



Mr Dardenne:
'Coffee machine in your room used to be a "wow", now ... it is a given'

Providing a one-of-a-kind hotel experience

HOTELS must work to offer customers a unique experience, according to Marc Dardenne, chief executive officer at Patina Hotels and Resorts.

In the past, luxury hotels had prided themselves in the uniformity of the service experience – the goal was to offer the same quality of lodgings and amenities around the world, so as to earn the trust of customers. Back when consumers had far less information, such consistency was of exceptional value.

Today, though, it is the smaller, boutique brands that are in vogue. "What these new brands bring is the local flair, the knowledge and the taste of experience for customers," he said.

Established hoteliers are working hard to keep up. "Marriott and Starwood used to have four, five key brands. Now they have up to 12 different brands, because they include some lifestyle brands, some boutique brands," Mr Dardenne observed.

It is now far more difficult for luxury brands to win over customers based on the opulence of the hotels alone.

They make for poor selling points also because fanciful amenities can be easily copied. "Coffee machine in your room used to be a

'wow', now ... it is a given," said Mr Dardenne.

This has led to the rise of concept hotels that are able to charge high prices for the one-of-a-kind experiences they offer. Mr Dardenne cites as an example a surf resort being developed in Indonesia. For the opportunity to pick vegetables and to interact with locals, the resort expects to charge more than S\$1,000 a night.

"That's what the high-end travellers are looking for... It's really the bragging rights to go back home and say: 'I've stayed in that hotel in the mountain that had only three tents and I saw the elephants going by.' This is more valuable than staying in a marble castle with beautiful chandeliers," he explained.

While Mr Dardenne's experiences relate more to the ultra high-end market, he believes that hotels targeting the middle- or lower-end of the market must also keep up. This is especially important given the rise of Airbnb and other similar services.

By allowing travellers to rent accommodation from locals, these businesses promise not only better prices, but a far more immersive cultural experience, Mr Dardenne said.

As such, across the board, the competition is

now in offering the most unique experience. In trying to do so, hotels must not be afraid to shed old baggage.

Technology has changed the needs of the modern travellers. Business centres, which used to be a key selling point of hotels, are increasingly being displaced by laptops.

Similarly, the ubiquity of cellphones has practically removed the need for landlines in hotel rooms. Mr Dardenne argues that hotels should do away with landlines, radical as it might seem.

He also identified several poor practices that were ubiquitous across brands, such as exorbitantly priced minibar goodies, and slow, expensive Wi-Fi services.

Mr Dardenne suggested that instead of trying to levy extra charges for these services, they should be provided as amenities. Even if this might result in higher prices, the improved experience will pay for itself.

"We're really trying to think out of the box and put ourselves in the customers' shoes to understand what they need and don't need," Mr Dardenne said of his company.

Though the customers' rooms will still be stocked with phones for now, he believes that hotels need to think differently so as to cater to new needs.