

Thought Leadership How to Power-Up Your Guest Engagement and Supercharge Loyalty

A Successful Guest Engagement Strategy Begins with The Property's Business Objectives, Then Leverages Technology to Create A Personalized Guest Journey

Hoteliers know an engaged guest is a repeat guest and often the most persuasive sales person a property has. Understanding how to effectively engage with guests is essential for a hotel's success, but what is the best way to do this? An effective guest engagement strategy is based on total property commitment, and the initial step to establish a successful program is planning.

First, a property must decide on the level of guest engagement it wants to achieve. Email is the standard method of guest engagement today, however there are many other tools available that a property can leverage and take guest engagement a step further for a more personalized guest journey. Each strategy and tool requires a different level of commitment and effort from a property's management and staff, and each delivers different results. Here are several examples of guest engagement hotel software tools, how properties may use them, and the level of staff involvement required to be effective.



Mobile check-in & check-out and pre-registration:

Guests value the convenience of mobile check-in since it allows them to bypass the front desk or have a VIP experience upon check-in with most of their stay particulars already shared with the property. It also allows the property to engage the guest further at a more personalized level by offering room upgrades or inviting the guest to enhance their stay with other amenities or services such as dining reservations.

Staff involvement: Mobile pre-registration and check-in requires minimal staff engagement. Guests receive an email confirming their reservation details and providing a link for online check-in. Staff must be trained in online check-in and pre-registration systems and procedures to be able to manage their tasks effectively and to assist guests who may have questions. Staff should be made aware by the property management system (PMS) of which guests checked-in

online, their preference criteria and when they will arrive. Housekeeping must also have instant knowledge to prioritize rooms and confirm when a pre-assigned room is vacant and clean. Maestro's WebPRO provides guests online check-in via mobile, tablet and desktop. This speeds up onsite check-in, and provides pre-arrival information to hotel staff for planning and upsell opportunities. Maestro's mobile housekeeping app also plays an important role in creating a fluid experience for the guest. Finally, a natural extension to this is mobile check-out that offers a digital copy of the folio and a post check out survey to continue the engagement after departure.

Guest surveys:

Most online surveys engage with guests after check out. These are digital comment cards and most are easy to create. More sophisticated survey tools provide performance measurement and highlight areas where the property should focus its attention to deliver an improved guest experience. They are usually emailed to guests asking for input on their stay and require low effort from the property. The most effective guest feedback systems are integrated into the PMS which automatically emails a survey to each guest at check out. Some systems go further to offer post check-in survey that proactively ensures the guest experience is off to a proper start while the guest is in-house. Maestro PMS' Guest Experience Measurement (GEM) system is fully integrated with Maestro's Front Office System to provide a highly personalized guest engagement experience. Automated communications with the guest throughout their stay creates a unique, intimate experience and develops a close guest relationship that promotes loyalty.

Helen Watson, GM at The Adelphi Hotel – Saratoga Springs, said, "I find Maestro's GEM extremely helpful to find out how our guests experience the hotel. I look for patterns to determine what our guests like, the areas we can improve, and where we are doing well. We find Maestro particularly useful to track each guest's specific needs. The system gives us the opportunity to wow them. What makes the biggest impact on our guests is the attention to detail that Maestro makes possible."

Staff involvement: Greater staff involvement is required when surveys come back. Although satisfaction thresholds are available to automatically alert a staff member when a response is particularly low, someone should review all returned surveys and determine which require action by the hotel and if management response is needed. This is important. If responses are not monitored and responded to, the penalty may be a bad online review for the hotel and loss of business or reputation.

On-property text messages:

Text messages are an excellent way to engage guests with full 2-way communication. These can be effectively used to promote events for all guests, and also for subsets of guests, such as those belonging to a group, those staying on a specific rate, or VIP guests.

Staff involvement: Text engagement demands a more sophisticated level of communication that requires staff training and accountability. Some text systems have the smarts, based on an AI (artificial intelligence), to automatically respond to guests, or to direct incoming guest communications to the appropriate department (e.g. housekeeping for towels, or room service for guest amenities). Some offer group messaging to notify guests of event changes and updates in real-time. Nevertheless, staff must continuously monitor guest texts and respond in two to three minutes to ad-hoc requests such as recommendations on local attractions, or dinner reservation inquiries. Text messages also benefit staff operations. Housekeeping tablets are gaining wider adoption in hospitality. These systems enable housekeeping staff to have

seamless mobile communication to and from the PMS for faster room status updates. Maestro's SMS Text feature lets management monitor guest text messages and its Mobile Housekeeping tablet capability facilitates a prompt response when guestrooms need attention.

"The Adelphi Hotel's Housekeeping Manager finds Maestro's Housekeeping app incredibly helpful," says property GM Helen Watson. "She can update the status for any room remotely on her mobile phone in real time in the Maestro Front Office System. This saves a great deal of time and gets guests into their rooms faster to begin their stay experience."

Social media:

Social media has proven to be a very effective way to engage guests, particularly for independent operators. Independents are experts at developing personal relationships and can often more freely engage with guests online. One advantage of social media engagement is that some hotel tech suppliers, like Maestro PMS, have developed direct-booking links for social media sites, including Facebook and Twitter. These links enable guests to book a reservation directly from a social media page which offers greater booking convenience and brand advocacy.

Staff involvement: Many properties turn to third-party contractors to handle online marketing and to respond to social media requests. This takes the weight of continuously monitoring social media channels, like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram off the property's hands. If a property selects this method of guest engagement it is important that it hire contractors trained to understand and mirror a property's online image. There are social media tools that work well for automating part of a property's online presence. If the property decides to regularly use social media for guest engagement it must commit to maintaining and refreshing its online presence. This includes creating compelling, time-sensitive promotions for upcoming events, developing special offers, and coordinating and advertising local activities to attract guests. All this must support a consistent online presence to maintain engagement and increase followers on the property's social media feeds.

Loyalty programs:

Loyalty programs engage guests and expand relationships through frequent-stay programs and rewards. Usually properties connect with guests via email to update them about frequent-stay points for room nights, dining, and other activities that accrue in a guest's loyalty profile. Guests are provided with secure access to their frequent stay rewards program page through online portals. This gives the property an opportunity to engage guests by suggesting promotions as guests view their loyalty points. The integration of the loyalty engine to the core PMS solution is an essential part of centralizing the guest information to add to a personalized guest journey. Guests value a well implemented rewards program. With a property's use of powerful analytics and data mining tools, they are able to further personalize their offerings to loyalty members with direct booking opportunities and promotions based on preferences to enhance guest engagement.

Well trained, committed hotel management and staff are essential for a successful guest engagement program. As you consider your strategy, schedule time to meet with your team and agree on the level of engagement you want to achieve, and the resources needed to accomplish it. Effectively deployed, the right guest engagement program and systems will absolutely lead to an improved guest experience, repeat stays and create a family of loyal advocates for your property.

By Warren Dehan, president of Maestro PMS