

# Meetings | focus

## A Demanding Demographic

### GenXers are dictating hotel design and amenities on their own terms

by Ruth A. Hill

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When it comes to catering to today's prime demographic, hotels and resorts are courting the next generation of business travelers with a dizzying array of amenities that are fast becoming *de rigeur* to a demanding public that wants it slick and wants it now.

From a simple touch screen, Tiare Technology's intelliChaise Personal Ordering System, for instance, allows guests to place orders from just about anywhere on-property, even poolside. If the order requires immediate attention, you simply press the "Call Server" button to alert staff about your request.

While intelliChaise hasn't come yet to a hotel near you—unless you're at the Four Seasons Hotel Miami—it was one of the whizbang amenities showcased at GUESTROOM 2010 at the Annual HITEC (Hospitality Industry Technology Exposition and Conference) last June. Other features in the room were non-traditional tech amenities for lighting, fabrics and furniture, as well as the newest generation of TVs, phones and even that ubiquitous inhabitant of any "future world" exposition—robots.

Both high- and low-tech amenities are key in modern hotel marketing strategies aimed at capturing, pampering and ultimately holding the younger business traveler.

Ten years ago, Baby Boomers were the marketing targets, and by their sheer numbers (77 million), they still command attention. But today the focus is on Boomers' kids—GenXers (born from 1965 to 1980)—and their younger brothers and sisters, the Millennials (those born since 1980).

#### Motivated Hoteliers

This new generation of buyers is a force to be reckoned with, says Joe McInerney, president of the Washington, D.C.-based American Hotel and Lodging Association (AH&LA).

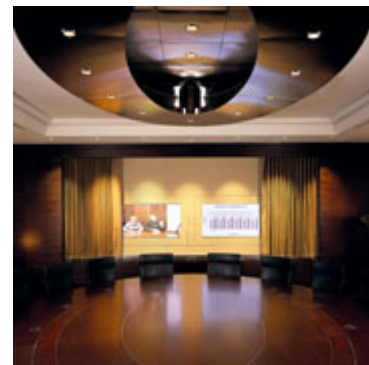
"If a hotel doesn't have wireless for their cell phones and computers, these new travelers won't stay there," McInerney maintains. "They are influencing their parents' decisions as well."

Hoteliers who are flush with more money than they've seen in several years are still held captive to the demands of this new brand of business traveler, who've come to expect cutting-edge technology and other perks. Owners and developers are spending millions on renovations and new-build projects with edgy design, decor and all the "extras" they hope will deliver what the younger generation requires.

McInerney says the dramatic changes in hotel design have been visible in the industry for the past couple of years.

"Many brands are going for a modern versus conventional look," McInerney says. "W Hotels started the trend with a minimalist design and neutral colors. Now you're seeing it even in bathrooms, where they are taking out bathtubs and putting in showers, preferably with a curved rod. The key is that this new business traveler doesn't want their father's Oldsmobile, and they are willing to pay for it."

Hoteliers must look seriously at what they can afford to do—or not do—to remain competitive.



"In some cases, if you don't go with the trends, you'll lose more than it will cost you to go with it," McInerney says.

The trend is particularly acute in the middle select-service market (\$135 to \$150 per-night rooms). The number of hotel brands in this segment continues to expand (see sidebar, page 14) to a volume that many find confusing, so the need to stand out above the crowd has never been greater. Consultants are advising hoteliers to add more amenities, especially technology-driven ones, to the guest seduction package.

"People work, live and travel hard," says Jim Schultenover, president of The Krisam Group & Global Events Partners in Washington, D.C., a sales, meetings and incentives planning office for 230 independent hotel properties, "so they want to be in an environment that makes life fun and interesting, from the moment they arrive on property. People know it's time now to invest and make a statement, especially for independents who must brand more aggressively."

Robert Mandelbaum, director of research information services for Atlanta-based PKF Consulting Inc., gives another reason for the luxury amenity spike: room rates continue to rise, so guests expect more for their money.

"We have a strong 6 [percent] to 8 percent increase in room rates, and guests want something back for that," he says.

Amenities please guests to a point, but the ultimate job of an innkeeper, he warns, is to serve guests well: "Technology and other things are not substitutes for good service."

With customer demand for high-speed Internet and Wi-Fi almost as basic as the traveling public's need for comfortable beds, serious money is going toward enabling hotels in all sectors and locations with a high-tech offering, however.

This year's International Hotel/Motel & Restaurant Show in New York (Nov. 11-14) will feature a technology sector that's larger by 15 percent than its 2005 counterpart. Sponsored by AH&LA, the show aims to help hoteliers stay abreast of design trends, especially technology. On the show floor will be the latest in check-in kiosks, high-definition TVs, reservation systems, security systems, software, telecommunications, and wireless solutions.

### **Meetings Applications**

One over-the-top response to business travelers' heightened tech expectations is The InterContinental Toronto Centre's Next Generation Boardrooms ([www.ngboardroom.com](http://www.ngboardroom.com)). Luxury appointments and technologies combine to serve up to 22 people with personal concierge services, voice- and videoconferencing, plasma screens, a touch-control screen for all equipment, wireless microphones, and other niceties.

The TeleCentre system for meeting, convention and trade show communications is also part of the tech amenity package in the InterContinental Toronto Centre. The system provides an in-room integrated telephone, laptop computer and an Internet device for interaction among meeting planners, exhibitors and attendees. TeleCentre provides customized greetings to guests as they enter their room, including an event directory, the latest schedule changes, important announcements, and special-event schedules. It's also an advertising mechanism for show organizers and exhibitors because it operates like an in-room electronic billboard.

Other hot hotel trends include the following:

- A more residential look. GenXers want more of what they have at home—or wish they had at home—like high thread-count linens, electronic entertainment "wows," and personalized concierge services.
- Room and bath fixtures must be more than utilitarian; they should look like works of art.
- Bathrooms that remind guests of their favorite spa, with curved shower rods, pulsating showers, plush towels, and high-quality personal care amenities.
- No-smoking hotels. Marriott is the first chain to ban cigarette smoking in all of its brands globally. Westin and Disney have bans in selected properties.
- Complimentary served or buffet hot and cold breakfasts.
- Green features, especially lighting, such as natural lighting and lightbulbs that cut energy use and disperse room odors.
- Open public gathering spaces; today's preferred bar and lounge configurations promote casual social connecting and informal business meetings.
- Smaller hotels that require less money to build and staff.

## Brand Responses

Embassy Suites counts business travelers as about 50 percent of its clientele at its 170 hotels across the U.S., and the brand wants to be known as the business traveler's home away from home. The brand's standard two-room suites feature a separate living area that gives business guests the opportunity to host meetings in their room, or for those staying an extended period of time, space to spread out and feel more at home. Guests also receive complimentary nightly manager's receptions and complimentary cooked-to-order daily breakfasts.

One of the brand's newest amenities is EmbassyDirect Registration Kiosks. Similar to the self check-in service now offered at many airports, it provides guests the option of automated check-in with the ability to select the room, obtain room keys and print registration information. The kiosks also offer visual room selection and services such as bundled high-speed Internet. Hyatt offers a similar kiosk.

When Hilton acquired Hampton Inn five years ago, the company set out to turbocharge the brand with a \$100 million project to raise quality and service standards. Brian Cooper, senior director of product and service development for Hampton Inn, says consistency was one of the brand's objectives, so business travelers in particular would be assured of getting the same amenities and services at all properties. Not an easy objective across a franchise-controlled system.

A focal point of the campaign became the Hampton Inn breakfast bar.

"We learned that 90 percent of our customers use our breakfast," says Cooper, "and we set out to pump it up with a lot of structure but some flex for individual variation, so you might see a choice of grits in Southern properties, something else up north."

Breakfast choices include seven hot and cold food "zones" that change daily. Guests on the run also have the choice of a nutritious "On the Run Breakfast Bag" between 6 a.m. and 10 a.m. from the front desk.

Aromatherapy has even taken on a new meaning at Starwood's Four Points by Sheraton brand, with the scent of pies and coffee appealing to guests' sniffers.

Hoyt Harper, senior vice president of brand management at Starwood, says his company is upgrading with lots of room and bath amenities along with some comfort edibles. In a new partnership with the Pie Council of America, Four Points is banking on pies to lure business travelers. Four of America's favorite pies are on every property menu, like deep-dish apple, French silk, and two others that are season and market specific. The aroma of Seattle's Best also wafts through public spaces, after managers learned about 40 percent of their guests were traveling off-property to get a cup of Joe the way they like it.

"Our latest program," Harper offers, "is beers of the world. While luxury-scale hotels focus on wines, we have chosen beers. We'll be offering the best in microbrews from around the world."

While many luxe-segment properties are still charging guests for Internet access, Holiday Inn is among the hotel brands that offer it for free. In a campaign to encourage travelers to regard the brand as a haven for business travelers as well as a family leisure hotel, Holiday Inn launched its multimillion-dollar "Look Again" marketing campaign that touts amenities like in-room work spaces, full-service meeting facilities and a robust loyalty program.

"The campaign reinforces the strengths of today's Holiday Inn, and prompts guests to 'Look Again' to see how the iconic brand they think they know has continued to evolve to meet their needs," says Mark Snyder, senior vice president of brand management for Holiday Inn Hotels and Resorts in the Americas.

At the center of the advertising are "The Business Guys"—Ted, Marcus and Zack—who highlight the brand's traveler amenities and services with humor.

## Wyndham's Design Prototypes

When Cendant acquired the Wyndham brand late last year, it set out to update the chain's image and make it more relevant to a new generation of business travelers. Michael Graves & Associates, the internationally renowned architectural design firm, created just-announced hotel prototypes, including guest rooms, lobbies, coffee bars, and other public spaces, that Kevin Rupert, vice president of brand marketing and strategy, says will work well for a "very wired customer who likes to work and play."

"Graves has a background in industrial design for not only Target kitchen products and scaffolding for the restoration of the Washington Monument, but also lots of hotels abroad, especially in Egypt and Japan," Rupert says. "We hired the best design firm we could, to make the hotel room livable, with furniture that has both good design and functionality."

Rupert says that the prototypes will be used for both new-build hotels and renovation projects, including an Atlanta property that's converting to a Wyndham Garden Hotel.

The new prototypes are for 126- to 301-room select-service hotels. Instead of a front desk "barrier," guests find a "pod" system whereby service agents move about to check guests in and out of the hotel. Meeting spaces range from 1,708 to

15,050 square feet. There's also a lounge where guests can do business, work and eat, Starbucks-style. A 24-hour food mart, a "front porch" with rocking chairs and regional art for hallway decor are other prototype components.

New Wyndham guest rooms have a large work desk with an ergonomic chair. The Wyndham signature Smart Chair has power and Internet outlets so guests have a functional place to use their laptop computer, charge their personal data assistant and connect to the Internet, "so the guest doesn't have to run around looking for a plug-in," Rupert says. The chair has pivoting table arms and a fabric covering that resists stains and bacteria.

An in-room "welcome center" is the source for coffee, a microwave, a mini fridge, and the flat-screen TV remote control.

"We're building for GenXers now," Rupert says. "They are the trendsetters and our primary market target because Boomers and everyone else follow them. About 15 years ago, they were young. But now they're in their 40s with a family and moving through their peak consumption years. So we're designing and building for them."

Call it the Revenge of the Slackers.

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