

The art of storytelling in hotels and other spaces

By  Avukile Mabombo

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Hotels frequently feature in movies, books, TV series and even songs. They're part of our cultural narrative that speaks of travel, exploring and living. It could be argued that the time has come for hotels to tell these stories, to go beyond being a passive element in someone else's story to become the storytellers of their destinations.



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In marketing, generating a narrative is a complex blend of strategy, goals and voice; what makes it interesting in terms of hotels is that each individual hotel has an additional narrative according to its surroundings. Let's say you have a hotel next to an airport – that hotel's story is going to be quite different to that of a hotel on a beach in a luxury resort, but that doesn't mean one is necessarily more interesting than the other.

What if a hotel could speak?

Your hotel is telling a story, but unless you are shaping that story, it could easily become a horror tale. The first clue is through feedback mechanisms such as on-site tools or apps, and then the secondary clues are the reviews that litter the internet. If you're not guiding the narrative, those reviews are your story.

Guiding the narrative starts with listening out for negative and positive reviews and addressing both: where there are hiccups in the visitor journey, remove the obstacles causing those, where there are successes, build on those.

In any story, though, there's never just one character. A hotel is part of a community, from the associates who work there to the supply chains and then the wider community – the places a guest may explore around the hotel. Better yet, you can open up a hotel's space to locals, so locals will get to enjoy facilities by having a meal or some entertainment, and travellers get to meet locals to hear even more stories.

The hotel is central to the trip, but most guests don't stay at the hotel while travelling, they head out during the day or evening to enjoy the destination. Giving guests access to some great local travel tips adds value – you can do it via literature, customised apps or your front of house staff, just make sure it all works effectively.

The weaving of a rich thread

As much as branding is about strategy, sometimes the unexpected can weave a rich thread through your brand's narrative: a staff member could have a fascinating back story that compliments your brands. For example, Freddy Pather, a Durbanite through and through, joined the Edward Hotel in 1961 in a junior position when he was just 16 years old and still at school, but needing to contribute financially to the family, once he had completed his schooling, he was offered a permanent position as the night switchboard operator, ending up as head concierge. His 55 years at the hotel have seen him win international awards, and guests have spoken fondly of his skills as a raconteur.

There are thousands of Freddy's in business around the country, each personality adding to the hotel's brand and image. Their stories are part of yours.

Storytelling isn't just about clever campaigns, although there have been some remarkable ones – it's more about telling the stories that you believe will entice people to visit, and then encourage them to return.

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Avukile Mabombo is the group marketing manager of Protea Hotels by Marriott.

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