Hotel And Office: Business Travel During Days of COVID (published)



This week I went back to SF for the first time since COVID lockdown started in March 2020. It was my first hotel business stay and my first visit to our SF campus to teach our MBA students there.

When, we, the Wharton faculty, make these trips, we stay at our "Wharton Hotel" (which I will not name in this post, since this is really beside the point).

The hotel is highly ranked, part of a reputable chain. I usually stay there around 10-12 times a year (a small number for consultants or salespeople, but not a small one for mere mortals). It's like my home away from home.

When I came this time, it was clear that the hotel was relatively empty. The person at the reception warned me that there would be no housekeeping service, a reduced number of meals, and limited room service. I paid very little attention to it. I don't consider myself someone that needs pampering.

But then it started: I got into the room, and there was nothing in it. The room was there. The bed was there. There was even a desk. But the room was a mere shell of itself. It looked more like a hospital room than a hotel. (If you don't have the patience to read whiny, privileged white man, you should stop here.)

Some of this is clearly part of maintaining cleanliness and health restrictions: Some guests want no interaction. The hotel also wants to keep its staff healthy by reducing interaction with guests as much as possible. And I understand and respect it. But as a repeat guest before COVID, the difference was jarring. It felt very sterile.

Then it was clear that it was not just the room. I arrived in between meals and wanted to get coffee. The coffee station was taken already. No coffee in the rooms, and the room service was not working between 10 and 5.

If you know me, you know that I can't work without coffee. I can fast for days, but lack of coffee is not something I can tolerate (I am not addicted. I can stop whenever I want. I just choose not to).

Again, I understand the driver for the hotel. With limited occupancy of the hotel and the fact that it's hard for hotels to get staff, hotels reduced services to keep costs low. But coffee? What's next? Bring your own towel?

Luckily, we have the gig economy to our rescue, with DoorDash and UberEats in SF, so I got my quick fix. (More on that in another post.)

Enlightened Hospitality

I understand why hotels do all of that, but my question is, what's the right approach in these challenging times. One may say that you want to cut costs and just survive. Others may say this is the time to really WOW your best customer. I actually think you need to drive to be "essential" to your guests. Be the home away from home they want you to be.

This is not my idea. The idea is Danny Meyer's idea, the founder of Union Square Cafe and Shake Shack. He coined the term "Enlightened Hospitality." "**Hospitality is not our end goal. Being essential is**," says Meyer in an interview a few years ago. "Another restaurant might try to impress diners by suggesting an esoteric sweet wine.… The servers at Union Square Cafe don't want you to be impressed. They want you to be happy."

Against the backdrop of COVID, this notion of being essential is becoming even more critical. Travel is uncomfortable. Everything takes longer with a face mask. That day, I flew with two masks out of caution and didn't eat on the plane (or the airport). The entire experience felt very "risky." Every person that sneezes behind me triggers enrollment in a COVID test. Not something that I associate with fun or luxury.

I was waiting to get to my hotel room, remove my masks, have coffee, and prepare for my next day's class. In these times, the hotel has a unique ability to amplify being "home" where the entire environment feels more hostile than usual.

But they missed it.

It will take a while for travel to go back to normal. Some people that traveled before may never travel again in the same capacity. But I can say that the people who travel now are the most likely ones to continue and do that. They will have more options than in the past. I know it's hard (but not impossible) to go out of the ordinary in these situations. So I say, don't do that. Be essential. The road warriors are not looking to be pampered. They are looking for attention to detail that makes their stay convenient. Home-like. They look to know that you know them.

As Danny Meyer describes it:

"Hospitality will not succeed unless the person on the receiving end knows all the way to the bottom of their kishkes [Yiddish for "guts"] that we're on their side. The definition of hospitality for me is the degree to which [the guest] feels that we are on their side, we have their back, we are their agent. "

How should hotels operationalize it? The answer is coffee. Well, not only (or not only). But start with knowing your customer. While customer service has technical features, hospitality and "being essential" are about culture. It's about how you view your role with respect to your employees and customers. For a hotel, the question is what services you keep when forced to reduce costs and staff. What feeling do you want people to have when they get into the room? When they leave?

The Enlightened Office

The notion of being essential is not only related to hospitality. It is also related to the workplace.

When I finally got to our campus in SF, I realized that there was no coffee there as well. Why? So few students and so few guests that we (Wharton) decided to cut costs. The building has no coffee, and you are in the middle of nowhere SF (so to speak) needing to teach for 3 hours and 6 hours of meetings without coffee. Again: I ordered from UberEats.

So the idea of being essential is not only valid for your guests if you are a hotel, but it's also true for your employees. Reward those who come to work in the office (and in this case, travel to another city) with knowing who they are. With being essential.

Over the next few years, the competition over workers is going to get tougher. The workplace itself plays a small role in attracting and retaining employees. But it is part of the culture you build. Again, it's not about going out of your way. It's about being predictable, being less alienating, especially in these times.

Many years ago, Starbucks coined the term "The third place" for its cafes: Not home. Not the office. That third space you spend time in and overpay for bad coffee.

This is a reminder for the office and your home away from home to play these "1-2" roles. Be the first two places. Be essential.