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DESIGN

Personal Touch

Perhaps, the big brands can learn from boutique hotels

By NICOLE CARANO



Niki Leondakis
Commune Hotels & Resorts



Larry Broughton
Broughton Hotels



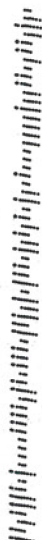
Kathleen Dauber
HBA



Kemper Hyers
Starwood Capital Group

Can you remember the last time a new brand didn't describe itself as boutique or lifestyle? The answer is probably no; as guests have clamored for authentic experiences, hotels—boutique and branded—have answered the call. With a move toward personalized hotels, Niki Leondakis, CEO, Commune Hotels & Resorts, reflected on how boutique properties have already changed brands. "Boutique helped elevate the travelers' expectations, which caused the larger hotel chains to pay more attention to more relevant design; 20 years ago, design in hotels was not necessarily from a perspective that defined an experience," she said. While applying a formula to a boutique approach could be problematic, there are guidelines: design, service and experience. "Those hotels with superior levels of guest loyalty make emotional connections with their guests through authentic and timeless design elements; personalized guest service; and anticipatory service that seems effortless," said Larry Broughton, founder & CEO, Broughton Hotels. "Sadly, great design can feel hollow if team members are robotic or apathetic; so exceptional training programs are key." From a design perspective, said Kathleen Dauber, partner, Hirsch Bedner Associates (HBA), there's a lot to be learned from boutiques. "Brands should be pushing the level of detail of each property; the subtle details that can best reflect a property's location, era and inspiration set each property apart from more standard hotels," she said. Elements include a curated or commissioned artwork and accessory collection, and utilizing specific pieces of seating and casegoods selected for how they relate to the property's story. As far as design goes, she said, there's nothing boutique that couldn't work in a brand "as long as the brand is open to different implementations of the brand standard." "Brands do a great job in understanding the rigors of the traveling ages and fabrics need to withstand the rigors of the traveling public, and ensuring their brand standards for linens include tried-and-tested products and materials," noted Broughton. "Too often, designers who are new to hospitality—whether in the branded or boutique space—find it difficult to transition from residential to hospitality due to this challenge. Sadly, the brands often fall short of the design standards set by the most successful boutique hotels because their mass-appeal approach can leave the design feeling soulless." "For brands to succeed in the boutique space, they'll need to celebrate the local soul, history and culture into the design and service elements. To capture superior market share, they need to offer more design and operational freedom to sophisticated, experienced operators to flex their entrepreneurial muscle," continued Broughton, adding that they need to be sure to avoid fake authenticity. "It's insulting to guests." Leondakis noted that one way brands can further learn from boutiques is by focusing on personalization—not just in design, but in offerings. "That's one of the things many travelers like about boutique hotels—the scale enables a more customized approach to providing what they want," she said. "The large chains may have to execute it differently due to their size but rather than giving a standardized every guest gets the following services and every guest pays for them, our industry has been forced to think more specifically about our target customers and what they want. That's been a real positive." "What isn't so beneficial is that every hotel chain is jumping on the bandwagon with boutique brands," she continued. "It's a little bit of an overpromise when you think about what boutique is supposed to mean. I think it's confusing to the customer. Is it really catering to their needs and desires, or are developers and brand operators just looking to build new hotels?" Kemper Hyers, head of design, Starwood Capital Group, reflected on the reason for some of these new brands—"This trend is really about relevant hotels. The industry is changing. Boutique hotels, being more nimble and less rule-based, can quickly pick up those needs. Older brands, mostly because of their scale and because making a change is such a multi-year and complex thing to get done, they're not as nimble." I said, "To me, boutique hotels are shorthand for that benefit. I think that's why a lot of them introduced these new brands—it allows them to let go of some rules that are fundamental to their other brands and be where the customers are today." But, while there is some worry about the blurring of lines between brands, boutiques and definitions, the executives aren't worried about its effect on the boutique industry. Broughton noted, "Without competition, lethargy and stagnation sets in, which ultimately leads to the death of a product or industry." Hyers agreed. "I think there will always be an avant-garde in the travel and hospitality business. There will always be somebody who comes at it fresh and from a new place," he said. "If you allow the definition of boutique hotels to be those cooler hotels that are slightly on the fringe, the fringe is typically at the front, and the front will just keep moving. There will always be a market for evolution." With a focus on customization across the board, what will the industry look like in 10 to 15 years? Dauber noted that we will continue to see evolutions of public and private spaces, but "most importantly, the guest will seek out the unique experience. The hotels will need to create personality and depth in order to continue to compete." "We're going to see more moves away from hotels that are generic, whether it's luxury or limited-service," said Leondakis. "Right now, the boutique industry comprises about 5% of the market. That's about 6% growth since 2009. I think that's going to continue to increase. We're going to see more and more conversions as hotels sell—they're still in the part of the cycle where we're seeing a lot of transactions happening. The buyers of these hotels are looking at conversions and, in many cases, taking traditional hotels and creating boutique offerings. That is the way of the future, even with larger hotels they will become more specific in what they stand for." Hyers noted, "I work for a man whose idea for hotels has always been and will always be the idea of comfort. That's his center point. I don't think that will ever change. Sure... aesthetics change? Sure. Will technology change? Sure... Budgets for technology are going to be big and there's a fall down from that, but there will always be those who want to be connected when they travel, and if we can make them comfortable and make them connected to the world they need to be connected to, we'll be successful."

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With a move toward personalized hotels, Niki Leondakis, CEO, Commune Hotels & Resorts, reflected on how boutique properties have already changed brands. "Boutique helped to elevate the travelers' expectations, which caused the larger hotel chains to pay more attention to more relevant design; 20 years ago, design in hotels was not necessarily from a perspective that defined an experience," she said.

While applying a formula to a boutique approach could be problematic, there are guidelines: design, service and experience. "Those hotels with superior levels of guest loyalty make emotional connections with their guests through authentic and timeless design elements; personalized guest experience; and anticipatory service that seems effortless," said Larry Broughton, founder & CEO, Broughton Hotels. "Sadly, great design can feel hollow if team members are robotic or apathetic, so exceptional training programs are key."

From a design perspective, said Kathleen Dauber, partner, Hirsch Bedner Associates (HBA), there's a lot traditional brands can learn from boutiques. "Brands should be pushing the level of detail of each property; the subtle details that can best reflect a property's location, era and inspiration set each property apart from more standard hotels," she said. Elements include a curated or commissioned artwork and accessory collection, and utilizing specific pieces of seating and casegoods selected for how they relate to the property's story. As far as design goes, she said, there's nothing boutique that couldn't work in a brand "as long as the brand is open to different implementations of the brand standard."

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