

# The Decade of Delusion

BY RANJIV BHALLA

**G**ood riddance to the decade of delusion. It is incredible that while the noughties brought in so many good things to the global travel sector such as the Internet age of travel, more low-cost fares on more routes and better quality hotels, the customers' experience in the last 10 years has dropped because of service levels, the one area that we can actually control. In my last 15 years of traveling, only once has the service I have experienced actually improved in a returning visit to a country, despite huge capital investment, technological advances and investment in training of better traveled and international staff. This is not good enough.

The corporate obsession with yields, Revenue Per Available Room (RevPAR) and Return of Investments (ROI) has taken priority over employing staff who can solve basic problems – the key critical measurement tool that every customer uses. Although coming from a generation that is as comfortable as any North American in wishing us to “have a nice day,” many staff in hospitality today are unable to think outside the box and are too willing to pass the buck. So when a customer has gone through the motions of hearing the usual lackluster sound bites of yet another underperforming server, the question that still persists is: has my request been sorted out satisfactorily? When inspecting hotels, I use my very own “porridge test” asking for this cereal to be made in a particular way, just slightly off the norm. In the majority of occasions, the waiting staff fail to make themselves understand how I want this to be prepared, then miscommunicate the order to the kitchen and invariably I send it back. This rarely happened in the '80s and '90s when listening skills and common sense were clearly more prevalent. It is a customer's right to have a request dealt with first time, on time, every time and this must be the norm rather than a pleasant surprise when it happens.

The source of this problem is that too much came too easily in the last few years. With easy credit and aspirational lifestyles, demand from both the leisure and corporate markets exceeded supply. And when there is excess demand over a prolonged period, complacency sets in as suppliers lose their creative edge and then their managers wonder why they can't turn in a decent set of results when the (inevitable) slowdown comes. Your true value is not what you earn in a boom, but what you earn in a recession. With the unprecedented level of investment in hotel, airports, transportation and attractions,

managers in the 2000s should have been feted as the best ever. But they've blown it as their predecessors extracted better satisfaction rates from less smart facilities, by dealing with each customer as if they were the only ones. The emphasis of such managers was on people rather than percentages.

So what lies ahead of us? Having just returned from the World Travel Market in London, my confidence in our sector has been boosted. For the first time in years, there was some genuinely creative spirit and hunger among suppliers. As long

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as this enthusiasm remains once the decision-makers return to the reality of their desks, then I have high hopes that the next decade could be the best so far: the consumer will be enjoying a better value product, benefiting from the investment of the last few years, with better service levels and more creative experiences than ever before. And this will be the case as long as supply exceeds demand sufficiently to ensure companies are kept keen.

Ironically, the global financial turmoil may be the wake-up call needed to correct the attitudes of suppliers. The tougher trading conditions may breed a new generation of leaders who, by the end of the next decade, could be hailed as the best ever, delivering a healthy balance between the responsibilities to the customer, stakeholders and the environment.

Bring in the new decade! **R+R**

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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