

Mobile, the future of guest engagement

By  Cari Coetzee

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Some statistics claim that well over 50% of all hotel reservations are done using smartphones. With the use of smartphones to book hotel rooms increasing significantly over the past years, hotels need to keep up with technology. Protel, by hospitality business solutions provider Ankerdata, has partnered with ConnectHotel to bring South Africa a customised, Protel-compatible mobile concierge and booking application. The mobile concierge and booking platform is designed based on a hotel's requirements and internal management flows and processes and is in keeping with its corporate identity.

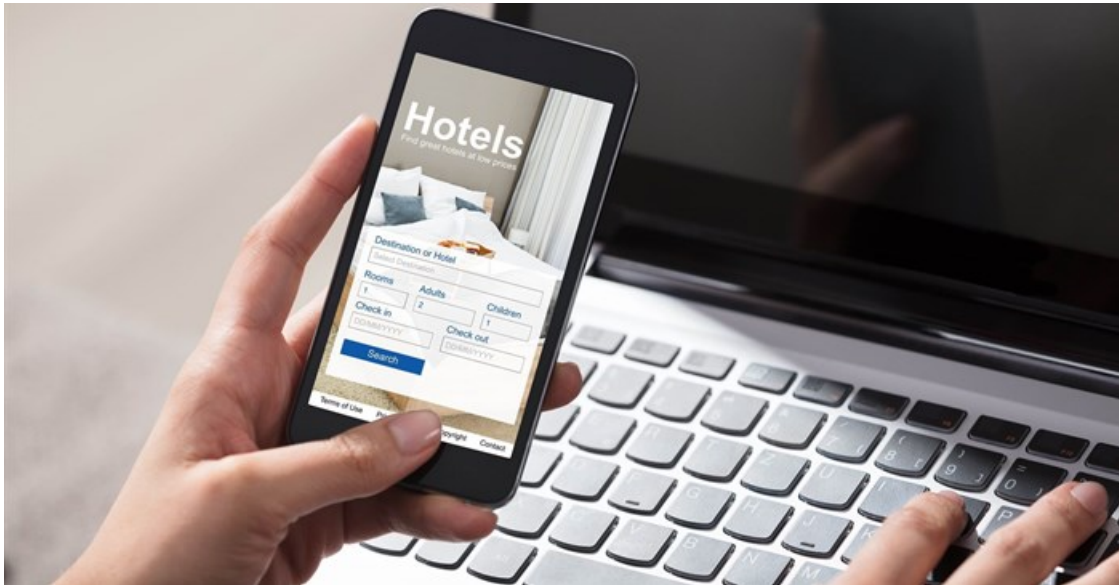


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Built locally in South Africa, the ConnectHotel platform integrates directly with Protel platforms - bringing the best available rates, in real time, to guests using the app. According to Eben Marais, Director at Ankerdata, the user-friendly, five-step booking application cuts commission fees to less than half of the major online travel agents (OTAs) and with a minimal set-up fee.

In response to the emerging chatbot demand, the platform also offers a bot named Holly, who is trained in the back-end to engage with guests before, during and after their stay, over a chat platform. Guests can order room service, lodge a request with housekeeping, book a taxi or arrange a later check-out time, and this is just the tip of the iceberg, ensuring a seamless, efficient and personalised experience with the hotel.

Jane Rosen from MV Media (MV Media's digital arm created ConnectHotel) says that they see this latest development in artificial intelligence as the future of guest engagement - it is a must for hotels wanting to attract and connect with a younger generation of travellers. We chat to Rosen and Ian Lumsden from Ankerdata to find out more.

■ ***Tell us about the ConnectHotel platform and the technology behind it***

ConnectHotel is designed for hotel groups who are wanting to add a new dimension to their hotel experience. The app is built using the latest AI technology and integrates directly into the Protel cloud to pull real-time information, making the guest's booking experience from their own mobile phone seamless.

■ ***Why launch a mobile concierge and booking application?***

A large number of hotel bookings are made online through leading web based OTA's like Booking.com and Trivago. These

aggregated platforms can charge the hotel up to 20% in booking commission fees. ConnectHotel is designed to incentivise return guests by booking direct and charges less than half such commission fees to the hotel. The mobile concierge is a global trend and takes into account the powerful potential for guests to chat directly with a business on a platform they are already comfortable with. This is a game changer compared to current frustrations like automated customer service reps over the phone and provides the guest with service on demand.

■ ***What differentiates this platform from other similar applications out there?***

ConnectHotel interfaces directly with the Protel PMS which means lower commission feed and better control over bookings.

■ ***Tell us about Holly***

Messaging platforms and chat bots are quickly becoming the new ecosystem for a world of instant services. Holly is our very own concierge who can accommodate guests with room availability, reservations, payments, room service and a whole lot more. Holly is accessed on existing platforms like Facebook Messenger, WeChat, and Whatsapp. She is also fully integrated with the customised hotel app. Imagine sitting at the pool and being able to pick up your phone and order a bottle of champagne without having to engage with hotel staff? This is the future of guest engagement but cannot stand alone without the hotel group being set up to accommodate the back-end of the platform.

■ ***What are the benefits of using the app to both guests and hotels?***

For guests, a seamless booking experience with credit card integration makes booking a breeze from their own phones. The guest automatically receives discounts when booking through the app which is a nice incentive.

For the hotel, massive savings compared to the regular commission fee's they are used to forking out when bookings are made through OTA's like Booking.com.

■ ***Is this the future of guest engagement? Why?***

The power of instant messaging platforms powered by machine learning can transform a person's phone into their very own personal assistant. Research proves that businesses who are open to chat as a serious communication platform increase customer satisfaction dramatically and shifts customer engagement entirely - it's instantaneous and with minimal wait time.

Further to this, there are nearly zero barriers to adoption, with minimal risk to the user and, therefore, we see Holly as the future of guest engagement.

ABOUT CARI COETZEE

Cari Coetzee is a contributor to Bizcommunity Tourism, Agriculture and Lifestyle.

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