

Standalone Hotels: Cashing in on the flexibility quotient

Free from the whims and fancies of a branded hotel chain, which not only make a hotel owner pay a hefty amount but also puts in place a list of do's and don'ts, standalone or independent, owner-driven boutique hotels have come a long way in developing their own identity through flexible working and powerful social media platforms, thereby offering personalised experiences. **Akansha Pandey** reports

Standalone hotels come as a breath of fresh air, niche and unique, widely admired by travellers today. With no fixed patterns, they leave no stone unturned to pleasantly surprise their guests and go out of their way in making a more personalised effort. Their business has been scaling up, thanks to their flexible business approach according to the dynamic market trends. Capitalising on the social media, standalone hotels aggressively use the platform for reputation management, servicing of customers and guest interaction. Since defeating the challenge of creating visibility and credibility in the market, sky is the limit for standalone hotels. So long as the 'passion' of owners do not find a match in a professional team, these boutique properties will choose to remain 'independent' in future as well.

Manohar S Gurung, VP & GM, Madhuban Resort & Spa, Vadodra highlights that irrespective of whether an owner is a part of a chain or a standalone hotel, basics of hoteliering remain the same. "If basics are not right, one is bound to fail. That's the reason why some hotels stoop badly even with the brand names. Chain hotels have their own strength but decisions need to be quicker in owner-driven hotels. Hardware is the same everywhere, it is the software, the human element, that should be in the right equation. Besides, technology has created a level playing field. Now, it is possible for a standalone hotel to compete with big brands and create a value proposition for itself," outlines Gurung.

POSITIVES OF GOING SOLO

An independent, owner-driven hotel has the positives of taking risks and quicker decisions that may not necessarily have to have everyone's consensus. They do not get entangled in excessive red tape, otherwise commonly seen with bigger chains. Since it is not constrained by a corporate brand identity that hotel chains have to conform to, it is free to create its own ethos and shape its perception in the market place. As a standalone, The Khyber has in the past few years of its existence achieved major success and has brought the city of Gulmarg back in the reckoning as a top end destination, feels Umar Tramboo, Managing Director, Pinnacle Resorts (Promoters of The Khyber Himalayan Resort & Spa, Gulmarg).

Luv Malhotra, Managing Director, The Suryaa, New Delhi is also among those that believes that they have the flexibility to try out new initiatives and

implement strategies, which are out of the box. We can change our strategies as per the market trends unlike the branded hotel chains, he said. Dr. Amit Modi, Vice President, The Grand New Delhi agrees that standalones have an upper edge in terms of offering tailor-made luxury experiences to each of their guests. Besides, independent hotels have direct access to top management and a deep understanding of their target group and the local market.

"Customised approach is unique to every independent owner-driven hotel model. The entire team provides a very tailor-made experience for the guests as the ethos and the culture that you can set in an independent hotel provide you with this edge," outlines, Sahib Gulati, Director, Ellbee Hospitality Worldwide.

Today, even growing consumer preference is towards unique experiences, products and services where authenticity trumps standardisation. "Hotels such as ours, have their own support systems like best practices, policies and procedures across all disciplines," highlights Sanjeev Bhatia, General Manager, The Metropolitan Hotel & Spa, New Delhi. Moreover, the savings in terms of higher fees, commissions and high marketing costs are used towards upgradation of guest facilities and efficient staff trainings.

GROWTH GRAPH

"There is not much change in the growth graph for the standalone hotel segment," feels Vijay Wanchoo, Sr. Executive Vice President & General Manager, The Imperial, New Delhi. "The Imperial,

New Delhi has observed an average occupancy of 75% over the years and has seen a steady growth from the international as well as domestic leisure markets," he comments. However, Malhotra adds that standalone hotels have witnessed growth in RevPAR year-on-year. Demand is forecasted to grow, but with more supply coming into the market, the ARRs are getting affected.

Within 2 years of operation, Gulati has managed to achieve 70% of average hotel occupancy at Ellbee Rishikesh and is confident of their sustained growth over the coming years. Anil Agarwala, ED, Tathastu Resorts, Pench National Park avers that standalone properties are now also getting bookings, months in advance, in good quantum and better than before. "Occupancy at Tathastu has been steadily increasing since the past 1 year. However, advance bookings for the coming season are phenomenal and better than our expectations. Future for quality standalone properties is brilliant, especially in the wildlife sector," he said.

The Khyber Himalayan Resort & Spa, Gulmarg has earned the attention of high-end travellers to Jammu & Kashmir. "We have been fortunate to have occupancies rise to almost 90% in season and even during shoulder months or lean periods we have maintained occupancies at 50%. We have witnessed a growth of 19% in the last year and hope that it will further increase this year," stated Tramboo.

FLEXIBLE STRATEGIES

Hoteliers here agree that the best marketing tool for them is through the word of mouth which is ultimately a by-product of quality customer service.





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Maintaining high standards of operation and exceeding the expectations of guests is the primary focus for any hotelier. At Tathastu, Agarwala engages with the guests at a personal level, giving them almost an ownership-level experience. The best way to keep ones identity intact would probably be through constant innovation and consistency in quality offerings.

The marketing strategy of The Grand New Delhi has been very consumer driven. With the deep understanding of the local market, they have strengthened their product mix accordingly and focussed on delivering a personalised service, unlike the international chains. "We have devised various touch points to enhance the overall guest experience and ensure repeat clientele," added Modi.

As far as the growth is concerned, even in the industry, the highest potential is at the moment in the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE) segment, followed by leisure, stresses Wanchoo, adding that the hotel's food and beverage (F&B) segment has played a significant role in achieving the financial objectives of the hotel and its impact on the profitability margins is tremendous.

Modi too, voices that the double digit growth in F&B segment has been very promising.

In sync with the above,

Tramboo adds that Free Independent Travellers (FITs) remain their priority, but the response from MICE segment has also been very encouraging with offsite business. Gulmarg also offers a plethora of adventure sports including skiing, snow-boarding in winters and trekking in summers. For golf aficionados, the Gulmarg Golf Course is a major attraction. "Khyber will continue to leverage such potential segments to keep the flag flying high in future as well," he outlines.

TECHNOLOGICAL TOOLS

Technology is dynamic and so are the needs and expectations of the guests. Today travellers expect high-speed Wi-Fi, interactive television and iPod docking stations and similar technology in their rooms. Likewise, the power of social media has also turned around the reach of independent

hotels in the domestic as well as international markets. Hotels today are extremely active on various social media platforms to promote their food festivals, recognitions, contests, news updates and other key developments in the hotel on a

global level to our guests, says Wanchoo. Bhatia too feels it's an apt medium for reputation management, social servicing of customers and guest interaction.

Social media has indeed brought the hotel closer to the customer. The direct interaction with the customers through the social media platforms and hotel website has increased the bookings and the customer database, according to Tramboo. Gulati avers that they often receive bookings via their Facebook page. "We get the opportunity to ascertain the expectations of the guest for a more personal service," he says. Besides, Malhotra feels that online reviews have helped travellers to make the right decision and choose between lesser rates versus quality offerings. "Our online business is growing year-on-year, at a fast pace," he added.

Apart from the above, Modi highlights the importance of TripAdvisor and Zomato, which are being widely used by the travellers. We are very active on both fronts in terms of responding to guests, their queries and concerns, thereby encouraging them to write reviews, he exclaims. Agarwala asserts that a positive feedback from a 'third party' works wonders! "In a much smaller budget, one can now have an aggressive marketing plan. Technology has been a game changer and it will change the way this industry has worked over the years", he adds.

CHALLENGES

The most challenging part of being a standalone is creating visibility and building the brand value, outlines Tramboo. Building trust and credibility among the guests is the next big concern, avers Gulati. Modi laments that HR has been their biggest concern till date. It is extremely hard to attract the right talent and then retain them. There is a certain temperament required in dealing with an independent hotel and that is where the challenge comes in recruiting. "We follow some of the best HR practices to overcome this challenge – a complete open door policy throughout the hotel, constant focus on top management and employee facilities and relations," he asserts.

However, Agarwala expresses that they have cracked the HR challenge by training local people. "In association with IHM, Bhopal and some private trainers, we conducted extensive courses for housekeeping, F&B services, gardening and administration. Today, we are happy that we have been able to develop a hard-working, eager-to-please and effective local team" he exclaims. ■

