

Trust & assurance revival by the leading hotels in Odisha during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract. The impact of the novel Coronavirus can be felt globally across nations in most of the sectors with travel and hospitality being one of the worst affected. So, it is highly essential to keep a watch on the trends and forecasts of the industry to be ready for the speedy recovery of the economy. This study focuses on the strategies of the leading hotels of Odisha during the Covid-19 pandemic for installing trust and assuring the guests for a safe future transaction. This study gives a brief idea about the responsible practices that the hotels have adopted for assurance and trust factor both from the customer and employee perspective. The study is based on leading hotels in Odisha. Secondary data has been considered for the study. Multiple case study analysis and observation have been adopted for the methodology. Best practices from the hotel industry during this pandemic have been discussed with the scope of improvement. Responsible tourism and automated practices would be the new normal so these aspects have been considered for the study. Hygiene and cleanliness standards are the new foundations of trust and assurance of the guests henceforth.

Keywords: Hotels; Covid-19 pandemic; trust; assurance; Odisha

1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has portrayed a clear picture of how vulnerable the mankind is in our lifetime. The hospitality industry across the globe has been affected deeply and is in a bad shape but still with a ray of hope for revival.

The Indian hotel industry has been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic and is struggling to survive with significantly low demand and rare future bookings. The luxury hotel chains have been affected badly but have been taking major steps for recovery by jumping into the track of assured and responsible tourism.

Odisha – India’s best kept secret has also been badly affected by the pandemic. It was gaining momentum in tourism after the success of Eco Retreat, Marine Drive, Konark that the pandemic hit the world. But still there has been continuous effort from for revival and rejuvenation. The hotels are paving a “new normal” safety standard for the reopening of the hotel industry which would help gain the trust of the potential guests.

Strategic analysts have already charted out plans for the recovery of the hotel industry globally. Despite of the future being hazy and unclear as to what and how the industries would recover, plans for reopening the hotels and adopting strategies for responsible tourism should start now. Now is the time to start planning and create a platform for attracting and engaging potential guests as soon as the time is ripe.

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Assurance and trust are the need of the hour with responsible tourism being prioritized for the simultaneous benefit of the service provider and the guests. As the world of hospitality is moving towards a new normal, trust and assurance would play a major role in the revival and rejuvenation of the industry.

2 Literature Review

As per United Nations World Tourism Organization, Trust is the new currency and tourism is a major player in the spreading this word of trust (UNWTO, 2020). Contactless services would be rendered in the hospitality industry during this difficult time of Covid-19 pandemic which would help improvise the hygiene and safety aspect thereby strengthening the trust among the guests and staff of the hotels.

In India, organizations like Federation of Hotel and Restaurant Associations of India, Hotel Association of India in association with the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India have laid down set of guideline for the safe operation of hotels during the Covid-19 pandemic which have been designed to create the sense of assurance among the guests and employees to rethink travel and work in a safe environment.

2.1 Cleanliness and Hygiene protocols

The following are the details of the protocols followed and adopted by the various hotel groups abiding by the rules of the government and standards of WHO laid down during the coronavirus crisis.

- The hotels have taken proper care and measures as per the guidelines laid down by the World Health Organization and at this point none of the employees or guests have shown any of the symptoms of Covid-19. The hotels have adhered to the standards of hygiene and cleanliness to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the guest and employees simultaneously
- Proper steps have been taken by the hotels to maintain the hygiene and cleanliness of utmost priority which include cleaning of all the touch points in the public places as well as in the rooms of the hotel with an alert and efficient housekeeping service on duty
- Professional and commercial chemicals are being used through electrostatic sprayers to disinfect the hotel entrances, staff entrances and the public areas
- Hand sanitizers are placed in all guest rooms and at all public spaces and including the entrances, lobbies, corridors, business conference halls etc.
- The supplies for the hotel, vehicles and luggage are sanitized and disinfected before getting an entry into the designated premises
- As far as the kitchens, in-room dining services, business centers, banquet halls and restaurants in the hotels are concerned, it has been made sure by the management that the staff needs to follow certain protocols to sanitize their hands every time they serve food or touch food related items
- The cars are being disinfected after each use
- Wearing of masks and disposable gloves by all the staff at all times and their regular changing at intervals and fresh usage is being encouraged and is a mandate for the hotels
- The seating arrangement in the lobby as well as the restaurants have been reconfigured to ensure social distancing is maintained between the guests
- There is an interlude of 24 hours between a check out and the next check-in and alternate rooms are to be allocated
- Change of linen of the room like bedsheets, pillow covers, towels etc is a mandate after a check out. Use of fresh linens is being strictly followed before a new check-in
- Cleaning of all the touch points inside a room after a check out is rigorously done.
- Vendor management protocols are in place ensuring social distancing, usage of PPE and proper sanitization
- Ensure right air quality in the air conditioning system of the hotel to ensure a clean and ventilated environment

2.2 Health and safety protocols

- The temperature readings of the guests who are not residing are taken at the time of entering the hotel
- Residing guests and the staff are subjected to temperature screening twice daily

- A guest check-in self-declaration form regarding Covid-19 symptoms has been kept at the reception which has to be filled by the guest at the time of check-in
- Any guest who indicates symptoms of the virus is required to undergo a medical examination prior to check-in
- If the guests or the staff don't feel normal in health, a medical examination and medical assistance is provided immediately
- Professional agencies for sanitization and doctors have been appointed in case of emergency
- SOPs are in place in case of a positive Covid-19 diagnosis where a guest or an employee needs to be quarantined
- Cross-functional response teams, including round-the-clock doctor assistance and occupational health experts to provide guidance to the hotels and help address specific requests when needed have been formed
- Wearing of masks for the guests and the staff has become a mandate for all the hotels.
- Wellbeing dishes and immunity building culinary delights have been put up on the respective websites for the guests to try at home during the pandemic
- Physical and mental health management is of utmost importance during the Covid-19 pandemic which is taken care of by the hotels

2.3 Travel flexibility services considered for the guests

- Most of the hotels have laid down a flexible cancellation system without any penalties. If the payment has been done for the travel but due to the lockdown it has not been used, the guests are being provided with an option to either cancel and get a refund or hold for future travel until the end of the year 2020
- In order to capture the online bookings, the first step is to reassure the visitors with two major aspects namely clarity in communication and flexibility in booking services. A worry free booking policy has been implemented by most of the hotels on their website to regain the trust of the visitors and deploy a peaceful booking
- Few of the hotels are supporting the work from home idea and are not accepting any new reservations for the time being till the lockdown has not yet been lifted
- Discounts and promotions have been offered to guests who are opting to go for future reservations
- Staycation packages are being offered to the guests
- Discounts are offered for bookings when the guest stays for more number of days

2.4 Employee-centric steps implemented during the pandemic

- Safety of the employees is of utmost importance for the leading luxury hotels in India and proper steps of health and safety have been taken as per the guidelines of the Government of India and WHO.
- Personal Protective Equipment has been provided to the housekeeping staff for their safety.
- The hotel staff empowerment is done through internal alignment with technology adoption as the guests would probably want a low physical contact.
- Flexible scheduling of working hours
- Optimization of the work force
- The leading hotels have tried to maintain proper and clear communication with their staff to assure and ensure their economic conditions along with their safety.
- Covid-19 Advisories set up for the employees
- Taking care of learning and growth of the employees during the time of pandemic

2.5 Role of Social media, technology in the hotel industry

In the time of Covid-19 pandemic, presence in the social media and technology upgradation have been the major steps taken by the hotels not only to attract guests but also to maintain a connect with the guests. To rebuild trust and assurance in the relationship with the guests, the hotel industry has been taking every possible path in developing applications to rendering service at home. Presence in the social media platforms have helped the hotels in the revival process during the pandemic. Previous studies have also proven the same for communication and for maintaining the customer relationship.

Usage and upgradation of technology and web applications have proven to be strategic tools for customer retention and marketing of the hotel (Leung, Lee and Law, 2011). The hotel industry marks its presence on the social media to attract potential guests and help them in decision making as stated by (Ng and Lien, 2014). By analyzing the content as given on the social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, it has been found that social media is an indispensable communication channel for branding purpose (Sobaci, 2015).

It's important for the hotels to understand how to measure the customer engagement effectively through the social media platforms so that the customer can be well assured of a future relationship with the hotel (Hashim and Fadhil, 2017). The quality of information available on the website of hotels matters a lot for the potential guests. Website content evaluation can help in improving the communication with and purchase intention of the customer (Law, Qi and Buhalis, 2010) (Law, 2019).

The use of social media for promotion and marketing of the hotel could potentially increase customer loyalty and trust which implies an increase in sales and business (Minazzi and Lagrosen, 2013). But at times, the hotels fail in providing updated and timely information on the social media platforms which accounts for a differentiated consumer behavior (Phelan, Chen and Haney, 2013)(Phelan, Chen and Haney, 2013). Timely updated information is the need of the hour during the Covid-19 pandemic from the hotels end which would help build trust and assurance.

In today's digital world, hotels must enhance their web reputation and prospects on social media to have a more engaging and personalized customer relationship (Minazzi, 2015). The hotels should incorporate social media presence along with the traditional channels of communication to leave an imprint in the minds of the customers (Minazzi and Lagrosen, 2013).

3 Methodology

The study has been conducted on five leading hotels in Odisha. Secondary research has been adopted for this study with collection of secondary data from the internet as source. Multiple data observation method has been used for this study. Commercial information source such as the print media, websites and social media like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have been the main source of data collection.

The leading hotels in Odisha which have been considered for the study include Mayfair Hotels & Resorts, Swosti Group, Trident Hotel Bhubaneswar, Fortune Park Sishmo, Pal Heights. Their official hotel websites were visited (Fortune Park Sismo, 2020; Mayfair Group of Hotels, 2020; Pal Height, 2020; Swosti Group of Hotels, 2020; Trident Hotel Bhubaneswar, 2020).

4 Results

To maintain a smooth functioning of the customer relationship management and the employee relations management, the hotels have been consistently trying to connect and communicate through the digital media during the pandemic.

The leading hotels in Odisha have marked their presence in the social media along with the digital media and have left a remarkable print through videos, dialogues, photos & promotion etc. Through these channels of communication, the hotels are sending a message of assuring cleanliness and hygiene to the guests as well as employees.

Following table 1, indicate the channels of digital communication where the hotels have marked their presence to keep the trust and assurance upright even during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 1. Presence of Covid-19 updates in the digital platform and social media by the hotels

Hotel Brand	Website	News & Media	Social Media
Mayfair Hotels & Resorts	Yes	Yes	Yes
Swosti Group	Yes	-	Yes
Trident	Yes	-	Yes
Fortune Park Sishmo	-	-	Yes
Pal Heights	-	-	-

The luxury hotels considered for our study have made collaborations with certain organizations for health and hygiene standards to be kept in place. Few initiatives have been taken by the hotels to ensure trust among the guests and employees during the difficult time of Covid-19 pandemic as given in table 2.

Table 2: Initiatives and Collaborations for Health & Hygiene by the Hotels for reinstatement of trust and assurance in the hotel industry

Hotel Brand	Website	Initiatives	Collaborations
Mayfair Hotels & Resorts	https://www.mayfairhotels.com/	NEW NORMAL safety measures have been implemented across all the Mayfair resorts and hotels	Revised health and hygiene standards in conformity with World Health Organization, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare- Government of India and Food Safety & Standards Authority of India
Swosti Group	https://www.swostihotels.com/	No information available on the website	-
Trident	https://www.tridenthotels.com/hotels-in-bhubaneswar	In depth cleanliness and hygiene standards implemented at every level of services.	Bureau Veritas Partnership for testing, inspection, validation and certification of health and hygiene standards
Fortune Park Sishmo	https://www.fortunehotels.in/bhubaneswar-fortune-park-sishmo.dh.49	Health and hygiene standards are being followed	In compliance with WHO and FSSAI
Pal Heights	http://www.palheights.com	No information available on the website	-

The leading hotels considered for the study have started offering innovative and tailor-made offers for the guests to attract reservations thereby assuring a safe stay. Rebuilding trust has been the main area of focus through these packages and offers as given in table 3.

Table 3. Tailor-made travel flexibility offers for the guests during the Covid-19 pandemic

Hotel Brand	Travel flexibility offered for the guests	Exclusivity of the package
Mayfair Hotels & Resorts	No special packages offered	-
Swosti Group	Nothing new in view of the pandemic	-
Trident	Trident Staycations (Ideal for work from hotel)	INR 7500 for double occupancy/per night 25% discount on Food & Beverage, Complimentary breakfast service in room

Fortune Park Sishmo	Unlock Business packae and Suite Surprise	25% discount on the room rate, 25% discount on Food & Beverage, Same day cancellation, 40% off in Bar
Pal Heights	Nothing new in view of the pandemic	-

Lastly, few of the renowned and leading hotels in Odisha have gone to an extent of delivery of culinary delights being served at home to the customers through variety of innovative ways which is again a clear progress towards building trust and assuring a safe travel relationship with them. Following table 4 indicates the initiatives and the ways.

Table 4. Home delivery of food initiatives by the leading hotels in Odisha during the Covid-19 pandemic

Hotel Brand	Home Delivery Initiative	Inclusions
Mayfair Hotels & Resorts	Partnership with Zomato	Home delivery of baked items and gourmet food prepared at the restaurants of Mayfair Lagoon Bhubaneswar
Swosti Group	Partnership with Zomato	Home delivery of food delicacies prepared by the restaurants of the hotels of Swosti group in Bhubaneswar
Trident	-	-
Fortune Park Sishmo	-	-
Pal Heights	Partnership with Swiggy and Zomato	Home delivery of baked delights and food items prepared by the restaurants of the hotel in Bhubaneswar

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The hotels are working on the following aspects to ensure trust among the guests and revive after the pandemic.

- Implementation of Cleanliness and Hygiene protocols as per WHO and certified organizations
- Universal precautions as per the WHO guidelines for the Covid-19
- Taking the best of measures to ensure safety of their employees first
- Creation of an incident command center
- Maintaining the standards of social distancing
- Investment in technological upgradation
- Automation of Services
- Communicating the culture of cleanliness and hygiene
- Air filtration and aerosol transmission system upgradation and implementation
- Digital health passports
- Adoption of cloud technologies
- Making cleanliness a part of the branding strategy
- Responsible tourism practices
- Attracting millennial travelers

- Optimization of services to ensure less physical interaction
- Creation of trust and assurance for the guests and staff alike
- Monetary, Fiscal and policy support from the Government of India

The business strategies used by the hoteliers pre Covid-19 and post Covid-19 would have a huge gap to fill. The marketing strategies and the services would be drastically changed for the good of mankind. Health and safety would be of utmost importance in the minds of the travelers and it would be the primary ground basing which the booking of hotels would be done (Hotelier India, 2020).

Even before booking, the sanitation safeguards and the hygiene aspect would come under the radar of skepticism of the customers. Questions related to the last usage of the hotel room and the sanitation process would arise in the minds of the guests which needs to put to rest. So, hotels are adopting and have started planning for maintaining the cleanliness and disinfecting standards. This is not only the era of the coronavirus but also the of the technology innovation in most of the fields of life. Hospitality industry should use technology at its best by bringing in the experience of virtual services in real life at the hotels for example virtual concierge facilities. Artificial Intelligence would play a crucial role in implementing the virtual reality in the hospitality industry.

The guests would want to come in human contact as less as possible during their stay at the hotel post Covid-19 pandemic. So, hotels have to make sure to increase the automation aspect in services provided and satisfying the customer at the same time. Travel Insurance and flexible booking services would gain momentum in the hotel industry to attract potential guests.

In Odisha, the hotel industry needs to put in more effort in terms of reaching out to the guests through proper communication channels and mark their presence in the social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. The potential guests need to remain connected even during the pandemic for a promising future travel. The hotel industry in Odisha also has a scope of improvement by learning and sharing the best practices which the leading hotels in India are implementing during the pandemic.

Recommendation would be to have patience and invest in the process of gaining trust, assurance and empathy of the guests and the employees as “Trust” would be the new norm of global tourism post Covid-19 pandemic. Trust and assurance are the new normal in the hospitality industry which would also prove to be the foundation of further growth and business. With every moment passing by the research analysts are trying to be innovative and creative in the hospitality business to attain a level of confidence in the minds of the guests. Definitely the hospitality industry in India and worldwide would revive and regain momentum but at a slower pace. After all, slow and steady wins the race.

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