

MARKETING

Why a genuine human touch makes all the difference in luxury

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Hotel experiences, even in the high-end space, often resemble each other. Hospitality audits reveal how luxury is driven by soft skills and human value. Image credit: Sofitel Moorea

By [Daniel Langer](#)

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I recently hosted a *Future of Luxury Masterclass* at the Sofitel Beach Resort in Moorea in French Polynesia. The focus was on how to create a refined experience for the next generation of clients that seek the ultimate luxury hospitality stay.

In preparation, I audited the experience of all aspects of the guest journey.

With my team, I do these audits frequently across all luxury categories, from the high-end car dealerships to high jewelry boutiques, hospitality to haute couture.

Typically, we find what I like to call "the sea of sameness."

I recall a high-end car audit where all dealership experiences literally resembled each other, and not in a good way with no brand storytelling, no differentiation and no special touch. When this happens, the experience does not feel luxurious at all, independent of impressive real estate locations or how much the dealer "sells a dream."

Similarly, restaurant and hospitality experiences often resemble each other.

In a restaurant, the food may be great but you do not feel the magic, usually because it was just a solid category experience like many others. The same occurs at many luxury hotels.

If you took off the brand name, you would not know in many cases which hotel brand you are in. Too often, even in the top-end luxury space, too many players rely on tangible assets, but underestimate the power of the intangible: the human factor.

So, I was not just surprised, but literally blown away by the experience at Sofitel Moorea.

Even before arrival, personal connection with staff was established and my preferences noted. The hotel organized a helicopter transfer from the airport because of the late arrival of our plane in Tahiti. At arrival, we were greeted with big smiles by hotel staff, flowers and a glass of Champagne.

From there, every single step of the guest experience was a benchmark for what a luxury hotel experience can be. Every single staff member greeted us by name, all the time. Preferences were immediately noted. It did not matter who we interacted with, in which situation, or how we ordered something. Every single interaction was a delight and so personal.

General manager Sabine Lamberts highlighted the importance of not just selecting the right people for each and every role, but also of training them and creating an inspiring atmosphere for the staff, where people feel happy and love coming to work.

"I am delighted about our capacity to create memories," Ms. Lamberts said. "I have a wonderful team and I am grateful for that."

A lot of the leadership personnel were local, hence there is no "glass ceiling" situation where leadership positions are predominantly given to expats, like in so many other resorts.

With this experience so close in mind, I cannot overemphasize the role of training and teamwork in creating a true luxury experience.

I often use the analogy of an opera or a theater show. You can have many great actors but if they have no script, if their roles are not clear and, importantly, if they do not feel happiness, it is impossible to create a magical performance.

The same applies to creating a luxury experience. It is not about the smile, because a smile is expected in luxury. However, when a smile becomes genuine, when the client or guest feels truly cared for, then it feels differently. It is the soft factor that creates luxury.

When we flew to Bora Bora to audit a second luxury hotel from a different brand, the difference was extreme. The "product" of the second hotel was stunning: The villas were large, incredibly beautiful, and the entire resort was nothing short of "wow."

While staff were generally friendly, the service felt distant. The smiles did not seem genuine, and you could feel that people did not have the same happiness, dedication and attitude as at the Sofitel. There was little attention to detail, and even complete indifference to service in some cases.

At the restaurant audit, the one thing missing was service. No one remembered our preferences and we were never greeted by name. And almost no one ever smiled.

The contrast between the two hotels was stunning. And the difference was in how the people make you feel. The other hotel did not leave any lasting impression other than the beauty of architecture and nature. And if there is no distinct brand-related memory, then there is no value. And if there is no value, there is no luxury.

Hence, at comparable prices, the first hotel felt like "it's worth every penny" while the other one felt like a "complete rip-off." That is the difference that a genuine smile and attitude can make. It has direct implications on willingness to pay, loyalty and, hence, profitability.

What is the lesson for luxury brands? Never settle for the obvious.

You need to create a wonderful ambience through architecture, design and other tangible factors.

However, these are just "hygiene elements" necessary but not decisive.

The difference is in how the client feels, in creating an emotional connection that reflects the script of the story of the brand.

As the year starts, it is a good moment to reflect on the experience that your brand provides and ask critically if the experience is luxury or not. And, importantly, if the smiles that your clients receive are genuine.

This is an op-ed article that reflects the views of the author and does not necessarily represent the views of Jing Daily.

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