

New trends, skill needs and developing services in luxury tourism.

A case study

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Today's luxury traveller has changed both in behaviour and in values and this demands certain changes in the product hardware and software. This can be especially observed in the luxury, golf and spa business, but also in corporate travel. Consequently, recruitment and training demands have changed as well and training methods have to be adapted to scarce time and budget in the fast-moving environment. While training can be comprehensive and intensive, the fundamental challenge is that genuine interest and caring cannot be taught.

The Marbella Club Hotel, Golf Resort and Spa is a leading luxury resort in Spain, member of the Leading Hotels of the World Ltd, competing in the global five star market, serving an international, individual and exclusive small incentive clientele.

The year 2004 is a year of festivities at the Marbella Club, celebrating the resort's 50th anniversary. To mark this important anniversary, a history of the Marbella Club has been written and a bust of the founder Prince Alfonso has been unveiled.

What was once Prince Alfonso's private holiday residence, Finca Santa Margarita, within 42 000 m² of olive and vine lands, the Marbella Club was founded in 1954 with only eight rooms. Now it is known as one of the most exclusive beach, spa and golf resorts in Europe, with 121 rooms and suites and 16 private luxury villas, some with a private heated pool, as well as eight restaurants and bars. These range from the gastronomic grill restaurant to the contemporary Marbella Club café, allowing for al fresco dining, breakfast and lunch throughout the year.

The main market challenges observed over the past years, partly as a consequence of world events, are the decline in popularity of conventional destinations, increase of multiple residences and fractional ownership offer, a general crisis in the service industry as well as the increasing cost of consumer acquisition.

1. Changes in luxury tourism: the client

Today's luxury customer is very price-quality conscious and highly educated as to options and quality attributes. A brand should no longer be flashy but substantial. Guests today seek a multi-level experience, a one-of-a-kind holiday where family travel and children as discerning designer brand clientele are becoming increasingly more important.

Consequently, value is attributed to spending more on an experience being the new 'currency' rather than on objects, as well as spending time alone with the spouse or family, seeking privacy and intimacy, value and authenticity. Information and communication technology (ICT) should not be visible, but an option if requested. Most importantly, technology is expected to be used as a way to improve, not replace, the human touch. Personalisation and time are highly valued, as well as security, credibility and disclosure.

While business hotels are expected to provide latest generation advanced in-room technology, one of the buzz concepts is 'barefoot luxury', also known as 'no news – no shoes', relating to tropical island luxury resorts that offer the highest standard of services in unique natural surroundings and most comfortable accommodation, but no electronic devices unless specifically requested. Many individuals, suffering from today's fast-moving and highly demanding everyday life, seek locations without mobile telephone coverage in order literally to disconnect.

4. Changes in luxury tourism: product hardware

With regards to the product hardware, much emphasis is placed on guest rooms; more specifically, bathrooms are becoming increasingly more spacious and equipped with large, luxury furniture and fittings, albeit functional. As for design, local artefacts are preferred over mass produced room design and natural window treatment with an open view over the traditional net curtains.

Golf (18 hole designer course) and spa (professional spa) have become facilities that are expected from a luxury resort rather than additional extras, as well as designer brand boutiques within the complex.

5. Changes in luxury tourism: product software

Consequent to the changes in clientele and the ever-growing expectations, knowledge has become of a key importance for all staff. Generally expected basic standards are growing ever more complex. Leading Hotels of the World Ltd expect to fulfil over 1 500 minimum standards from member hotels and their staff. The most important of these are languages and making the impossible possible, to create the ultimate guest experience (from swimming with dolphins to finding a lost civilisation).

For spa resorts, there are certain decisions to be taken early, as health and hospitality have become intertwined in a way that they cannot be distinctly separated any longer. Naturally, destination spas have a number of requirements and the fundamental decision is whether to take the holistic approach or even plastic-aesthetic surgery on the treatment menu. Very popular are alternative medicine and age management. Taking this one step further, a spa hotel of the future should be prepared to offer purified air and water systems, non-toxic paint, fabric and cleaning products. Rooms should offer colour and aromatherapy features, restaurants and immune boosters should offer organic and local products on their menu, and food and beverages staff need to be trained on dietary options. Nature has become an important feature as well as awareness and integrity in business ethics.

6. Recruitment: how to prepare for the different/unique/memorable/customised delivery of services in the future

Recruitment methods that have proven successful for leading hotel chains and international luxury groups are hand-shake followed by in-depth interviews and multiple assessments (at least three interviews with department heads). This is a way to seek ambassadors inside out, with a clear focus on hiring for attitude, not aptitude, commitment and confidence. The assumption is made, and proven, that genuine caring cannot be taught.

Although the following, applied by Marbella Club, may seem evident, experience has proven that they are not and that these 10 commandments of hospitality offer a good base for developing a professional and positive conduct in client presence:

1. smile and be positive;
2. greet all you meet: 'good morning/afternoon/evening', 'you are welcome', 'my pleasure', 'excuse me', etc.;
3. the answer is 'yes', never 'no';
4. a guest's concern is your concern;
5. an absolute level of cleanliness and security is each one's responsibility;
6. escort guests, do not point;
7. assist your colleagues;
8. do not eat, drink, smoke or chat with colleagues in guest areas;
9. enjoy your work, treating guests and colleagues with respect and dignity;
10. act as an ambassador of your hotel inside and outside.

Once recruitment has occurred, regular but intense, brief training must be planned and monitored in the following areas: language and product knowledge, training on the job on over 1 500 minimum standards, telephone training and etiquette, ICT (e.g. a reservations system such as Fidelio as well as the relevant billing systems). Another very important area is

complaint handling with a focus on the opportunity to create loyalty. Service is not defined by not making mistakes, but much rather how these are handled. Naturally, every company should have the specific ‘credo’ (such as Marbella Club hospitality basics) or employee handbook where the company’s philosophy and their dos and don’ts are outlined.

With training, the main issue is normally time or money. In order to maximise resources, including time, energy and attention to the matter while minimising budget, we suggest short and intensive (half-day, full-day or one-and-a-half-day) training. Courses can also be offered optionally in employee personal time or as an incentive and motivation. However, for those employees requiring training, the emphasis should be on short and intensive courses with periodical repetitions or addition of modules. This increases the individual’s attention to the matter and motivations, and becomes more realistic time- and cost-wise as well as giving better outcomes.

Naturally, such departments as spas require specific training beyond the general, administrative and hospitality basics. This includes additional spa-specific product and treatment knowledge, medical training with regular up-dates and technical training, as well as product sales and service philosophy.

Four concepts that can be useful to deliver excellent services and professionalism in a nutshell are:

- (a) friendly without being familiar;
- (b) always one step beyond expectations;
- (c) good enough is the enemy of excellence;
- (d) success is a journey, not a destination.