



## Guest Services

by Steven H. Siegel

# Unique guest services – or – Did that fish really press the elevator call button?

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Throughout the past few decades, the growth in the number of market segments identified by hoteliers as economically feasible to serve in a differentiated fashion has grown at a tremendous rate. This has led to the development of many hospitality products that closely match the customers' specific needs; but at times it can also be viewed as presenting a rather confusing number of product offerings from which the consumer must choose. Another consequence is that it has become rather difficult for hospitality companies to further sub-segment currently served markets in their effort to generate new brands without creating at least some overlap of products and services with existing brands.

### Unique guest service ideas

So how do hoteliers find the “little cracks” in the market segments where an eclectic mix of unique value-added activities can pay large dividends in capturing customers who appreciate uniqueness?

As an example of how hoteliers find these cracks, the list below describes a nationally-based hotel company that has worked hard at conceptualizing and implementing some guest service ideas that appear to go against the grain of what many in the lodging industry identify as standard amenities in the near-luxury brand. Can you identify this company solely from this list?



- This is a boutique hotel chain situated in urban settings competing in the upper-upscale segment offering first class service and a “Chef Driven” hotel restaurant at each location designed to compete with the best freestanding restaurants that exist in that particular city.
- This hotel company is rated by Fortune magazine as one of the “100 Best Companies to Work For.”
- They are into adaptive reuse and generally try to develop properties with this in mind.
- The chain is so pet friendly that you may find a little dog bed and a toy fire hydrant (for decoration purposes only) in the lobby, along with the availability of an abundance of doggie treats.
- If you leave your pet at home (or don't own a pet) and are lonely during your stay and wish pet companionship, you can borrow a goldfish complete with its own bowl.
- You can also borrow a hula hoop from the front desk, grab a Popsicle from a cooler, and hula hoop in the lobby while eating your Popsicle.

- For the very sociable among you, they offer a hosted wine reception in the lobby each afternoon. If you are artistic, you can sit down at the piano (where available) at this reception and entertain and then satisfy your penchant for painting by moving over to an easel (where available) and painting a watercolor of your fellow guests attending the reception.
- If you happen to be in a city known for being bicycle friendly (Portland, Oregon being one example) you can borrow a bicycle for a ride around the city.
- 50% of the minibar products are organic products and recycling trash bins are located in each guestroom.



If you guessed Kimpton hotels...you were correct. Kimpton is a chain of 54 boutique-style hotels founded by Bill Kimpton in 1981 and based in San Francisco. According to Steve Pinetti, Kimpton's Senior Vice-President for Sales and Marketing, "In a prior life, Mr. Kimpton was an investment banker who spent a great deal of time on the road in cookie-cutter hotel rooms. Based on his experience, he wanted to bring the charm and uniqueness of European boutique-style hotels to the U.S."

He has succeeded in that Kimpton manages to combine the highest level of very personalized customer service with a rather whimsical, and at times, irreverent (as compared to more "traditional" hotel amenities) touch as demonstrated through a wide array of very creative and very fun amenities. These give the perception of much value added to the guest while apparently being rather affordable for the hotel to provide.

### Customer perception is reality

The downside risk potential inherent to this strategy is that the market might perceive these rather non-conventional amenities (certainly non-conventional for an "upscale" brand) as serving to obfuscate the image. For instance, might a hotel chain which is so pet friendly be a turn off to non-pet owners worried about a smelly carpet or maybe being stuck in a room next to a barking dog? Or might Popsicles and hula hoops be viewed as a sign that Kimpton might not take this business of delivering high-quality services to the guest as serious as they should?

Evidently not. Recently Kimpton received the highest ranking score in customer satisfaction for its segment (upper-upscale) from the Market Metrix Hospitality Index (MMHI). The brand received the top score of 94.7% for the first quarter of 2009, surpassing competitors across several segments, including luxury leaders Fairmont Hotels & Resorts, Four Seasons, Ritz Carlton and W Hotels.

One clue to Kimpton's success can be found through looking at their customer demographics. Demographically, 50% of their customers are between 25 and 44 years of age, with the remaining 50% pegged at 45 or older. Statistically, the percentage of guests in the 25-34, 35-44, 45-54 and 55 years of age or older groups are approximately the same – between 21 and 29% of all guests are within each group. So one is equally likely to find a 27-year-old couple as you would a 55-year-old couple staying at any of their properties on any given day.



So what do customers separated by an entire generation have in common? In looking at customer psychographics and emoto-graphics it appears that traits that most people associate with younger consumers (seeking new and unique experiences, creativity and innovation, and being the first to adopt new products) may also apply to the older customer groups. Conversely, traits that society may associate with more mature customers such as a sense of self awareness, environmental awareness, and health consciousness may also apply to the characteristics of the younger groups. So this leads one to possibly conclude that older customers of Kimpton have remained young in their outlook on life and younger customers possess a mature outlook which generally is developed later in life. Both groups apparently don't take themselves too seriously and know how to have fun. These conclusions are empirically supported from my own observations as a guest at multiple Kimpton properties.

In response to my question of future Kimpton expansion plans, Pinetti responded: “Our development plan is very opportunity driven. We are always on the search for a great deal, be it an old hotel, new construction, or the conversion of a historic building.” Pinetti went on to say that historically Kimpton expansion plans are accomplished through a combination of new construction (20%), adaptive reuse projects (40%), and reflagging existing hotels (40%).

### **And what about the fish?**

In closing, I might relate a personal experience that I had while staying at a Kimpton that truly sums up the fun nature of this chain. My wife and I were staying at a Kimpton Monaco Hotel on the west coast when, upon exiting our elevator, we notice that in an adjacent elevator was a small fish bowl in the middle of this otherwise empty elevator containing a little gold fish staring back at us. The elevator doors shut and the little passenger headed up to floors unknown. My wife took pity upon this poor solitary traveler and, planning to take the orphan back to our room for the night, pressed the call button. In a moment, the elevator returned to our floor and the door opened only to reveal a totally empty elevator. Evidently these fish not only make great pets, but they also deliver themselves to guest rooms!

Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants remains a fine example of a company willing to take some chances in an effort to develop a clearly-defined image. They have proven that the high end experience may be less about creating an image that the hotelier *thinks* that people aspire to and more about creating a functional environment that truly *meets* the guests’ everyday needs. ✧

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