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### Give Guests a Rest!

A good night's sleep is the most important service a hotel can offer its overnight guests, according to Dr Alice Hon and Dr Clare Fung of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Analysing hotels' sleep-management strategies from the perspective of both business and leisure travellers, the researchers show how hotels can best allocate their resources to optimise guests' sleep quality. Such strategies may offer hotels a unique source of competitive advantage, enabling them to survive and even thrive in today's precarious market environment.

The chance to sleep well and deeply is important to every hotel guest. Leisure travellers wish to escape the stress and strain of everyday life, enjoy a restful sleep and wake refreshed to make the most of their holiday. Sleep quality is just as important for business travellers, whose jobs require them to be well rested and alert. As the researchers remind us, "good-quality sleep is essential for our health". It not only improves mood and concentration, but also reduces the risk of diabetes and heart disease.

Unfortunately for hoteliers, people are rarely able to sleep well in a new environment. This is known as the "first night" effect, and it is of particular concern for hotel managers. "Many tourists expect that their first night in a hotel will be less than restful", explain the researchers, "due to jet lag, sleeping in a different bed, rooms that are too hot or too cold, noise from the street or neighbours, light from the corridor, and so forth".

As small changes in hotel guests' new environment can affect their sleep, the researchers stress that it is vital for managers to "identify a proper hotel environment that maximizes sleep quality". Managing external factors like this can even help hoteliers to reduce the impact of pre-existing psychological factors such as guests' stress and worry. Overall, well-rested travellers are more likely to be satisfied with their stay, and thus to return to the hotel in future.

No wonder, then, that hotels have invested a lot of money in identifying strategies to give their guests a good night's sleep. Some, the researchers explain, focus on providing comfortable mattresses and bedding in cool, dark, quiet rooms. Others advertise their thick walls and sound-proof rooms. A few even offer guests warm milk and cookies at bedtime. However, according to the researchers, little is known about which such sleep-management strategies work best, or how they affect travellers' satisfaction and intention to return.

Seeking to address this lack of knowledge, the researchers' first task was to find out exactly which strategies hotels should implement to maximise guests' sleep quality. They identified common problems affecting guests' sleep in luxury and budget hotels. For example, "many hotels concentrate on the quality of sleep amenities, but they seldom control the morning chatter of housekeepers or clatter of hotel guests". Rooms may be too warm or too cold, and intrusive smells such as cigarette smoke or cooking food may enter through air conditioning units.

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Next, the researchers identified three sleep management strategies implemented by hotels to ensure that their guests sleep well. The first is bed amenities, which must be clean and comfortable. For example, the researchers write, “hotels may offer different types of pillows (high or low), mattresses (firm or soft), or quilts (duvet or cotton)”. Second, room design should be warm, welcoming and restful, with appropriate lighting and perhaps blackout curtains. Finally, hoteliers should provide a room environment conducive to sleep. Guests can use temperature and humidity controls to customise the room climate, and some may welcome relaxing bath salts, earplugs or mugs of Horlicks.

Inevitably, however, guests’ responses to these strategies are affected by their particular perceptions, experiences and characteristics. “There are two main types of travellers,” note the researchers, “holiday and business”. Although sleep quality is important to both groups, they have different purposes in travelling, and potentially also different needs. The researchers thus set out to compare the responses of business and leisure travellers to hotels’ sleep management strategies.

To gain in-depth insights into hotel sleep management strategies, the researchers chose a 5-star hotel in Hong Kong with more than 260 guest rooms. First, they interviewed eight members of the hotel’s managerial staff, all of whom “had complete knowledge of the sleep management practices at the hotel and fully understood the importance of a good night’s sleep”.

Next, the researchers distributed questionnaires to 202 guests as they entered one of the restaurants for breakfast. The guests who completed the questionnaires were all international travellers. The largest proportion were from Asia, followed by Europe and then North America and the Middle East. Gender and age were roughly evenly balanced, but holiday travellers outnumbered business travellers.

They answered questions about their satisfaction with the hotel, their intention to return and how they felt about the hotel’s sleep management practices, ranging from the choice of pillows (bed amenities), room colour and light intensity (room design) to the room temperature (room environment). Examining the hotel’s sleep management from all angles – from the perspective of customers as well as managers, leisure as well as business travellers – was expected to provide holistic insights into how hotels can best give their guests a good night’s sleep.

Rigorous statistical analysis of the interview transcripts and questionnaires provided important theoretical and practical insights into how each of the three sleep management strategies related to guests’ satisfaction and intention to return, and how business and leisure travellers reacted differently to these strategies. Using these findings, the researchers explain, “hotels can put in place a series of sleep practices in hotel rooms that may help build good sleep hygiene to improve the sleep quality of their guests”.

First, as expected, both groups considered comfortable bed amenities, a cosy room design with heavy curtains and an easily controllable room environment to be important for a good night’s

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sleep. All of these strategies enhanced both their satisfaction with the hotel and their intention to return. However, there were also differences between the two groups of travellers. This, write the researchers, “explains why hotel guests give different feedback on their sleep quality under the same hotel room environment conditions”.

To satisfy business travellers’ particular need for choice, hotel managers could offer various types of bed amenities, including soft or firm mattresses, pillows of different heights, cotton or duvet quilts, or individual sprung mattresses. To cater to the specific needs of holiday travellers, hoteliers should focus on providing clean, welcoming rooms in warm colours, with adequate control over room temperature and humidity. More generally, note the researchers, hotel managers could provide “specially designed and premium bedding, thick walls and soundproof room design, aromatherapy, and quiet zone floors for guests”.

The researchers acknowledge that some travellers experience personal issues that disturb their sleep, such as jet lag or insomnia. Dealing with these issues may require more personalised services. “Well-trained sleep specialists who know how to enhance sleep quality could be employed to provide training to frontline staff as sleep consultants and offer suggestions to guests”, the researchers suggest. More simply, offering hot chocolate to guests could create a relaxing atmosphere conducive to sleep.

“Although hotels have put many resources into creating a quality sleep environment”, the researchers tell us, “their effectiveness is variable”. This study offers much-needed insight into how hoteliers can best invest their resources in sleep management strategies that meet the needs of particular groups of travellers. Satisfying guests is not only beneficial to their well-being, but “essential to business success and a determinant of hotels’ long-term survival”.

**Alice H. Y. Hon and Clare P. Y. Fung (2019).** A Good Night’s Sleep Matters for Tourists: An Empirical Study for Hospitality Professionals. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, Vol. 43, Issue 8, pp. 1153-1175.

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