



**INDUSTRY REPORT**

# India: Evolving the Service Playbook

**JUNE 2021**

As the hotel sector prepares for life after the second wave (W2), we must recognise that this was not the same as W1.

Firstly, many more people have been infected by the virus. Second, a much larger number of people have seen the incidence of death and disease strike their families, friends, colleagues, employees, social circles, and others – the disease has come much closer to home, possibly even come home, as compared to W1. Third, the massive challenges concerning unavailability of infrastructure, medical facilities and medications have shaken all segments of society. Fourth, the inability to give a proper farewell to departed loved ones has left an emotional void that even time may fail to fill.

The mind is scarred and the scar is far deeper and graver than from W1. If W1 brought shock and frustration, W2 has brought shock and fear, an entirely different degree of frustration and a sense of utter helplessness. It has driven home the fact that absolutely nobody is immune from the reach of this virus, and from the challenges of obtaining medical care amidst a surge. Constant chatter and bad news, via electronic and social media, has added to the sense of distress.

As hotels look to draw back guests, some human aspects of service delivery will arise, and we should look to address these. While the focus is on guests, we must remember that hotel staff have equally been impacted by the terrible experiences and scars we have talked about.

### **If the revenue provider is key, the revenue enabler is equally so.**

Guests will come to hotels and resorts for varied reasons – leisure, recreation, change of environment, to be with families and friends, for a special meal, to celebrate small and large events, for business, for weddings and events and meetings. They will also come seeking a get away from the scene of an intensive illness or a sad, even devastating, loss.

So you could have a dining room filled with people of varied state of mind – joyful, relaxed,

cheerful, celebratory, merry, boisterous, melancholic, brooding, silently grieving, happy to travel, travelling from necessity but fearful, careful and disciplined, arrogant and lacking discipline, vaccinated or otherwise, ... and so on. Hotels draw a varied guest profile (and moods) every day; but seldom, if at all have current generations faced the same depth and width of challenge, devastation and helplessness as this pandemic has wrought.

An altogether different but linked feature is, unfortunately, the ready willingness to shed masks – a good trait when applied to character, but a terrible practice when applied to the shielding ‘face mask’. The desire to photograph and post is incessant; masks are, of course, a hindrance and must be removed. We must talk on cell phones while in public places, and masks are inconvenient – these can be dropped, the calls cannot. We remain oblivious, even callous, to the impact of unmasking on people around us. If anything, W2 hasn’t yet added enough caution or fear into the mind and behaviour on ‘mask discipline’.

Pre-judging guest actions is equally inappropriate because no guest is necessarily right or wrong in their individual attitude – each guest has an individual situation and experience which is being addressed by visiting and staying at a hotel. Herein lies the paradox - a guest who has lost a loved one (elder, spouse, even child), sits watching milestone celebrations of another family; or a ‘mask disciplined’ guest seated next to a table that has a group or family happy to drop its guard – out of carelessness, *joie de vivre*, or simply because they have all survived the virus and are just happy to get together and celebrate an easy or tough recovery.

For hotels, the challenges revolve around (a) the subtle aspect of delivering service with the right spirit and empathy; (b) the issue of dealing with ‘mask indiscipline’; (c) ensuring that, each guest feels at ease and relaxed, leaves the hotel energised and with a lightened burden.



This is one of the beauties of working in hotels because no two guests are alike and yet you must adequately satisfy all. The diversity of background and expectation does nevertheless have one common factor – the need for a satisfying and enjoyable experience. We don't have a ready playbook for the current situation; if it exists, it certainly has not been part of training because the completely unusual situation from the pandemic was not anticipated by anyone. Our approach needs to be developed so that, on the one hand, empathy becomes an underlying, silent, yet effective part of our service and response; and on the other hand, there is mask discipline and strictness – polite but firm and unyielding.

Can hotels develop service approaches that recognise these vastly different needs? Can we make the day for each guest, by responding with empathy and balance appropriate to these different attitudes? Maybe seek out an opportunity to try and understand the purpose and background behind the guest coming to the hotel – particularly where the reason is not obvious. Maybe have more neutral welcome conversations and welcome messages till the guest's particular situation is better understood. Maybe a different amenity, once the mood is correctly gauged. Yet all of this done so subtly as to show care and empathy, without any aggravation. It presents an enormous learning opportunity for managers and staff; and a unique opportunity to create deep sense of ease, happiness and even loyalty.

The aspect of 'mask discipline' needs a conscious balance. The masked and the mask-less can each have fun, recreation and relaxation – but neither must impede the other. Space segregation where possible can be a facilitator. But a line needs to be drawn and followed, with clear communication of intent. It is a reality that discipline is not a forte of our typical mind-set; our sense of entitlement easily overpowers our sense of social propriety. Hotels and resorts will therefore need to pursue the path of fairness yet firmness towards compliance – for itself, for the sake of its guests and staff, and as a commitment to society and public health. It is part of an obligation to sustainability – of mankind, not just the environment.

Let us also fully address the real and emotional concerns of our staff. They carry their own traumas - of illness, loss, grief, fear, helplessness, unemployment, difficult living, and others. Many are very young, impressionable through social media and swayed by group thinking, living away from family, insecure about the future, worried about their earnings, etc. There is the joy of being back at work, and the relief of being gainfully employed – happiness and enthusiasm to serve, but even risky tolerance of guest indiscipline for fear to offend. Cognisance of, and empathy towards, their situation; addressing individual and group challenges; diligent support towards their emotional balance and recovery, their well-being, guidance and counselling – these are part of a new playbook, to be tackled to a degree, and with maturity and insight, that is way above the norm. Lessons from 26/11 events would partially help. Staff must feel confident that the hotel will draw a line to safeguard their health as they commit to service. Group vaccination is very valuable; engendering a sense of care and well-being is equally essential.

**Hospitality is a people's business. Let us care and support our guests and staff; their goodwill, satisfaction, happiness and loyalty will, in turn, foster us.**

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With over 40 years of overall professional experience, Vijay Thacker, a veteran in hospitality and tourism consulting, often guides his clients to take calculated risks and measures. His experience comprises transaction, valuation and advisory services to privately-owned and listed companies, banks and private equity groups based in India and abroad along with being a speaker at professional seminars in India and internationally.

Vijay has extensive consulting experience of over 35 years in the Hotels, Tourism and Leisure sector. He has undertaken, supervised and directed professional work comprising feasibility studies for hotels, resorts, serviced apartments, branded residences and sports facilities, concept planning for hotel chains, valuations for hotels and hotel sites, management contracts, strategy plans, bid structures and advice, systems reviews and litigation support. He has carried out professional work in over 110 cities in India and for 20 international projects, including several projects in the Middle East. Some assignments handled involved projects with large development potential of 1,000 plus acres.

Vijay has provided several services including due diligence investigations, transaction and tax structuring, joint venture agreements, transaction documentation reviews, valuations and transaction negotiations. He has also worked on restructuring exercises, systems and process manuals, operating reviews, conversion of accounts to US, UK, International GAAP. Clients served comprise Indian and multinational companies, with target businesses / operations in India and in several international markets.

Vijay has led and participated in valuation exercises for M&A transactions, intercompany transfers, brand and goodwill valuations, asset acquisition transactions and for bids submission purposes.

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