Operations

Hotels design, personalize elements for solo travelers

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Faced with a loneliness epidemic in society, hotel staffs are devising ways of detecting and dealing with guests who may be feeling isolated by listening closer, connecting more and providing lots of communal spaces and interactive guest experiences without being invasive.

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REPORT FROM THE U.S.—A recent survey of 20,000 U.S. adults conducted by global health company Cigna found that nearly half suffer from feelings of loneliness and isolation, very often in the workplace. That trend is being accentuated in the hospitality industry by a major growth in solo travel.

Hoteliers are addressing the issue, partly through hotel design by creating more co-working spaces and communal leisure areas. They're also promoting activities for guests to partake in together, and by what's almost become a mantra—connecting with guests emotionally.

Connect naturally
But how can hotels keep tabs on lonely guests without being invasive? After all, many travelers relish the ability to shut their hotel door at the end of a long day and keep to themselves.

"Usually, the main indicator of loneliness is when our guests spend a great deal of time connecting with the front-desk staff or sharing stories with the hotel bartender," said Mark Henry, GM of the HarbourView Inn in Charleston, South Carolina.

"The housekeeping team also creates personalized relationships with guests to know specific preferences and usually has the ability to check up on guests

when they are alone in their room to accommodate their needs," he said.

Karen Dade, GM at the 207-room Aloft Miami Aventura, believes it's the hotel staffs' responsibility to be intuitive, not invasive, about the loneliness issue.

"In our current workplace environment individuals are extremely adept at masking emotions and feelings," Dade said. "So it's key that my associates use a nurturing tone and attempt to connect with our guests on a meaningful level."

Dade said her staff addresses lonely guests, just as they do other guest needs, by watching out for the signs that someone is seeking interaction.

"For example, if we notice a guest is in the lobby frequently it may be due to stress and anxiety or just plain loneliness and we will make a conscious attempt to connect with the guest," she said. "No degrees are required, just a welcoming smile and a genuine interest in the wellbeing of our guests."

Hoteliers across the U.S are taking seriously health studies and research that link social media to spiraling loneliness, depression and anxiety.

Ironically, the most digitally connected groups—millennials and Gen Z—often do not feel the most social connection, according to some research.

Kathleen Reidenbach, chief commercial officer of Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants, said the chain's interactive Room 301 experiment and Stay Human Project grew from the realization that people are craving more real connections.

"As a brand, we've always grounded our approach to guest experience in creating community, and as road warriors ourselves (we) know that business travel can feel isolating. (That) is why Bill Kimpton initially brought employees and guests together every evening by the fireplace in the lobby to decompress over a glass of wine and good conversation," she said.

That tradition she said continues today across the Kimpton brand, with the nightly wine hour, alongside other creative tactics that aim to "surprise and delight guests with more personalized and thoughtful experiences."

Non-digital connections
Digital detox is increasingly being prescribed by many hotels along with a slate of immersive and interactive experiences from shared tours to culinary get-togethers.

Matthew Barba, GM of the Deer Path Inn in Lake Forest, Illinois, said that's the case at his hotel.

"Here it's board games over apps. Guests are invited to get away from technology in the Hearth Room, a communal meeting area centered around an open fire. This takes visitors back in time—to pre-cell phone era, while sharing some laughs and chatting over morning coffee or evening cocktails," he said.

Shared activities help corporate and leisure travelers wind down and intermingle, Dade said, much like the ones the Deer Path Inn has.

"We have a pool table in the lobby. We also have a giant chessboard on our pool deck that invites social connectivity. And our bartenders are champions of Cards Against Humanity, which draws people in together," she said.

Many novel hotel activities are aimed at drawing guests out of their rooms and into an interactive environment.

"We have many activities that open up the opportunity for social engagement," Henry said. "Guests can be seen gathering on the rooftop bar, socializing during our complimentary wine and cheese hours, taking in an evening sunset skyline tour or enjoying weekly jazz nights together.

He said the HarbourView Inn has a unique space that's designed as more of a "home base" for corporate and leisure travelers. The public spaces are "quaint enough that they can un-forcefully create fraternizing between guests will allowing personal space to be safeguarded."

The dynamics of checking in on guests and drawing them into common spaces is surely very different in a several-hundred key hotel than in a 52-room boutique property, Henry said.

But bigger brands are also introducing initiatives to personalize and humanize their guest relations.

"We have live entertainment twice a week, and invite our guests to participate in holiday festivities like St. Patrick's Day," Dade said. "And we recently started the stress-reducing activity of coloring.

"Additionally, the property offers weekly 'Live at Aloft' events to bring together the surrounding community of Aventura for live local music and dancing."

The success of shared workspaces that have been converted into lounges in hotels also illustrates the intrinsic human need for connection.

"The Aloft brand emphasizes open, collaborative spaces," Dade added.

The transformation of public spaces—lobbies, rooftops—into open, co-working areas, by other groups will increasingly allow guests to get out of their rooms to work and play.

Kimpton argues for a thoughtful use of technology.

"Technology is no substitute for human interaction," Reidenbach said. Guests would almost never emerge from their rooms, she explained, "If we equipped every room with technology that served as the concierge, TV controller, valet and room service."

"Guests want to be able to pick up the phone or go down to the front desk and have their requests addressed instantly, by a real person," she said.