

How Smart Hotels Use Messaging to Connect With Guests

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Earlier this year, Skift proclaimed [messaging as the “new language of the globe”](#) and asked, “Are travel brands listening?”

It looks like hotels finally are, if they haven’t already.

With an expected additional 1.1 billion new users set to adopt messaging by the end of 2018, for a total of 3.6 billion users, it’s clear that messaging really is the new **social** media.

Why? Because they’re realizing the importance of messaging to building loyalty, increasing guest engagement, and enhancing the overall guest experience. And what better way to continue making inroads in getting more guests to book direct?

Over the next few months, expect to see more hotels offering guests the ability to text or message the hotels, whether through their own proprietary apps, established messaging channels like **WhatsApp** or **Facebook** Messenger, or the use of third-party technologies.

The different methods by which hotels are choosing to message with guests, while they all fulfill the same objectives, also show different benefits and potential downsides, however.

Going Native

One approach that some hotel companies have chosen is housing all guest messaging “within the walled garden of their own app,” as Robert Cole, the founder of RockCheetah, a hotel marketing strategy and travel technology consulting firm, described. This is an approach often favored by larger hotel companies because it adds yet another layer of functionality or value to their native apps, in addition to features like mobile check-in/check-out and keyless entry, for example. It’s also the most expensive option to pursue.

The biggest pro for going this route also relates to the hotels’ ability to capitalize on the extensive and richer data connection to each individual guest’s loyalty profile. When a guest uses a hotel’s native app to message the hotel, it’s that much easier for the hotel brand to know exactly who that guest is, and to collect a record of those messages as part of that

customer's loyalty profile.

"These hotels want to encourage that native app environment to use it for all those processes and purposes and also message people with the hotels, and tie it all back to their guest profiles," Cole said.

"Messaging, especially messaging done right at scale, is really going to be a big game changer for the hotels," said Joshua Sloser, Hilton's vice president of digital product innovation.

Regardless of hotel chain size, there are a number of hotels using this strategy or planning to use it in the near future. Messaging via native app is something Marriott International is already testing out, and it's also something Hilton Worldwide plans to add to its app next year.

It's also a strategy being used by Virgin Hotels with [its Lucy App](#), which lets guests not only message hotel staff but also communicate with other guests, too. At the moment, there's only one Virgin Hotel property, located in Chicago, but the brand is expanding.

And Palace Resorts, an eight-property chain of beach resorts in Mexico and the Caribbean, has also debuted its own mobile app for guests. It includes a built-in messaging feature and allows guests to engage on social media networks and TripAdvisor, too.

Currently, Marriott is testing out messaging via its Marriott Rewards app at approximately 850 hotels and it plans to expand the feature to 4,000 by next month. The messaging is activated on the app when a guest has an upcoming stay, allowing a guest to message the hotel prior to arrival.

George Corbin, senior vice president of digital for Marriott International, said that having messaging on Marriott's own app makes it easier to scale worldwide, simply because there are so many different platforms out there.

"Whatever we do, we have to be able to operationalize it at scale worldwide, consistently across 90 countries," he said. "If we relied on third-party apps, which ones would we use? WeChat? WhatsApp? Kakao? Skype Messenger? There's a massive proliferation of messaging platforms out there — who will manage all of them and respond immediately?"

Not only that but it's also better for customer relationship management (CRM), too, he said. "We can be much more personalized, adaptive, and responsive, and here's what we know about past stay behavior. It's bringing different pieces of data together to bring what they want, when they need it — that's why companies like ours are building up CRM."

He said he's also wary of allowing another third-party, whether it's Facebook or a hotel-specific messaging platform have access to his customers' information or messages. "Our currency is the relationship we have with our customers. Letting others come between that is doing a disservice to ourselves and to our customers," Corbin said.

But what about app fatigue?

“App fatigue is a risk we all run,” said Corbin. “The primary play for that is to consolidate and aggregate as much as you can into that one app.”

Moreover, said Hilton’s Sloser, the apps are where the guests are. “It’s important for us to get that functionality [messaging] in the app because of the adoption rates of people using the app during their stay,” he said. “If our guests are constantly going into our app to access info, that’s where they are during their stay, so being able to deliver that holistic experience makes it easier for the guest.”

Both Hilton and Marriott have said they’ve seen increased booking revenue, usage and downloads of their apps within the past year.

Marriott booked \$1 billion in revenue via its app in 2015, and this year they surpassed \$1 billion in August. The app is downloaded, on average, 8,000 times per day, and compared to 2015, Marriott has seen a 30 percent increase in downloads.

Hilton said its app is downloaded, on average, 450 times every hour, or about 10,800 times per day. And its mobile app features like digital check-in with room selection are used nearly one million times per month. It’s also seen a 13.5 percent increase in the number of app users utilizing its Digital Key feature, with as many as 6,000 uses in a single day.

“With these apps, with all the things we’re doing digitally, we want to try to answer the question of how we make ourselves useful beyond that single trip,” Corbin said. “How do you stay relevant beyond that? The way you build engagement with a guest goes much beyond a stay.”

Looking to Facebook, WeChat, WhatsApp, iMessage, and Others

Two years ago, Starwood Hotel’s W Doha hotel embarked on a pilot program using WhatsApp and BlackBerry Messenger as a way for frequent guests to message the hotel and make requests, or ask questions.

“We quickly found that guests naturally wanted to communicate with us the same way they did with everyone else,” said Daniel Kerzner, Starwood’s vice president of digital loyalty and partner marketing for Europe, Africa, and the Middle East (EAME).

That pilot has since expanded to 175 properties throughout the EAME region, and the company expects to have close to 100,000 guests using its [“Let’s Chat” feature](#) by the end of this year.

Kerzner said that staff members at all participating hotels carry mobile phones synced to the specific numbers that work for various platforms and that customers will receive a response 24/7 and within 60 seconds. Skift tested out the iMessage number for the W Doha and, sure enough, Kerzner was right — within seconds we were connected to an associate who gladly answered our questions.

One of the benefits of pursuing a strategy like this, Kerzner noted, is that you don’t even necessarily have to be a guest or have a reservation to start up a conversation. And customers

don't have to download the SPG app to be able to communicate with the hotels.

"It's really about being where our guests want to be," Kerzner said. The guest is in WhatsApp or iMessage. Not every guest has our app. The premise of the service is about allowing guests to communicate with us on their device on their own terms. What better way to give our guests a better way to experience the world than on their own terms and their own dialogue?"

Since launching the service, Kerzner said, "Participating hotels are seeing uplifts in revenue, associates are more efficient and more comfortable using the service. It's increasing the amount of restaurant bookings and spa treatments, for example. Guest index scores are going up."

When asked if the lack of synchronization between a guest's loyalty profile and his or her messages was a concern, however, Kerzner said it wasn't. "If a guest messages us on a number we don't recognize, we ask the guest for their name and room number and once a guest uses that service, the hotel now knows that number. It's a privacy issue." He said the situation was similar to that of a guest calling and making a request and having to tell the operator their name and room number.

Facebook Messenger, in particular, is a channel with a lot of potential, said Cole, thanks to its 1.5 billion users worldwide. Both Hyatt and InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG) have it as part of their messaging strategies, and Starwood EAME is planning to add it as well.

Facebook Messenger was also recently used by Uber to put all of Uber's functionality into the platform, Cole noted. "You can pay for the car and do everything you'd normally do in the Uber app on Facebook Messenger," he explained. "It's a leap forward in terms of tech capabilities and you might see some hotel groups go down that path as well."

But, hotels will have to weigh the potential risks of putting all of their eggs (or app functions) into one basket, so to speak, Cole said. "What if Facebook decides to monetize that service or change their policies? I think one of the major fears of major hotel groups is that one of these external platforms shifts into more of an ad model so that to message your own customers, it will cost you something."

Some other potential downsides of only using third-party messaging platforms, Cole said, have to do with data collection. "How does this integrate with the guest profile and keep track of stuff? It's nice to send the concierge a message, but it's all on one cell phone and not being shared system-wide. There are certain limitations."

Best of Both Worlds?

What if you offered both messaging via your own app and used third-party messaging services like Facebook Messenger? That's exactly what Hyatt Hotels is doing, and what IHG plans to do soon.

In November, [Hyatt began using Facebook Messenger](#) as a customer service channel, in

addition to using Twitter (as a lot of travel brands do) and just a few weeks ago, it released a new version of its Hyatt Gold Passport app that includes the ability to text message, Facebook message, and Tweet a hotel. Currently, only 19 properties have the text messaging function enabled, but the number will continue to grow.

“We want to communicate with our customers in a method that they want to use,” said Ellen Lee, senior vice president of global digital for Hyatt. “For our loyal customers, it’s generally through the mobile app, and they can choose their channel of choice. With the predominant social channels, like Facebook Messenger, WeChat, or WhatsApp, we can reach a larger group of customers who may or may not know us. It opens that net wide.”

The difference between the two strategies, she says, has to do with “breadth versus depth.” “By participating in social networks where the customers are, I can go wide and reach customers who haven’t yet downloaded my app. But for those customers who know us and want to have a deeper relationship with us, they can use the app.”

There are some differences in data collection among the different channels, however, Lee noted. When guests message via SMS through the app, it connects them directly to that specific hotel property and is connected to a customer’s data. If the guest messages via Facebook Messenger, past conversations are stored but those conversations aren’t immediately synced to that customer’s profile.

IHG’s current app has a “messaging” section but it doesn’t encompass live, real-time messaging yet. The company also began using Facebook Messenger — with a chatbot — this July as a customer service channel for select Hotel Indigo properties. When guests make reservations at those select properties, they can make special requests, set preferences, ask for neighborhood recommendations, and “tap” to call the hotel directly.

“We are also pursuing opportunities on messaging platforms like Facebook and WeChat because of their broad appeal and the advances in natural language tools and artificial intelligence,” said Bill Keen, VP of mobile solutions and digital guest experience for IHG. “We were the first in our industry to have a Facebook Messenger bot; it’s just one example of the solutions we are pursuing in this area.”

Using Third-Party Software Solutions

For hotels that don’t necessarily have the scale or funds of a Hilton or Marriott to build their own app, and don’t want to have to juggle multiple systems to respond to guests as Starwood does in the EAME, there’s another solution: the third-party platform.

These third-party companies like [ALICE](#), [Checkmate](#), [Hotsos](#), [SynergyMMS](#), [Knowcross](#), and the like try to pull everything together into a single, easy-to-use platform that hotel staff can use seamlessly. With these platforms, guests can message the hotel using various messaging channels, and those conversations can be held on the same platform instead of being spread out across multiple screens.

“What we do is provide a platform that allows you to offer a guest multiple ways to engage with you [the hotel], but centralizes it so the hotel can manage it, dispatch it appropriately, and respond,” explained Alexander Shashou, co-founder and president of ALICE. “It should be up to the guests how they message a hotel and hotels shouldn’t force it on way or the other. Any channel you don’t offer is a barrier to you offering service to your guest.”

Noah Lemaich, head concierge for SIXTY LES hotel in New York, uses ALICE regularly and said that what he’s learned throughout his more than 14 years in the hotel industry is that “there’s no one single solution. It’s about having different lines of communication open to guests so guests can choose what’s most convenient.”

“What I like about ALICE is we have one place where we can receive, log, and track all of our guest interactions,” Lemaich said. At his hotel, guests can simply text the hotel using a designated number or they can download the ALICE app to message the hotel, as well as any other hotels from other brands that also use the ALICE system. Messages and any information that passes through ALICE also gets synced with the hotel’s own property management system.

RockCheetah’s Cole likened ALICE to a sort of modern-day restaurant ticket system whereby messages get routed to the appropriate department. So a request for extra towels, for example, goes straight to the housekeeper who can see the request on his or her phone.

If there’s one slight downside to using ALICE, Lemaich said, it’s that he wishes the displays for different departments — from housekeeping and concierge to security — would be more tailored to address the specific needs of each of those departments. For example, where housekeeping is most interested in immediate requests, the concierge department might want to be able to check on a restaurant reservation that’s been made for two months out.

Currently, ALICE offers the ability to message via SMS and through its app, or a white-label app, and the company plans to include Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp by the end of the quarter. A guest doesn’t necessarily have to download an app to be able to message a hotel that has the ALICE system. ALICE’s Shashou was also quick to point out that any and all data that goes through ALICE is the client’s data and that the platform acts like Salesforce. “We’re just the data engine,” he said.

“Messaging has fundamentally changed the way people communicate,” said Ellis Connolly, chief revenue officer of TrustYou, the parent company of Checkmate. “I think there are advantages for having your own native app to do messaging but it’s also expensive and app real estate on someone’s phone is mentally expensive. Today, though, it’s second nature for people to use messaging channels like SMS, email, Facebook Messenger, or WhatsApp.”

Somewhat similar to ALICE, Checkmate makes it easy for hotel staff to see all the messages they’re receiving all in one place. The web-based system also helps automate the check-in process by emailing guests 24 hours prior to arrival and helping the staff know how to personalize their stay.

Dan Daley, general manager of the Dream Downtown hotel in New York, said that at his hotel, his front desk agents are the ones who use the Checkmate platform the most, responding to or routing requests to the appropriate departments, although all team members also have the ability to log in

“It’s been a wonderful tool,” he said. “Hospitality is a dialogue and this platform allows us to have a user-friendly, easy way to connect with our guests which is what we’re in the business of doing.”

Although the Dream Downtown’s property management system (PMS) isn’t set up to be immediately synced with Checkmate, Daley said his team is diligent about inputting any information collected about guests from the messages into the PMS.

What’s Next?

When it comes to the evolution of hotel messaging, there’s already been some discussion about how much of it will involve artificial intelligence (AI), as well as whether or not the conversation will shift from a request-based one to more of a two-way dialogue between hotels and guests.

IHG is already testing out a Facebook Messenger chatbot, and Edwardian Hotels London also uses a chatbot, Edward, to communicate with guests via text message. Earlier this year, Hilton tested out Connie, an IBM Watson-powered robot concierge at one of its hotel properties.

But most of the hoteliers we spoke to seem hesitant to start using chatbots or AI just yet to handle customer service, although they are keeping an eye on them.

“My fear is that many of the travel brands will, at some point, get too overzealous with the chatbots and start making some mistakes,” said Cole. “If the systems get good enough to the point where they’re like IBM Watson, they may get smart enough to the point where they can do things better than humans.”

And as beacon-based and messaging technology continues to advance, can hotels begin to use these channels to deliver marketing messages? Should they?

Starwood’s Kerzner said he doesn’t want Let’s Chat to be used for outbound or marketing purposes at all. “This is solely to provide a response and assistance to our guests,” he said.

Marriott’s Corbin, however, said the company is beginning to test out proximity-based messaging and marketing. “Our ability to do that well represents an inflection point of how we view service versus marketing,” he said. “None of us wants to be a victim or perpetrator of spamming on your device, but I think marketing can become a service if it’s personalized and in the right moment.”

For example, if Marriott knows one guest has used the gym each time he’s visited, it can message him to tell him where the gym is and its opening hours, Corbin said.

Hotels should also be aware that they aren't the only ones trying to engage with guests via messaging, either. Online travel agencies are also entering the space, too, in an effort to drive loyalty. And we'll all have to see what happens when Google debuts its own messaging app, as well as see how much further it chooses to deepen its travel aspirations.

Messaging is just one part of the quickly evolving hotel technology landscape when it comes to controlling your hotel stay, or overall hotel relationship, from before you even make a reservation to long after you check out.

Already, we're seeing hotels like Starwood's Aloft piloting voice-activated rooms, for example, and this is also something IHG's Keen mentioned as a future in-room guest experience.

As Cole noted, with regard to hotel messaging, "We're just in the very early innings of this."

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