



INSTITUTE OF HOSPITALITY

WHITE PAPER

THE ARTISTRY OF AMBIENCE:
IDEAS, INNOVATION AND INSPIRATION

November 2024 | COMO The Halkin, London



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In collaboration with Bolsius Professional

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It can help with some elements of recruitment. But, if you were to rely solely on AI you will miss those opportunities for extended conversations, body language, and talking to somebody about their experience, that you wouldn't normally capture within an AI tool. It's about using it in moderation and responsibly.”

Micaela Barlow FIH, quality & curriculum director, HIT Training

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CPD



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The background



The ambience of a place is the character and atmosphere that it seems to have

Collins Dictionary



With hospitality businesses striving to boost their bottom line, deliver a service that guests feel is value for money and create upselling opportunities, particularly in the current economic environment, ensuring a venue has the right ambience has perhaps never been more important.

From sights and sounds to smells and textures, ambience is subtle but potentially highly impactful – the “silent component” of the customer experience (1). Ambience can influence customer behaviour and mood and be critical to achieving guest satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth recommendations. It can even inform staff behaviour and service.

Although in many ways intangible, ambience “really counts in the hospitality industry” and for people in the sector, “it is something ‘real’ that is taken seriously” (2).

According to one study: “Providing pleasant and innovative atmosphere in addition to high quality of service to customers are necessary to improve price perception. In fact, environmental psychology presents owners and managers with an opportunity to improve their revenue management practices by observing how the environmental cues of [their] business may stimulate customers” (3).

By thoughtfully crafting and marketing a venue’s ambience, operators can create appealing environments that encourage guests to indulge in upgrades and add-ons. The key is to communicate the value of an enhanced experience through all five senses, making guests feel like the extra cost is worth it for the increased comfort and luxury.

The challenge

Operational success is influenced by multiple factors, not just ambience, which is itself potentially a 'risky' investment as the impact and contribution of ambience to operations is largely intangible and immeasurable. Atmospheric "overkill" and losing focus on the main product are also both potential risks (4).

As well as financial constraints, some of the main challenges hospitality businesses face in creating the right ambience may be sustainability and appealing to a broad audience, as well as creating an ambience that's right for their business and customers and aligns with their brand values.

Customers are increasingly demanding that the hospitality businesses they engage with are environmentally sustainable. For example, operators need to be prepared to discuss the content of their candles, as cheaper candles may contain more animal fat or palm oil.

To change the ambience of a space seasonally, venues may want to change their décor, but rather than buying new decorations every season, it may be more sustainable and cost-effective to rent items or upcycle. And many florists will now offer arrangements without oasis, which can be very environmentally damaging.

It's also challenging for operators to keep in mind that everyone will have different preferences – some customers won't like certain music; others won't like certain scents.

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Atmosphere shouldn't negatively impact the space. Bolsius candles provide a clean burn, so glassware, walls and ceilings won't go black.

Paul Christodoulou MIH, national account manager, Bolsius

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The Artistry of Ambience: Ideas, Innovation and Inspiration

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Once you find the theme, it needs to run through the whole property in various ways... it's just finding that one key theme, explaining it to the staff so that they know the story and can sell it, and then you tell that via smell, temperature, and sound.

Katariina Reissaar MIH, director of operations, the Royal Air Force Club

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Creating the right ambience in a hospitality venue begins before a guest even steps foot on the property and can have a lasting impact long after they've left. Guests will have an idea of what to expect from the visuals they have seen of the venue and the language and tone used in communications, so every aspect of communication even before a guest's arrival needs to align with the brand vision and the reality of the experience.

Everything from fragrance to music should align with your brand and your customers – floral scents may be out of place in some venues, for example, and loud music may put off customers who may be seeking a quiet space or a place to have a conversation. Owners “should examine the fit between their goals for table turns and meal duration and the environmental cues present in their restaurant” (3). For example, a lounge space may want to create a calming, relaxed ambience, encouraging a guest to stay longer and therefore purchase another glass of wine or cup of coffee.

Consider how this ambience may change from day to night and between a communal space such as a lobby to a quieter space like a spa, where guests will probably be closing their eyes and therefore have a heightened awareness of their other senses.

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You're left with a heightened sense of smell and sound, and so those scents and that music soundtrack become all that more important in that particular environment. Where they may be quite subtle in the main body of a hotel, then suddenly in the spa, they're really quite important. It's understanding how each space gets used and the priority of all those senses in all spaces.

Chris Gunton, founder and managing director, CGA Integration

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Visuals and lighting

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It's creating those Instagrammable moments.

Catt McLeod FIH, vice president brand development, Elegant Hotel Collection

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Something as simple as a small candle or a plant can help create a relaxed, cosy ambience in a space. However, a plant that isn't well cared for may have the opposite effect. If passing trade is important to your business, consider how your venue looks from the outside – is it inviting?

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You have to be really careful with silks and dried [flowers] because they can very quickly look quite dusty and that's obviously going to affect the overall ambience... orchids and all tropicals actually last so much better in a hotel kind of setting because of the heat. It does depend on the kind of setting that most florals are going into as to what I would recommend.

Laurie Edwards, director, Chic Weddings

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Some venues have installed light systems that change with the movement of the sun so that staff do not have to change lighting manually and ensure it is appropriate to the time of day.

Scents

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It's fairly well known that scent and memory connect really well.

Alex von Ulmenstein MIH, hotel manager, The Kensington, London

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Scent can be incredibly evocative, which is why some hotels invest in creating a 'signature scent', which they then use across their properties and infuse into their toiletries. Not only can this create upselling opportunities with guests potentially wanting to buy the toiletries, but the scent will always remind them of their (hopefully positive) experiences on the property.

Both Chelsea Townhouse and The Kensington see candle usage as essential, especially in the evenings. Both use unscented candles and create signature scents from other sources. Chelsea Townhouse has diffusers in public rooms while The Kensington has a signature scent in all hotels.

It's important to consider how fragrances will be deployed. While fragrance reeds in bedrooms may be better than candles for health and safety reasons, on the other hand, they have also been known to trigger allergies. Consider how products will be marketed, would a cabinet display or digital screens be more appropriate to your setting?

On arrival at COMO The Halkin, depending on the weather, guests are welcomed with hot or cold scented towels, beginning that olfactory, sensory journey from the moment they arrive.



The olfactory journey starts from the reception.

Alain Martzloff MIH, hotel manager , COMO The Halkin, London



Flowers can lose their fragrance over time. Consider complimenting with candles, pumped air or herbs to create a scent.

Temperature

Temperature will of course affect how a guest feels in your space. Too hot or cold and they may not stay long, but a cool room when it's hot outside will be a welcome relief, while a cosy fireplace will be appealing in the colder months. It can also be a challenge balancing this to ensure all guests in a room who may be quite differently attired are as comfortable as possible.

Texture

Don't forget touch – the upholstery of your seating, for instance, will play a part in the ambience, while serving tea in proper teacups will create a more refined, luxurious experience for the guest.

Best Practice



The customer service and interaction are really important.

Kan Koo MBE FIH, director, COSMO Restaurants



While sounds, scents, lighting and temperature help create ambience in a space, the service delivered by team members absolutely needs to align with the story you're trying to tell. It is your people who are the final piece of the puzzle in delivering that ambience and experience. Train and educate your teams to ensure they understand your vision – achieving a relaxing ambience will be impossible if a guest is repeatedly disturbed by the sound of glass bottles being thrown into a bin, for example.

Empower your team members and give them the freedom to create special moments specific to a guest, for example, if a member of staff is passionate about plants or calligraphy or folding towels, allowing them to bring that creativity to their role. As long as they understand the vision and the activity aligns with the brand, these special moments can be what really stand out to a guest.



Your team needs to be given a lot of freedom so that they can express themselves. At the end of the day, they are the artists in hospitality, you should be able to trust them, that's why you hired them. You need to leave that freedom to the staff to do those special touches because those will be the difference to make it extra special.

Samantha Rieu FIH, general manager, 11 Cadogan Gardens and Chelsea Townhouse, London



This also includes your suppliers – they are the experts in their fields and know their products best, so will be able to give you the best recommendations to achieve the ambience you're trying to create.

And don't forget to review the ambience of your space periodically. One solution won't fit all spaces and a small change to a venue may change the dynamic quite significantly.

Solutions

Using ambience as a tool for upselling in hospitality can create a memorable and emotionally engaging guest experience that encourages guests to spend more. Here are some ways ambience can be leveraged for upselling in hospitality:

1. Luxury in-room design

Highlight the superior ambience in upgraded rooms or suites, for example by using visuals and descriptions emphasising the larger spaces, better views, and premium décor to entice guests to upgrade. Emphasise sensory elements like better lighting, softer bedding, superior soundproofing, or personalised room scents.

2. Lobby and common areas

Design common spaces such as lobbies, lounges and cafés with comfortable furniture, calming lighting, and soft music to create a relaxing, luxurious environment. Consider offering access to exclusive areas such as executive lounges, private terraces, or rooftop bars with perks such as special services or complimentary refreshments.

3. Dining experiences

Use ambience in your restaurant or bar to enhance the guest experience. For example, dim lighting, enhanced with candlelight, soothing music, and stylish décor can create a more intimate setting. This can be particularly useful for special dining events such as candlelit dinners, sunset drinks on the terrace, or themed dining nights with appropriate music and lighting to enhance the experience. Strategic use of plants can also create privacy.

4. Spa and wellness areas

Ensure your spa or wellness centre's ambience is tranquil, with soft music, dim lighting, and aromatic scents. A relaxing and aesthetically pleasing space makes the idea of indulging in extra services more appealing.

5. Events and celebrations

When promoting event spaces, such as for weddings or conferences, focus on the ambience you can create in these areas through the use of customised lighting, décor, and themes. Décor can really transform a space – some venues have plain rooms that look like meeting rooms, but flowers, ceiling draping and lighting can completely transform a blank space while lighting control systems can change the mood from a daytime conference to an elegant evening affair.

6. Technology and smart controls

Allow guests to control lighting, temperature, or sound through in-room tablets or apps. This added convenience, plus the ability to customise ambience to their preference, can be marketed as an upsell and delivers 'hyper-personalisation', identified as a top trend last year by EHL Insights (6).

7. Exclusive environments for VIPs

Create a VIP atmosphere by offering guests private access to spaces with enhanced ambience or more personalised services. Could an exclusive lounge have a dedicated mixologist creating cocktails and putting on a show? This is not only visually pleasing but could encourage increased spend.

8. Seasonal or themed ambience

During festive seasons or special occasions, transform the ambience of your hotel with seasonal decorations, lighting, and music. You can also create themed packages where a room's ambience and décor are tailored to a specific theme e.g. a romantic getaway or wellness retreat.

9. Ambience marketing

Use social media and your website to visually highlight the ambience of your hotel to emotionally engage guests before arrival.

Next steps

- 1)** Consider the ambience you're trying to create and how that will align with your brand, vision and customer demographic
- 2)** Find your theme and make sure it runs throughout the property. Think of the story you're trying to tell.
- 3)** Think about how your guest profile and space usage changes throughout the day and across your venue, and how the ambience should change to suit this
- 4)** Find suppliers who understand what ambience you want to deliver – ensure they have seen the space and even better, have experienced it as a guest
- 5)** Ensure your team are trained and understand the brand vision, but also empower them to bring their own personalities and creativity to the guest experience
- 6)** Make sure any upsell opportunities, such as toiletries, are marketed appropriately
- 7)** Communicate ambience in all marketing and guest interactions
- 8)** Explore whether technology could support ambience in your venue by automating processes such as brightness and sound or offering guests the opportunity to customise a space
- 9)** Have flexible spaces that can offer a different ambience through décor, lighting, temperature and sound depending on the occasion to maximise sales opportunities
- 10)** Approach ambience with sustainability in mind
- 11)** Be aware that every guest will have different preferences
- 12)** Review ambience periodically to check it's still working

Methodology

This white paper has been produced following a round table discussion at COMO The Halkin, London, on 25 November 2024.

Panel



Hosted by

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Paul Christodoulou MIH, national account manager,
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Laurie Edwards, director,
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Alex von Ulmenstein MIH, hotel manager,
The Kensington, London

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