

MARKETING

## Orchestrating the customer journey is the new black, says Ritz-Carlton exec

October 18, 2016



*Sentient got on board with a mobile app release*

By SARAH JONES

NEW YORK A mobile application needs to serve a function that is unique from other touchpoints to give users a reason to download and return, according to panelists speaking at Luxury Interactive 2016.

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During the "App Happy Customers and the Loyal Buyer" session on Oct. 17, executives from the Ritz-Carlton, Sentient Jet and Camuto Group explained their reasons for rolling out an app or remaining hesitant to launch. Knowing when to make the leap can be a challenge.

"We probably actually waited a bit longer than the business demanded," said Sarah Lukas, corporate senior manager, ecommerce marketing at Ritz-Carlton.

"When we launched our first app for the Ritz-Carlton, the brand still had a very pixel perfect mindset," she said. "They weren't agile in our approach, we were not very tolerant of failure and were intolerant of not putting our best face forward for our customers. So the idea of coming out with an app that didn't completely knock their socks off was really why we were hesitant.

"What you'll see now from a cultural standpoint is lots more versioning and iteration than I think before. Before we were trying to build something that was perfect, and we probably sat on it longer than we should have."

### App appeal

Of the panelist companies, Ritz-Carlton launched its app the earliest, in 2012. Key features of the app are activated on-site at a property, with mobile check-in and the ability to request services easing the guest's stay.

For Ritz-Carlton, the mobile Web still holds a place, with international markets less apt to download an English language app.

Sentient Jet, on the other hand, waited until earlier this year to release an app ([see story](#)). With the private aviation firm's average user age around 60, the company saw the rise of social media as the tipping point to creating an app.

As Andrew Collins, president and CEO of the private aviation firm explained, many around Sentient were attempting

to be the Uber of jets, so the company had to figure out how to launch an app without becoming part of the group.



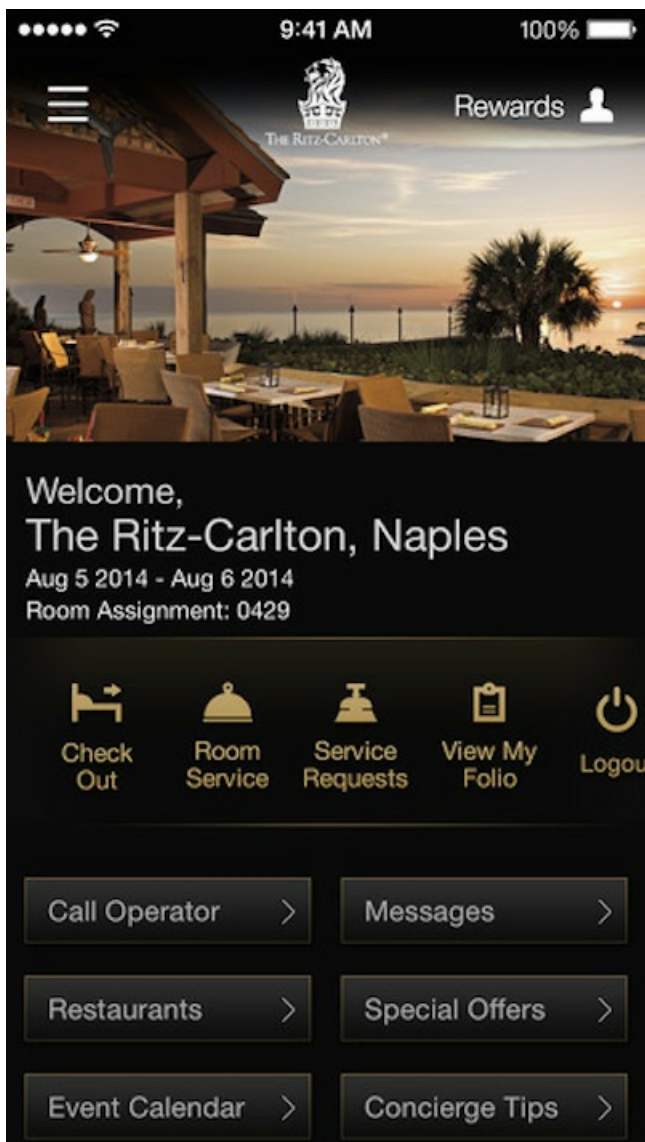
### *Sentient Jet's app*

With a captive audience of members, Sentient decided that a mobile app could change the way in which consumers transacted. Going native with an app also meant that Sentient's users were not accustomed to another platform that they then had to adapt from.

Camuto Group, which includes the Vince Camuto brand and other apparel labels, has talked about creating an app, but is holding back until it is sure that the user experience offers something that consumers cannot currently get in-store or online. According to the group's vice president of marketing Diana Takach, this added value has to go beyond promotions.

Creating an app often includes involving external developers, which comes with benefits and challenges.

The Ritz-Carlton's Ms. Lukas, said that mobile developers sometimes do not understand the luxury market. To ensure that the developers can speak for the brand, Ritz-Carlton hosts orientations for them on-site at its properties.



*The Ritz-Carlton app*

Sentient Jet found that using outside help does not mean that the internal team is off the hook. Aside from the involvement of its own employees, the brand's app went over budget on time and money by 20 percent.

Those on the panel who have launched apps have different ways of measuring success.

A Ritz-Carlton loyalist is apt to visit only 20 times a year, so achievement is more tied to retention of the app on their phone. Meanwhile, Sentient has found that the app has been able to upsell bookers more effectively than phone calls or emails could, as consumers could see the options in front of them.

#### Popping up

Notifications are a means to get noticed by consumers, but luxury brands have to be mindful of not being intrusive.

Ms. Takach noted that in a landscape of fast fashion where the message changes daily, push notifications are often the only means to get the shopper's attention in a crowded field.

For Sentient Jet's Mr. Collins, push notifications have to serve a functional purpose. For instance, the jet service uses notifications to direct its users toward partner services, such as restaurants in their current location.

With push notifications and in-application messaging expected to be a core product function on any connected object going forward, Forrester Research pinpoints 10 emerging best practices marketers must adopt to ensure strong engagement rates.

While the number of marketers adopting push notifications and in-application messaging continues to grow, engagement rates are low and decreasing in some cases due to unclear value and a lack of personalization, according to the report, Upgrade Your Marketing Plans with Push Notifications And In-App Messaging. A key takeaway is that with consumers becoming increasingly selective about which messages they engage with, providing contextual relevance alone is not enough ([see story](#)).

In messaging, brands walk a line between helpful and intrusive.

"There's a running joke in our office that orchestration is the new black," Ms. Lukas said. "So while it certainly comes up in context of mobile because it is the most personal and you can't be invasive in the customer journey, it's something that is a bigger problem across all of the digital touchpoints, so we're being mindful of that."

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