



IS YOUR BRAND “Sense”-able?

a signature smell or sound can—create lasting bonds

How can your resort appeal to all types of guests – aging baby boomers and young, hip up-and-coming professionals; business executives and vacationing families; the retired and well-to-do vs budget-minded travelers? The truth is, you can't. That reality has, in recent years, led to consolidation and segmentation in the lodging industry, creating large conglomerates with multiple brands, each customized to meet the needs, preferences and budget of a particular type of guest.

To help define, differentiate and communicate their brands, progressive companies are looking beyond graphics and décor to sensory branding. This strategy, which appeals to all the senses, seeks to create a strong and lasting emotional connection between customer and brand.

“Hospitality companies spend huge amounts of money to entice people to call or visit their property. Once they do, you need to deliver a unique, unforgettable experience – that’s where sensory branding comes in,” says Brian McKinley of DMX, a provider of sensory services. “Our senses determine our perception of the world, our emotions

and our memories. The more senses that are engaged, the more stimulated a person will be and the more vivid and lasting their memories become.”

Expanding Touchpoints

Whether a resort’s focus is luxury, family, or economy, multisensory branding can create an environment that speaks directly to its patrons and connects with them on a personal level. Branding is your company’s personality, McKinley says. It goes beyond traditional considerations like names, logos and signature colors to influence every part of your business and every person associated with it.

Although sensory branding is a

relatively new strategy for resorts, spas have long been adept at bringing every sense into play due to the very nature of their business. At Two Bunch Palms Resort & Spa in Desert Hot Springs, Calif., for example, guests are immersed in the sights, sounds and natural beauty of the area, as well as the manmade accoutrements.

“With the sense of touch being addressed through our treatments, we look to the other senses to complete a person’s experience,” says Jerry Angelini, director of health and wellness. “Our custom-blended essential oils support the body’s recuperative and regenerative capabilities, turning pleasant aromas

into truly therapeutic events. On site fountains and a meandering mineral water-filled brook provide a soothing background, and our restaurant serves a range of flavors and textures to satisfy the palate and stomach while being visually appealing.”

Focusing on the details is key to ensuring that all the parts work together to form a cohesive picture of a brand and to set it apart from competitors. The Westin resorts started it all when they introduced their Heavenly Bed brand. Now, nearly every resort brand boasts its own luxury bedding, as well as its custom-blended bathroom soaps and lotions, high-definition TVs, and computer workstations.



Natural Appeal

Even the plants you choose to display say something about your brand, says Ken Brewer, North American technical manager for Ambius, an interior landscape firm. “Beautiful interior plants, combined with the right décor and lighting, are the hallmarks of an inviting entrance. They can create a tranquil atmosphere, reduce stress and provide private areas where you can have a quiet conversation,” he says.

Although large atriums can be visually impressive, they also can be perceived as cold and overwhelming. In these cases, the right selection of plants can help create a warm and inviting environment.

A case in point is the pool and spa

at Harrah's Resort Atlantic City, where a 90-foot-high glass dome shelters 12 cabanas, six hot tubs, a bar, and a giant pool in a 172,000-square-foot space. “We wanted to transform this indoor pool area into a tropical oasis with an arboretum atmosphere, complete with gorgeous plants and trees,” said Nick Moore, the general contractor for Harrah's Pool & Spa from TN Ward, a construction management firm.

Ambius brought in 21 semi-trailer loads of interior plants and trees and installed a tropical and floral design to complement the luxurious compound. “Harrah's guests are captivated by the lush greenery,” Moore says. “The stunning plantscaping complements the dramatic



architecture. It has made a distinctive contribution to the space.”

The Smell of Money

More recently, smell and hearing have been receiving the lion's share of attention. Background music is long gone, replaced with unique playlists that vary by zone, genre and time of day. And since 2005, when author Martin Lindstrom revealed that 75 percent of the emotions we generate on a daily basis are affected by what we smell, resorts have been using scent machines to waft made-to-order scents into their lobbies and other public areas.

In 2006, after almost a year of research,

Westin Hotels & Resorts launched its distinctive fragrance, White Tea. Holiday Inn worked with a global fragrance house to fashion a crisp blend of citrus and white tea to help create an environment that is perceived as simple, clean, open, airy and warm. And Omni Resorts chose a subtle blend of lemongrass and green tea to complement the music, lighting, room design and restaurants found at its upscale locations.

Fragrance delivery systems can be purchased or leased, and they vary from small zone machines that target specific areas, such as the front desk, to multiple-fragrance HVAC systems that disperse the scents over wide areas, says Lisa Marie of Eco-Scent. “With our HVAC system,

we can deliver up to four different fragrances, so in the lobby we can pump out fresh pastry in the morning and Coconut Mango in the afternoon,” Marie says.

Likewise, specialized music can be delivered when and where you want it. “You can play different types of music in different parts of your property at different times of the day,” says Allen Klevens, CEO of a music branding and consulting company. Want a particular song or playlist to play when



Custom scents can set the mood, from cinnamon rolls in the morning to eucalyptus in a spa environment

the lights in the lounge go down or a certain scent is released in the lobby? No problem. A music-delivery system, says Klevens, can program that for you.

Some signature fragrances and music tracks have become so popular that they have generated branded retail products such as Westin's White Tea candles and potpourri, or Four Seasons' private-label CD containing the soundscape heard in the Windows Lounge in their Beverly Hills property. Not only has this created new revenue streams, but it also extends the property's unique experience into the guest's home, further strengthening the emotional connection between brand and customer.



Holiday Inn's branch relaunch calls for fresh, white triple-sheeting and pillows that come in two comfort levels: "soft" and "firm."

Who Do You Touch?

To craft an effective sensory branding design, hospitality companies first must understand what their target customers want and how those customers currently perceive the brand, DMX's McKinley says. Do the two match up?

Before embarking on the \$1 billion relaunch of its Holiday Inn brands, InterContinental Resorts Group conducted consumer research, encompassing more than 100 different brands and more than 18,000 people.

"This extensive market research serves as the foundation for the changes IHG is making to the Holiday Inn brands and ensures we are providing consumers what they want," says Brad Minor, manager of public relations for Holiday Inn.

"One interesting statistic is that our guests tell us 90 percent of what's important to them in a hotel stay is a modern, clean, safe property with efficient, friendly service that affords a great night's sleep," he says. "So while we

are fine-tuning those key areas, the other 10 percent affords us an opportunity to use sensory branding components, such as custom music and fragrances, signature bedding and bath elements, softened landscaping and outdoor lighting, to surprise and delight our guests."

DIY Customization

The bar is constantly being raised and the future looks interesting. Some experts predict that soon, during registration, guests will be able to choose the type of art they want on the wall, the contents of their minibar, the fragrance that greets them upon entering their room, and music to suit their taste and mood.

What is most important is how the senses interact and work together to create the power of the brand. McKinley likens sensory branding design to a painting. "Every artist has the same basic colors to work with, but what makes a painting unique is how the artist blends the colors and creates new shades, shapes and textures, adding patterns and layers to create dimension," he says. "Sensory branding works in the same way. Two places may be using the same music and scent, but how they work together and interact with other elements like lighting, furnishings, wall color, and architectural style impacts the guest's overall perception of the ambiance." **R+R**

Buyer Beware

In light of a 2008 University of Washington study showing that many scented products contain toxins, resorts may want to take a cautionary approach when adding scents to their marketing mix.

"They need to know where the products are coming from," says Harold Vogt, founder of the Scent Marketing Institute. "Ask for the Material Safety Data Sheet. If they won't provide it, stay away from the product." Vogt also says to look for suppliers who are members



of the International Fragrance Association.

That's not enough for U.W. engineering professor Anne Steinemann, who conducted the study. "I haven't found a scented oil that doesn't emit toxic chemicals," she says. "I'm really concerned because resorts are exposing employees and hundreds of guests. It could be a liability for resorts

if someone develops a respiratory ailment."

Steinemann is so sure of her finding that she's offered to test the scented oils in her laboratory. "I'll see what the exposure level is," she says.

Wyndham Hotels and Resorts is taking a different approach, having begun a ClearAir initiative to offer allergy-friendly accommodations. While eight Wyndham hotels offer allergy-friendly rooms today, all will be required to convert 10 percent of their room inventory or a minimum of 25 rooms into allergy-friendly environments

by the end of 2009. Wyndham is the first lodging chain to mandate such rooms system-wide.

The chain is responding to guest concerns over rising health issues and costs associated with allergic reactions. According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, allergies and asthma affect one in four Americans.

Following a system designed by New York-based PURE Solutions NA, Wyndham ClearAir rooms undergo a multistep clearing process designed to remove up to 98 percent of allergens.