

Enhancing the customer experience through AI

 By [Robin Fredericks](#)

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The hospitality and tourism industry is constantly looking for ways to stay ahead of the competition, and one of the most exciting developments in recent years is the rise of artificial intelligence (AI). During a panel discussion at the Arabian Travel Market in Dubai, which took place from 1-4 May, industry experts discussed the potential benefits of AI in the hospitality and tourism industry, as well as how it can be leveraged to improve the customer experience.



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The panellists included Frank Trampert, senior vice president and global managing director at Sabre Hospitality, Sanjay Sharma, head of IT at Jumeirah Group, and Samir Abi Frem, CEO of Lokalee. The discussion was moderated by Karl Escritt, CEO of Like Digital and Partners.

Although the panellists had differing views on the optimal approach to using technology and AI, they all agreed that it can be a powerful tool to solve difficult problems and improve the guest experience. They discussed various AI-related technologies, such as machine learning and augmented reality, and how they can be applied to the hospitality and tourism industry.

Sharma emphasised the importance of starting with a clear strategy, defining the future guest journey, and then using technology to curate that vision. He cautioned against using technology for technology's sake and stressed the need to prioritise the guest experience.

On the other hand, Trampert saw AI as a powerful tool to enable personalisation and drive incremental revenue. He explained how machine learning and augmented reality could be used to solve difficult problems in a fast and elegant way.

"In the hospitality and tourism industry, machine learning and augmented reality can be used to personalise guests' experiences and provide them with tailored recommendations. For example, hotels can use machine learning algorithms to analyse guests' preferences and behaviours, and then use this information to suggest personalised activities, amenities, and dining options.

"Augmented reality can also be used to enhance guests' experiences by providing interactive maps, virtual tours of local attractions, and even virtual reality experiences. This can help guests better plan their itineraries and make the most out of their stay, leading to higher levels of satisfaction and increased revenue for the hotel."

The panellists agreed that AI has the potential to transform the industry, but it must be used thoughtfully and strategically. Some examples of thoughtful and strategic uses of AI in the hospitality and tourism industry that the group provided include personalisation by offering personalised recommendations for activities and destinations based on guests' choices and habits. Streamlining processes, such as automating manual check-in processes, document verification, and room assignment, can also enhance guests' arrival experience by saving them time.

Improving customer service

Additionally, AI can be used to improve customer service by providing quick and accurate responses to guests' queries, complaints, or feedback. Other uses of AI include optimising pricing, inventory management, and distribution channels to maximise revenue and profitability, as well as creating targeted and personalised messages for marketing and advertising campaigns by analysing consumer behaviour and preferences.

As the conversation deepened, the group explored the different applications of AI in hospitality and tourism, and how it can be leveraged to create unforgettable guest experiences.



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Sharma highlighted the success of online retail in curating and presenting products in an easily accessible way for consumers. "The hospitality industry can take inspiration from this model, providing guests with a more personalised experience," Sharma said.

He also emphasised the potential for a marketplace where multiple parties can trade offers, giving consumers a wider choice of options.

Trampert, who recently relocated to the US, spoke about the benefits of online shopping and how companies like Amazon have done an excellent job of curating products and making them easy to find and purchase. He suggested that the hospitality industry could take inspiration from the retail industry in this regard and focus on making it easy for customers to find and book the perfect room.

Streamlining processes

Frem shared Lokalee's experience in using AI to streamline check-in processes. He noted that traditional check-in

procedures often involve multiple time-consuming steps, such as document validation, registration, and room assignment.

However, by using AI and machine learning, Lokalee was able to significantly reduce friction for customers. They implemented a machine learning model that could validate the authenticity of documents in real-time, cutting down on manual verification time.

They also automated processes to automatically send a key to the guest's phone when they arrive, reducing wait times and improving the arrival experience.

"By leveraging AI and machine learning, the industry can enhance the guest experience and create a competitive advantage in an increasingly crowded marketplace," Frem said.

The group offered several practical examples, including tailoring recommendations based on guests' data, preferences, and behaviour, as well as leveraging AI to allocate rooms that align with guests' distinctive preferences.

Furthermore, biometric technologies can enable streamlined check-in and check-out procedures, while AI-powered virtual assistants can rapidly respond to guests' inquiries and oversee room features, predictive maintenance can assist in preventing issues, and chatbots powered by AI can enhance pricing and customer service.

Balancing tech and human support

Additionally, the group discussed the importance of balancing technology and human support to provide the best possible experience for customers.

"While AI can provide personalisation and efficiency, human support can cater to individual emotions and needs. Utilising technology to support emotional well-being and providing simple solutions to real-world problems can create a more empathetic and efficient experience for customers," said Sharma.

As the use of technology continues to grow in various industries, it is essential to strike a balance between providing innovative solutions and protecting consumer privacy and data. By remaining vigilant in safeguarding customer information, companies can create personalised and efficient experiences that prioritise customer satisfaction and loyalty.

One of the most significant advantages of AI in the industry is its ability to personalise recommendations and enhance the customer experience. Sharma noted that analysing consumer behaviour and preferences can provide businesses with insights that can tailor suggestions for destinations and activities that align with their preferences. By improving personalisation, companies can enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty, and improve the overall customer experience.

AI challenges

The group also acknowledged that AI models can reach inaccurate conclusions if the data content is not confined. To overcome this, AI and machine learning are to be combined to optimise recommendation engines. "By studying customer behaviour, purchase frequency, and return frequency, businesses can improve the accuracy of their recommendations," said Trampert.

Another challenge noted by the group is the cultural change that businesses may need to undergo to adopt AI systems. They highlighted the need for new skill sets to adapt to AI and the challenges this change may present to businesses. One example of the cultural change that businesses may need to undergo to adopt AI systems, said Trampert, is the shift towards data-driven decision-making.

"In the past, decisions were often made based on intuition or experience, but with the implementation of AI, decisions are increasingly being based on data analysis. This requires a shift in mindset and culture, as employees need to be trained in data analysis and be open to using data to inform their decision-making processes," Trampert explained.

A few challenges that businesses may face in adopting AI is the potential resistance to change from employees. "Some employees may be resistant to the implementation of AI systems as they may feel that their jobs are at risk or that they will be replaced by machines. Therefore, businesses may need to provide training and education to employees to help them understand the benefits of AI and how it can improve their work rather than replace them," Said Trampert.

During the discussion, the speakers also focused on changing regulations and their impact on the use of AI in the hospitality sector. They agreed that regulations are not keeping up with the fast pace of technology and suggested that technology companies should be prepared for changes in regulations, with a consensus that regulations must keep pace with the rapidly evolving technology landscape.

The group continued the discussion by offering valuable insights on how technology can be used to improve customer insights and enhance customer service.

They shared several ways in which businesses can leverage technology to enhance customer experience. For instance, text analysis tools and sentiment analysis algorithms can be used to gather valuable customer feedback, while chatbots and virtual assistants can provide quick responses to common inquiries and offer personalised recommendations.

By utilising predictive analytics, businesses can anticipate customer needs and behaviours, leading to data-driven decisions and increased customer loyalty. Social media monitoring tools can also be used to track customer sentiment and address concerns proactively, resulting in improved customer satisfaction.

Additionally, the speakers noted that machine learning algorithms can provide personalised experiences and recommendations, creating a more engaging and satisfying experience for customers.

In conclusion, the hospitality and tourism industry must embrace the potential of AI while remaining focused on the guest experience. With the right strategy and approach, AI has the power to revolutionise the industry and create new possibilities for both businesses and consumers.

As Trampert put it, "We have the opportunity to create a new era of hospitality, where we can deliver personalised experiences that are intuitive, anticipatory and exceed expectations."

ABOUT ROBIN FREDERICKS

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