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Instant Messaging Apps in Hotels: A Perfect Solution to Guests' Communicative Needs?

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Today, sending a message through Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp to a business to inquire about a product or service is no less commonplace than chatting online with a friend or a colleague. In fact, communication through online channels has become routine in the digital era. With the continued prevalence of high-speed internet and mobile devices, interacting with others through mobile platforms is now a normal daily activity for consumers. In 2020, approximately 50% of the total internet traffic worldwide was from mobile devices, and one of the top reasons for using mobile gadgets was to socialize or communicate with others through instant messaging (IM) applications (apps) (Statista, 2021a). IM is a form of two-way, real-time communication via the internet which involves text transmission. IM apps are usually free of charge and enable the exchange of different forms of information (e.g., text, image, video, audio, file). According to Bucher (2020), in 2019, the top three most popular IM apps – WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and WeChat – have attracted more than 4 billion active monthly users. The total number of active mobile messaging users is expected to grow from approximately 2.5 billion in 2019 to over 3 billion in 2022 (Statista, 2021b).

Instant Messaging (IM) in Hotels

Gone are the days when marketers could rely solely on traditional communication media. Employing new channels to reach and interact with customers seems inevitable. The use of IM in daily personal life has thus spilled over to commercial settings as businesses have begun to see the potential of IM as an effective communication channel for marketing and beyond. Understanding how customers want to be reached and interacted with is particularly relevant to service-based industries such as the hospitality industry, in which customer experience is at the heart of the business, and every touchpoint is critical. Consumers, for example, switch to companies that offer text messaging as a communication channel if they find it effectively enhances their experiences. The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated these trends, as technologies and accommodations that do not require direct face-to-face contact are increasingly seen as safer for consumers and employees, and such an option has become a sign of care for a guest's well-being.

These changes in consumer preferences have concerned hospitality businesses even before the pandemic. In 2015, Marriott International launched the "Anything Else" mobile IM service, allowing customers to chat with and request service directly from a hotel associate via the official Marriott mobile app. InterContinental Hotels Group and Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts offer similar services to interact with customers through different messaging platforms. As a means of communication that enables interaction with customers before, during, and after a trip, hoteliers believe IM has great potential to facilitate more personalized and contextualized communications. There have been several trade publications advocating that hotels incorporate IM into their marketing and experience management efforts.

Yet, communication through IM is not as effective as many believe. We have learned from previous research that depending on how IM is applied and what services it aims to provide, the factors affecting user experience may differ. In the workplace, IM could improve interaction and information exchange among employees but, as a distractor, it also negatively affects employee productivity. For customers, their willingness to use IM depends on whether they see IM as useful, easy to use, convenient, and enjoyable.

By nature, IM communication has its weaknesses. As a type of computer-mediated communication, it filters our nonverbal social cues. This is particularly risky when we need to get a complex message across because a receiver is lacking the (social)

context for the message, resulting in misinterpretation and loss of efficiency (e.g. back-and-forth messaging).

Study on IM Usage in Hotels

To identify best practices about how hotels can integrate IM applications into hotel guests' experience, we conducted a three-part study on guests' IM apps using behaviors and preferences, as well as their communicative needs. The research consisted of three studies. Study 1 (Lei, Kirillova, & Wang, 2018) was a survey among 336 hotel guests in the US who used IM to communicate with a hotel during their stay in a full-service hotel. Study 2 (Lei, Kirillova, Wang, & Chan, In Press) consisted of face-to-face interviews with 18 Chinese and US guests during a stay in 4- and 5-star hotels. Study 3 (Lei et al., In Press) was an experimental-type study conducted with 420 Chinese guests and 415 US guests who used an IM app to communicate with a hotel before, during, and after a stay in the last 12 months.

Key Takeaways for Hoteliers

Based on the results, we propose several key takeaways for hoteliers.

Guests prefer to use IM apps when their needs are not urgent. It is thus important not to rely on mobile IM as the dominant channel, and hotels should ensure that other channels are available for emergencies. Hotels may even consider blending mobile IM and other channels by incorporating other channels in the IM interface (e.g., adding quick buttons such as "room attendants" or "call" button on the texting interface).

Additionally, it is important to develop a list of common, non-urgent scenarios when guests contact hotel staff and standard operating procedures (SOP) that should guide staff training. The SOP should detail how often employees must check the IM app, how fast to respond, and how to handle common queries. Hotels may consider educating guests to use IM for non-urgent communications and other channels for urgent communications to ensure all guests can experience effective customer service. This helps prioritize urgent requests and avoid guests waiting in line or being kept on hold. Promoting IM service for non-urgent communication can boost usage without overloading at the same time. To implement these suggestions, hotels should redirect their personnel and allocate resources strategically.

Guests prefer to use IM before and after the stay. This means that hotels should allocate more resources to handle pre-arrival and post-stay communications (e.g., preparing answer templates for frequently asked questions, development of chatbots,

transferring customers to public relations for complaints). Understanding how hotel guests would like to receive a certain type of information, hoteliers can make good use of this to promote products and services or to build relationships with customers. Pre-recorded messages and chatbots, however, should be avoided for in-house IM communication with guests when richer and immediate communication is a priority. Furthermore, pre-arrival is a suitable period for customization and upselling efforts using IM. Using their existing customer database, hotels can push more targeted information to customers through IM before their stay to maximize the chance that customers will read and be interested in the promotion.

Guests who often use mobile IM for work purposes in daily life are more likely to expect and to use IM apps to connect with a hotel. Given the pervasiveness of technology and its significance for guests' daily and professional lives, hoteliers should expect an increase in the number of guests who are comfortable with IM. This means that hoteliers should keep their finger on the pulse of innovation in communication technologies to make wise investment decisions.

There is no difference in how US and Chinese guests use IM to connect with a hotel. Thus, hoteliers do not need to customize their communication strategies for both countries and both types of guests, potentially saving financial resources. This recommendation is particularly critical for large hotel chains that not only have properties in both countries but also often cross-train and transfer their employees across geographic markets. Although the IM apps in the two countries are not the same (e.g. dominance of WeChat in China), the benefits and circumstances of IM use are consistent.

In conclusion, we want to caution hoteliers that IM is not a panacea for all guests' communicative needs, as many trade publications have recently advocated. To counter this, the study provides evidence-based guidance on how to leverage IM to benefit both the hotel and the guest.

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