

Technological evolution is changing the way travel and hospitality players identify and acquire new customers. New-age technologies such as internet of things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI) and cloud are being adopted to deliver a personalised experience to customers. The majority of these players are using analytics to create a strong and loyal customer base for their brands. **H**

arish Chandra,

Chief Technology Officer

, Sarovar Hotels Pvt Ltd,

shares his views on the evolving ICT needs of the sector and future technology trends...

What are the key ICT trends shaping the travel and hospitality industry?

The industry is witnessing an evolution with the adoption of newer technologies such as blockchain, business intelligence, big data, bots, robotics process automation. Technology is helping hoteliers in enhancing their operational efficiencies and the customer experience. It is helping hotels in reducing the cost of operations and maintaining profitability in the competitive market. Earlier, hotels were investing in door frame metal detectors, X ray machines, CCTV cameras, etc. Now with the rise of e-commerce and cyberattacks, most of the companies have started investing in state-of-the-art firewalls, network security and backup systems to secure their systems and business.

Hotel chains are gearing up to comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) to ensure that data is secured and used appropriately after obtaining consent from the guest. Guests need to be informed beforehand if their data is shared with hotels' business partnersthird parties or if the guest is enrolled in the loyalty programme automatically. Guests should be removed from the promotions list if they wish to opt out. If a hotel violates these norms, it has to pay a hefty penalty in accordance with the GDPR guidelines.

Online reputation has also become very important. Today, every hotel company is investing significantly in customer engagement platforms from branding perspective and to maintain and protect its reputation on various online social media platforms.

What are the technology solutions that your company is deploying?

We do not overuse technology because we know that the requirements of every generation are different. We need to deploy a mix of technologies to meet the requirements of a diverse age group of customers. The basic things that we use are digital signage. We have installed a small digital display unit at the reception, which keeps changing the content automatically. It displays foreign exchange rates and different promotions. Old LED standees at our hotel lobby areas are being replaced with sleek digital information display standees. The focus is more on digital marketing and social media.

Further, we engage with our potential and actual guests on various online social media platforms. Guests like our Facebook page and participate in quizzes, etc. This helps us in branding and promotions, and later converting these into business leads. Our website is dynamic, responsive and supports all mobile platforms – Windows, Android, and Apple-IMac. We also do online promotions to generate business through our brand websites rather than just through expensive OTAs that charge hefty commissions. Emphasis is laid on digital marketing, search engine optimisation, search engine mechanism, and inorganic search, etc.

How are technologies such as AI, IoT, cloud and blockchain transforming the travel and hospitality industry? What is your future roadmap for their deployment?

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What are the key challenges faced in deploying these technologies?

The key challenge that the hotel industry faces is that all technologies are created for bigger business verticals such as BFSI, IT/ITes, healthcare, oil and energy, and government. Very few partners understand the hotel business and customise solutions as per the industry requirements. Technology solutions developed for other industries are dumped into the hotel industry. Due to this dumping, the cost of business increases and the profit margins go down.

We tried experimenting with bots for our website. However, the accuracy of bots was less than 60 per cent. These solutions need to be mature enough to work in line with the hospitality industry. Even machine learning and voice-based controlled systems (Alexa and Google i-home) are not widely used to automate guest rooms.

Technology becomes obsolete very fast. Investing in technology repeatedly is a challenge. IT service providers should study the travel and hospitality industry, consider its pain points, discuss its requirements with industry veterans and then develop solutions instead of dumping them from other verticals on to the hospitality industry.

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