hall itself.

While things are “still at an early stage”, Mr Law hopes that data collected through the app can be used to build up a picture of different traveller profiles and their preferences.

This will give the hotel a data-backed understanding of how the preferences of business travellers, for instance, differ from those of family groups.

Preferences could also be analysed according to age groups or where guests hail from.

In the meantime, Grand Park City Hall is already reaping immediate benefits from how the app connects with and feeds into disparate systems across the hotel. These include the keycard system, property management, finance and accounting, and building maintenance.

For instance, if the app is used upon check-out to settle the hotel bill, this information is fed directly into Grand Park City Hall's finance system.

Even the customer-facing aspects of the app can increase efficiency. With the app being used to scan passports at check-in, reception staff no longer need to laboriously type up guest details.

“It removes a lot of the time traditionally spent doing data entry or transactional work,” says Mr Law.

Instead of focusing on such manual tasks, staff can focus on welcoming the guests, he adds.

“Our colleagues can actually spend their valuable time with the guests, understanding them, engaging them, and being able to provide more personalised service.”

The need for such changes is especially pressing given a long-running challenge in the hospitality sector: the manpower crunch.

Given this labour shortage, it is important to “make the best use of (employees’) time”, says Mr Law.

The hotel's push for efficiency thus goes beyond developing an app. Other improvements include an automated system for staff to pick up and drop off their uniforms.

The hotel is also working to improve some inter-



Besides providing guests with a high-tech experience, Grand Park City Hall's new mobile app aims to provide greater efficiency and customer insights for the hotel's management, says Park Hotel Group CEO Allen Law.

PHOTO: YEN MENG JIIN

nal workflow processes, such as petty cash claims and purchasing, by moving everything online: from filling in forms to obtaining approval and undergoing checks.

“We are combing through the entire operation of the hotel, finding opportunities to cut down some of the not-so-value-adding work,” Mr Law sums up.

GETTING HELP

What helped Grand Park City Hall in its journey was that it did not have to go it alone. The mobile app was developed with funding support from the Singapore Tourism Board’s (STB) Business Improvement Fund.

The fund encourages tourism sector firms to innovate, adopt technology or redesign business models and processes to improve productivity and competitiveness. Small and medium enterprises can receive support of up to 70 per cent of qualifying costs, and non-SMEs can receive support for up to half of qualifying costs.

The funding “made the decision-making a lot easier,” says Mr Law.

It would have been a tough call otherwise, due to the largely intangible and unquantifiable benefits, he says: “It is hard to put a finger on the dollar amount of guest satisfaction.”

This is especially so since the app “did not set out to drive revenue”, he adds. “It’s more of a customer

experience enhancement app.”

The STB also provided ideas such as using facial recognition for check-in. To pilot this, Grand Park City Hall is part of a regulatory sandbox with the Ministry of Home Affairs and STB.

Nor did Grand Park City Hall have to develop the app on their own. Instead, they worked with tech vendor GTRIIP.

The tech firm’s key concept is “document-less travel”, says GTRIIP chief executive officer Maxim Thaw Tint. Founded in 2014, the firm released its off-the-shelf app in 2016.

This app is used by smaller hotels in the Jalan Besar area for check-in, as well as by member clubs, gyms and co-working spaces for access.

In contrast to the off-the-shelf product, Grand Park City Hall’s app is the first fully customised app developed by GTRIIP.

Says Mr Maxim Thaw Tint: “In hospitality, the branding and the customer experience need to be very tailored.”

Grand Park City Hall’s app certainly sets them apart. But Mr Law acknowledges that being ahead of the curve may mean being ahead of guest preferences: “Customers today may not be used to the app.”

That is why the hotel still offers guests the option of using a traditional keycard.

Still, he is convinced that this is the right direction to take, to keep pace with consumer behaviour and expectations.

This is particularly true when it comes to younger generations, for whom mobile apps are part of their everyday lives. He notes: “We need to ensure that we ourselves are in touch with the platform that our guests are used to.”

The final stage of Grand Park City Hall’s refurbishment – its retail podium – is on track to be completed by the third quarter of 2018. Work on the app, however, has not wrapped up, with the hotel continuing to fine-tune the user experience.

Guest feedback has already prompted small tweaks to the user interface, such as enlarging or moving certain icons for a smoother experience.

Future plans include adding more language options to the app, which is currently available only in English.

Constant improvement and progress, after all, is the idea behind Grand Park City Hall’s digital drive.

“We believe it’s the future of hotel operations,” says Mr Law. “What we’re trying to do is build the hotel of the future.”



A better experience for staff, too

GRAND Park City Hall’s mobile application provides a better experience not just for guests, but also for the hotel’s frontline staff as well.

“Of course it’s easier for us too,” says Daniel Peh, 26, who has been with the hotel since 2014.

Since the middle of 2017, he has been serving at the front desk as a guest services executive.

At check-in, the mobile app can now be used to scan guests’ passports, saving time for both the guests and the staff.

“There’s no need to type in all the details, so it’s faster for us – especially when the names are long,” says Mr Peh.

During their stay, guests can also use the app to make requests for items such as water, plates or towels, instead of calling the reception.

The requests show up instantly on the front desk screens. This helps the busy staff as well, adds Mr Peh: “Sometimes you don’t have time to pick up a call.”

There are also environmental benefits, he notes. The app-based check-in process is paperless, eliminating the need to print out forms for guests to sign.

With most guests using the app to access their room, far fewer keycards and keycard holders are needed, thus saving plastic and paper.

Admittedly, not many guests arrive at the hotel with the app already downloaded.

But Mr Peh and his colleagues will introduce guests to the app upon arrival. Out of every 10

guests, about five to seven are intrigued and will then use the app to check in, he says.

“They will be like, ‘Wow, what is this?’ It’s a new experience for them.”

By freeing front desk staff from the need to take down details, the app not only saves time, but also encourages more meaningful interaction.

“We can spend more time connecting with guests and find out more about them,” says Dimitria binte Hamzah, 19, who joined the hotel as a guest services officer in February 2018 after a six-month internship.

Another function of the app which has benefited both guests and staff is the ability to control the room’s air-conditioning and lighting.

“Most of the guests prefer the app. Inside the room, they may find the control panel a bit hard to use,” says Ms Dimitria.

Previously, the front desk used to receive many calls from guests who needed help with navigating the in-room control panel, she says.

Now, with many guests relying on the easy-to-use app instead, such calls are much less common.

Another innovation at Grand Park City Hall has benefited staff on both sides of the service: its automated uniform control system.

To get a fresh uniform at the start of the day, an employee simply needs to tap his or her staff card at a card reader next to a pick-up slot.

The corresponding RFID-tagged uniform, ready on its numbered hanger, will be delivered by a conveyor line in a matter of seconds.

This process used to be more manual – not least for Peggy Tan, 72, who has worked as a linen attendant in the housekeeping department since 2006.

Previously, when staff members wanted to pick up their uniform, she would be the one sending it to them.

This involved manually controlling the conveyor: pressing a button to rotate it until the hook arrived, hanging up the corresponding uniform, and then sending it back to the waiting staff member.

Now, she merely has to hang up the washed uniforms on their respective hangers each morning, all at one go.

This task, too, is partly automated. When she scans a uniform’s RFID tag, the conveyor brings the corresponding numbered hanger to her directly, so she does not have to spend time looking for it.

What Ms Tan likes most about the new system is that it allows her to concentrate on her role as a seamstress.

Before the automated system was introduced, her sewing work was often interrupted by having to deliver uniforms to staff.

“With this new one, I don’t need to serve them. It saves a lot of time for me,” she says with a smile.

Guest services officer Dimitria Hamzah (left) and guest services executive Daniel Peh find that the app not only saves time, but also encourages more meaningful interaction with guests. Linen attendant Peggy Tan (centre) is now able to concentrate on her role as a seamstress, with the automated uniform control system.

PHOTO: YEN MENG JIIN

Mr Law is convinced that the new app is the right direction to take, to keep pace with consumer behaviour and expectations. This is particularly true when it comes to younger generations, for whom mobile apps are part of their everyday lives. He notes: “We need to ensure that we ourselves are in touch with the platform that our guests are used to.”