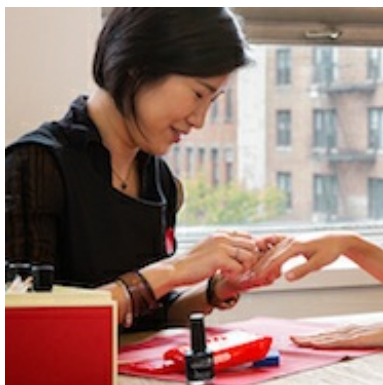


INTERNET

High-tech meets high-touch for service-centric startups

March 30, 2015



Manicube

By SARAH JONES

NEW YORK – As technology emerges to help facilitate services, the human touch is still key, according to panelists at the Columbia Business School Retail & Luxury Goods Conference March 27.

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Luxury Daily

"The New Luxury Lifestyle" session focused on service startups that reflect the new definition of luxury, which combines the ease of digital with elevated services to make consumers' lives easier. Rather than removing the personal connection, these platforms instead provide an opportunity for a solution that caters to the individual in a way unachievable through traditional means.

"The human connection is growing that much more important, ironically, as people have more technology, more connection, they have the ability to disconnect from real humans as much as possible," said Kerry Bennett, senior vice president of marketing at [DogVacay](#), Santa Monica, CA. "I think people are really craving that.

"We talk a lot about the global neighborhood at DogVacay, and connecting real people, real humans, one-on-one basis building those relationships."

Making a connection

Manicube works with human resources in corporate to provide 15-minute manicures in-office, saving women time and enabling them to squeeze in the service within a busy work week.

DogVacay is an online platform for consumers to find reliable sitters and in-house boarding for their furry friends.



From left, moderator Eliza Brooke with Manicube's Katina Mountanos and DogVacay's Kerry Bennett

For both DogVacay and Manicube, the most important concern is quality control, which can help them attain and retain consumer trust. In hiring and training, service providers are screened thoroughly to ensure that they reflect the values of the company.

For Manicube, that means practical assessment on one of the company's employees, and a "Manicube boot camp," in which aestheticians complete an eight-hour iPad training with quizzes.



Manicube setup

Pets are a member of the family, and therefore screening potential hosts is imperative to make consumers comfortable leaving them with a relative stranger. Only about 15 to 20 percent of applicants have been approved.

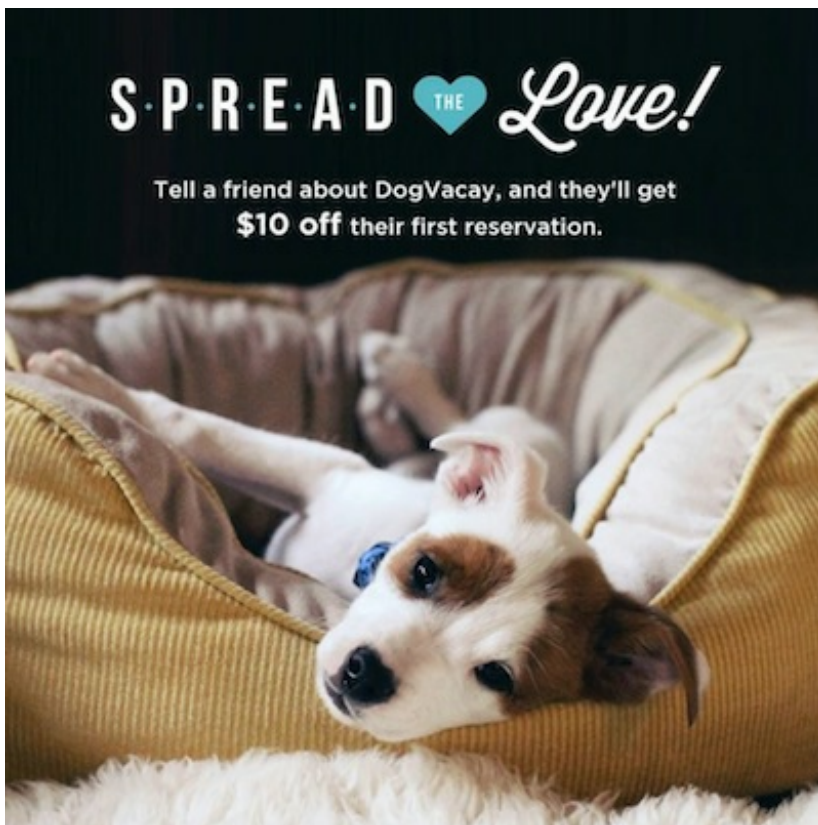
Since it would be impossible to visit every single potential host in person, DogVacay has instead mobilized existing hosts to check out other possible hosts in-person, giving other users piece of mind, even if a new provider has no reviews yet.

Customer service is also paramount. DogVacay has 55 of its 75 employees dedicated to client care, and provides 24/7 access to speak to a live person, as well as extensive insurance. Four associates are also available to act as a concierge to help a customer find the right sitter for them and their pet.

Technology is also a customer service. Ensuring that the booking process, including payment, is easy to process aids to the user experience and sentiment towards the company.

Data can also create a more personalized experience, ensuring that service providers featured are relevant to a consumer's wants and needs.

Even with all that digital can do, marketing these services is still high-touch. Half of DogVacay's new bookings come from PR or word of mouth, and Manicube relies on getting in the door with an individual at a particular company, opening them up to an entire office.



DogVacay gets most new users through word of mouth

Pairing up

These types of startups can make strategic partners for more established luxury hospitality brands.

Trump International Hotel & Tower New York is helping guests achieve their desired beauty look through a partnership with beauty application Vensette.

With the hotel's "Beauty in a New York Minute" package, consumers can book hair and makeup applications for special events such as a birthday party through their smartphone, and have beauty services performed in the comfort of their hotel room. Vensette estimates that its makeovers take 45 minutes or less, leaving lots of time for celebration following primping ([see story](#)).

What sets these apps apart from competitors is the people behind them and the level of service offered, rather than technology.

"I do think there's something to this more high-touch element, where we're actually vetting that service provider and ensuring their quality, where there's a ton of competitors on the market that are really just focused on supply-demand matching," said Katina Mountanos, co-founder and CEO of [Manicube](#), New York.

This differentiating factor is more difficult to accomplish, but according to the panelists, worthwhile.

"I think the ability to build a platform, to build an app and to launch it into the market, and even to get supply initially is actually a really easy thing to do right now," DogVacay's Ms. Bennett said. "I think the ability to make that a really scalable experience and a great

business is the hard thing to do.

"Anyone can launch a platform, but to really make an experience that people trust, feel confident about and that they'll use again is not something that you can just leave to technology or complete do-it-yourself services."

Final Take

Sarah Jones, staff reporter on Luxury Daily, New York

Embedded Video: <https://www.youtube.com/embed/Ld9GQssi1MY>

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