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PASSION POINTS

SMART HOTELS ARE ATTRACTING LIKE-MINDED GUESTS

BY LAURA PRATT

The Signature at MGM Grand is a trio of all-suite, non-smoking, non-gaming luxury towers connected to the MGM Grand itself. In the past, the vast hotel and casino enterprise targeted the same audience for its sub brand as it did for its flagship product. But, when the third Signature tower opened about four years ago, just in time to sustain the full blow of the recession, the hotel was spurred into action. A much more focused marketing approach resulted, exploiting the Signature's strength: providing an oasis to consumers looking for a less 'buzzy' Vegas experience. The property's adjusted focus targets a mindset as opposed to a demographic. The Signature pitches its large, high-end, kitchenette-equipped rooms to travellers who want to be in the action of Vegas, but don't enjoy its chaos. "We went from this large, undefined affluent target to focusing in on what Signature really does best," says Kate Wik, vice-president of Marketing. "We've revisited our marketing plans to better define the market we're after and have definitely seen a lift from that."

There's something to be said for casting a wide net when fishing for new business for your

hotel. Times are challenging, after all, and customers of every stripe are undeniable assets to a brand. But it's just as valuable to occasionally catch handfuls of the wonderfully varied marine life from your haul, and target different groups of them individually. Ranging from Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender to "girlfriends" to particular ethnic factions and everything in between, the opportunity to single out niche markets and cater to them directly is limited only by a hotelier's imagination.

It's an emerging reality Casey Wohl stumbled upon when her girlfriends took her travelling several years ago to distract her from a divorce. Wohl, now an author and television travel correspondent behind the Girls Getaway Guide brand, realized

the "girlfriend" market was not well served by the travel industry. She knew female tourists had unique needs and tastes: ones hotels would do well to acknowledge.

"Women have more disposable income than ever, they're travelling more, and they're travelling together, whether they're married or not," says Wohl, who lives in Orlando. "When you travel — you want to spend time with people who have like interests. Guys have their golfing and fishing; they're not great fans of shopping or going to spas."

Beyond that, Wohl thinks the hospitality trade needs to understand female travellers have a lot of interest in unique experiences and cater their offerings accordingly. "Two years ago, I went to



ILLUSTRATION BY HADLEY HOOPER

Gatorland and wrestled an alligator. I posted it on my Facebook page and other women said, 'I would wrestle an alligator.'"

These days, Wohl says hotels need to think differently. "I see hotels putting together packages with shopping coupons and spa treatments. That's great, but it's not special. Women want to do what they can't do at home," she says. Clearly a creative thinker, Wohl lists a few adventures she's gone on. "In Montreal, we did trapeze classes with Cirque du Soleil. I made my own perfume in Paris. I went zip-lining in Cancun. When I go to Indianapolis, I want to drive a race car. If you have a five-star chef on staff, couldn't you offer me cooking classes?" In other words, she says, "what are the creative nuggets you can tie back to the destination so women are going to remember and tell their friends about it?"

The creative pieces fit together perfectly when Donny Osmond toured Ontario several years ago. The Donny.com fan club gathered for the third time at Casino Rama in June 2005. A group of 80 loyal fans, who routinely travel with memorabilia items so they can decorate their banquet room, enjoyed a Donny-themed buffet especially prepared by the Rama culinary team. Trading stories and special Donny moments together, the group of fans enjoyed such treats as "Little Bit-of-Country" cole-slaw, "Puppy-Love" potato salad and the "Sweet-and-Innocent" dessert table. During one of the dinners, Osmond himself surprised the group by joining their pre-show party.

"Our entertainment is a big driver for the type of people who come to the hotel," says Helen Cooper, director of Hotel Operations. Casino Rama marketers look to capitalize on

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those interests with packages organized specifically with guests' passions in mind. The hotel also hosted a 'meet-and-greet' party for 200 guests when New Kids On The Block played Rama last year, and a small reception was held for the Rob Thomas Fan Club a month later.

Rama also organizes a slew of bus tours, particularly for seniors, Asians, Italians and gay trippers. Working with a database and partners such as ethnic television and radio stations, the property targets specific segments through its monthly newsletters and special-issue electronic "postcards" with attached video clips. And Rama has added both Mixed Martial Arts events to its roster — in a bid to appeal to the young male market — and, for their female counterparts, concerts with artists such as James Blunt. "It used to be we only spoke to the baby boomers and older," says Cooper, "but we're starting to really consider the 20 to 30s market."

Other casino-hotel combos simply hone in on the activity that so often unites their guests: a love of gambling. At the Fallsview Casino Resort in Niagara Falls, Ont., for example, 85 per cent of visitors are casino customers. "We've developed a

large and sophisticated database of returning customers, and we have a significant marketing department that appeals to them," says Andrei Kun, executive director, Resort Operations. Additionally, the casino's "high rollers" are given perks such as a personal assistant and a private concierge who look after such minutiae as room, restaurant and concert reservations.

Fallsview further segments its gaming market according to ethnic distinction. Since Asian gamblers are among the property's primary clientele, it caters to them with a busing program, Chinese hosts and front-desk clerks, who speak the language, and an authentic Chinese restaurant staffed by Chinese workers. Fallsview also regularly brings in entertainment from Hong Kong, China and Taiwan.

Toronto's new Ritz-Carlton super-serves yet another niche; its wine and cheese lovers receive special attention from the five-star hotel. Daniel Newberry, the hotel's director of Sales and Marketing, says "we're constantly evolving our deployment models and strategic approach for how we drive business and who we target." Direct sales efforts and a culture of constant engagement with customers

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helped the Ritz-Carlton zero in on their guests' interests. The approach led to the hotel singling out “Merlot and Muenster” aficionados. In turn, they're invited to enjoy a customized package that might include an educational component, a dinner and a visit to the hotel's cheese cave.

At the W Hotel in Montreal, a focus on fashion, music and design has always guided customer-attraction efforts. “We've got a certain DNA, and we have a lot of fun with our passion points,” says GM Jean-Francois Pouliot. That translates — under the guidance of in-house fashion and music “curators” — into what the W calls, “W Happenings.” The W puts on four to six annual events that attract fashion, design and music addicts. These might be as simple as a fashion show or as complicated as hosting a design competition among design students. Would-be guests are alerted to these happenings via blogs, Twitter and Facebook. “It's a design-led brand, and it's about lifestyle,” says Pouliot. “Our talent is very keen to make sure our guests are experiencing the latest. They hunt for the cool, new and upcoming ideas, and

we share them.”

Such efforts to carve up your clientele are commendable, says Philip Barnes, GM and regional vice-president, Pacific Northwest, at the Fairmont Pacific Rim in Vancouver. But he cautions the impulse to cater to a specific niche can go too far. “You always need to ask, ‘How deep is the pool?’ The wedding market and the girlfriend market, for example, are good niche markets to be in,” he says, “but how much do they actually affect you? To focus a huge amount of time and energy on one market isn't going to help you the other four days of the week.” Barnes says there's a chance some operators keen to super-serve a niche, might not see the forest for the trees, adding “the danger of this approach is getting so focused on the niche, you lose sight of the big picture.”

True enough, agrees Wik, whose Vegas hotel, The Signature is now fully realized as a distinct brand that turns up on searches googled with keywords such as ‘oasis’ and ‘weekend getaway.’ “But any time you can be closer to a one-on-one level with your desired target, the response rates go up. Ultimately, it's about understanding who your guest is.” ♦