



Advancing the Business of Hospitality & Tourism

STAYING AHEAD IN THE HOSPITALITY GAME

How can you deliver on the promise that your brand makes, or build transformational travel experiences? What is the relationship between celebrations and connecting with employees and customers?

These and other critical issues facing the travel and hospitality industry were tackled head-on by top consultants and thought leaders at the Asia Connect Leadership Forum held on May 25-26, 2017 at Grand Copthorne Waterfront Hotel Singapore.

In the age of the empowered consumer - who can easily amplify his/her delight or discontent - the travel and hospitality industry needs to gear up and develop robust customer experience management. Key to this are a business' brand and employees.

Keynote speaker Dr Janelle Barlow kicked off Day 1 of the conference - themed *Connecting On All Fronts: Amp Up Engagement & Holistic Brand Experience* - by reminding delegates that a brand is a promise of performance which can only be met by great customer service.

The noted public speaker, trainer, entrepreneur and best-selling author of business books spoke on *The Branded Customer Experience: A Pathway to a Powerful & Sustainable Business Strategy*; pointing out that while keeping customers is not as complex as getting them, it remains the bigger challenge. Hence, differentiating your service and linking it to your brand is how you stand out in the marketplace.

"There has to be a strong culture that is aligned with your rational and emotional brand position," says Dr Barlow, adding that the focus has to move from the features of brands to the emotions they conjure up. And while product branding has more impact on the attraction of customers, it is service branding that has the greater effect on customer retention.

This means it's time to re-evaluate customer service, looking at whether your customer service is good and if your customers are satisfied, engaged and emotionally connected with your brand.

Because not everyone will become your customer, businesses must figure out which ones they want and go after those. And everything in the sales experience has to be lined up to match this. Meaning, business operations have to revolve around customers and there must be consistent service delivery.

Her advice?

- **Stop** trying to be someone else. Use your own brand DNA to create your brand vision and future because generic customer service is no longer good enough as it won't engage customers

- **Stop** scripting your staff. Companies should educate staff for service competency rather than merely train them for service
- **Go** pay attention to your culture. Internal brand behaviours should be visible internally, influence how the brand promise is delivered and inspire everyone
- **Go** set some brand standards. Everything has to be brought into the branding process and every department has to be involved, with management leading the way

In the lively panel discussion that followed, Lawrence Lee, Senior Vice President HR, Millennium Hotels & Resorts, said that selection is the most important thing in human resource. “If you hire the wrong person, neither training nor compensation can change him or her. So if you want service that meets the brand promise, it starts with the person facing the guest.”

Meanwhile, Neeta Lachmandas, Executive Director at Institute of Service Excellence at Singapore Management University, highlighted the urgent need for a fundamental re-look at the roles of service staff via data analytics. “Hotels can collect data and have the massive opportunity to measure a lot of things, yet so few are doing it. It requires a lot of effort, investment and a big push from senior management. But you have to base all your decisions on research, surveys and consumer data and not rely on your gut feel.”

Kathleen Tan, President North Asia, AirAsia, shared how low-cost carriers disrupted full service airlines by using technology to their advantage, such as online bookings. “We went online because of the generation we are in, which is very educated. If they don’t like something, they will go online to leave their comments. The customer is king, but the digital generation is even more vocal and they want speed, so transparency is critical.”

The fact that travellers have access to all kinds of resources, and are more mobile, better informed and have higher expectations than ever before, is also dealt with by another keynote speaker, Dr Mike Hampton, Dean of the Chaplin School of Hospitality & Tourism Management at Florida International University.

Dr Hampton emphasised that transformational travel experiences are built on details and an understanding of what drives guest satisfaction and gives them the “wow” factor.

“We have to think about the ideal guest experience before we start doing anything. We have to have the right vision, then start to put pieces together to make that happen,” he says. “We have to get out of the box and start thinking strategically, and look at the world differently and act tactically. We have to constantly assess our feedback mechanism to help us get to the strategic position we want to be.”

Because every customer is different, businesses have to think globally but act locally. “There is only a market of one because each individual has specific things he or she wants when they travel. The husband, wife and kids each have different expectations. So catering to each person can only happen when we have the right insight and data that tells us about these individuals, how they make their decisions and what influences these decisions not just for today, but also in future.”

Looking at the broader picture, it’s about the customer’s entire travel experience and how businesses play into that. “What influences can we have in their mode of transportation, food and drink, spa experiences – all these variables should be important,” says Dr Hampton. “The world is changing fast – we have to constantly change too and constantly assess how customers are thinking and behaving differently today from yesterday, with their new mobility, insights and expectations.”

Following this, Robin Yap, President Asia of The Travel Corporation, underscored the role of senior management in the future of transformational experiences: “Transformation needs top-down change. It’s important to get the top guy so he’s inspired too.”

On the B2B front, Sean Treacy, Managing Director of Royal Caribbean Cruises (Asia), says his company has launched and completely streamlined its sales force in the United Kingdom so everything, including “their last discussion with agents and their likes and dislikes”, is on their phones now. “We’ve made quite a bit of investment in technology to know our agents well.”

Looking ahead, artificial intelligence will change the game again for everyone, says Puneet Mahindroo, Senior Director of Hotel Marketing and Revenue Management, Asia Pacific, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts. “It’s a trend to watch in the long run and the implications it could have on businesses. If people are not already thinking about it, they definitely need to.”

On Day 2 of the conference, Scott Friedman, motivational humourist, author and Chief Celebration Officer at Friedman & Associates, shared how organisations can use celebration as a strategic tool to truly engage and connect with employees and customers.

“We define celebration as acknowledging all that is good in all that you do, the people you work with and the people you do it for. Celebrating the big and small things is an attitude and way we approach life. If you can change your lens, you can change your language and life.”

The essentials for celebrations to be effective are:

- **Inclusiveness** - Make sure staff feel assured that they are included and find a growth strategy for employees so they stay longer
- **Gratitude** - The quickest way to get rid of negative emotions is to have an attitude of gratitude. It’s far more important how you define your experiences and the stories you tell yourself about those experiences than the experiences themselves
- **Play** - Live in the present moment. Start with a good sense of humour, get creative, always innovate and look for opportunities because sometimes it’s the littlest things that make all the difference
- **Surprise** – Include an element of the unexpected. Catch people doing something right and provide the element of delight - not just for customers but also staff

Conference delegates also had the opportunity to attend ‘Fast Track’ Workshops with Master Classes by:

- Lucas Peng, Chief Executive Officer, Peak Hospitality Solutions, on personal and innovative leadership to inspire and achieve peak performance in a fast-changing, disrupted yet connected business world;
- Daniel Ord, Founder & Director, OmniTouch International, on differentiating the brand experience in this highly connected-sharing economy using the omni-channel approach; and
- Lisa Watson, Regional Customer Success & Commercial Business Development Lead, HP Inc, on innovations in using data to disrupt the customer experience

In Ms Watson’s session, titled *Pokemon Pioneers*, she showed how the world is exploding with data, taking everyone into a world of data-driven marketing.

“It’s about using data to make your marketing decisions,” she says. “When you find a tiny bit of data before anyone else, that becomes your competitive edge.”

Customers today expect an omni-channel experience, in which all the channels work together and there is consistency in the messaging. Along with the mobile phone, which has empowered everyone, is the exponential growth of data.

“Marketing is no longer about companies telling consumers what to do but consumers telling companies what they want,” she points out. “It’s all about the consumer. Even if they searched and found the cheapest price for a room, they expect a great room. The millennial generation is used to having what they want when they want it.”

The message for marketers is that they have to create relevant experiences for the consumer – moving from volume to value marketing. “And you can’t even begin to do it without data,” notes Ms Watson. “Data is oxygen – targeted, personalised and customised.”

Acknowledging that the journey isn’t easy, she exhorted the delegates to have the passion to do it, courage to do it right and commitment to press on. “If you fail, fail fast, so you can move fast.”

The two-day conference culminated in the inaugural Asia Connect Customer Experience (ACCE) Tourism Awards to recognise hospitality and tourism’s Best Practices and Achievements. The award winners are:

- Data-Driven Customer Acquisition Campaign - Award Winner: Far East Hospitality
- After-Sales Service & Customer Success Strategy - Award Winner: Far East Hospitality
- Omni-Channel Engagement Strategy (External Customers) - Award Winner: Swissotel Merchant Court; Honourable Mention: Raffles Singapore
- Omni-Channel Engagement Strategy (Internal Customers) - Award Winner: Royal Plaza on Scotts

Producer & Organiser



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About Asia Connect Leadership Forum

Created by MacroVision Network Pte Ltd in 2005, the Asia Connect Leadership Forum provides a unique opportunity for senior leaders in hospitality and tourism to connect, collaborate and be inspired by visionary leaders and experts in Customer Experience Management and Employee Engagement. In 2018, Asia Connect events will be held in Singapore and major cities in North and Southeast Asia. For more details and major takeaways from Asia Connect 2017, visit www.macrovisionnetwork.com/asiaconnect/