SKI INDUSTRY POLL 2024

How Technology Is Improving the Customer Experience

TECHNOLOGY IS IMPROVING THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Resorts predict technology will play a growing role in managing their business over the next decade, according to a survey conducted jointly by SAM Magazine and **accesso**. Many believe self-service tech will become especially important, as both resorts and guests use self-serve tools for everything from ordering F&B to lodging check-in and room access. To the extent possible, resorts want to give guests more flexibility and control of their experience through technology. At the same time, they are cautious about how they use guest data. Generally, winter resorts are highly respectful of guest privacy and only aim to use data in ways that provide value to guests. They avoid intrusive technology that could be a potential turn off.

Data can be an invaluable tool for resorts that want to learn more about their guests and develop strategies to better serve them and to improve the guest experience.

Guests appreciate a respectful and common-sense approach to technology and resorts are wise to respect those boundaries. There are times when guests even appreciate a low-tech approach.

As guest expectations continue to change and as technology becomes more sophisticated it is important to strike an appropriate balance, especially as survey respondents expect to utilize this capability over the next 5-10 years.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

A total of 113 respondents filled out the survey, representing a cross-section of resorts from across North America. Some of the questions were multiple-choice, while others were open-ended. This combination allowed us to obtain a broad overview of how resorts are using technology and also gain specific insights into how individual resorts are incorporating technology at present and plan to in the future.

THE INTERSECTION OF SELF-SERVICE AND CUSTOMER DATA

Self-service has become embedded in resort operations. In our survey, 69 percent of respondents reported that they currently leverage some level self-service technology, such as kiosk ticket redemption and self-service rentals. (Among those who said they do not use such tech, we expect that at least some have an e-commerce site for advance ticket sales and snowsports school reservations, which are also a form of self-service.) And most of these resorts expect that the range and use of this technology will continue to expand, with benefits for both guests and operators alike.

We found that a similar percentage of resorts also collect consumer data. However, a majority of respondents make little or no use of the data they collect, either to connect with individual guests on a personal level or to complement their self-service tech. These are avenues for resorts to pursue as they seek to improve the customer experience.

as ticket kiosks, rental pick-up, and automated lockers. On-hill, self-serve tech shows up in such things as RFID gates and mobile apps that provide maps and wayfinding, and perhaps offer tools for social sharing and connection.

Only 30 percent of respondents, however, employ self-serve tech for other on-mountain and resort-wide activities, such as offering mobile F&B, lodging check-in and room access. This is an area for future expansion, according to several respondents.

Of those who are not employing self-service tech, the prime reason for that is cost. That appears to be true especially for smaller operations. Some cite their existing infrastructure, or the lack of it to be more precise. Others are still looking into the various options or waiting for their current software suppliers to add new capabilities.

Another reason to avoid self-serve tech: a belief that a live person provides the best service. "Personal face to face [service] is still considered the best," said one operator. "It [technology] takes away from personal contact with the customers," said another.

SELF-SERVICE:
THE CURRENT VIEW

At present, the most commonly-used forms of self-service tech provide pre-visit services: 94 percent of those operators who deploy self-serve tech offer such amenities as e-commerce pre-purchasing, waiver collection, and direct-to-lift ticket options, for example.

Roughly three-quarters of these same respondents support guests with self-serve tech on-site, via such things

A FINAL REASON, ACCORDING TO A FEW, IS SIMPLY OLD-FASHIONED OWNERS.

SELF-SERVE: THE FUTURE

We asked respondents, "How do you see the continued evolution of self-service technology impacting your ski area or resort over the next 5-10 years?" The answers demonstrate a broad range of ideas.

Most respondents have high hopes for, and expectations of, self-service tech. In particular, resorts foresee more self-service options coming on-mountain, for services such as F&B, snowsports instruction, ease of access, even lift loading. The aim is to get guests on the hill and deliver services faster by eliminating bottlenecks and touch points.

Self-service options also provide the instant gratification than many guests now expect. Resorts repeatedly cite these expectations as a reason to adopt self-service steps. The point: self-service has become common in many aspects of their lives, and guests now expect to have this same sort of control over their experience wherever they are. This trend is only going to grow stronger, operators believe.

Resorts also see self-service as a way to thrive, and not just survive, with a smaller workforce. Operators anticipate continued difficulties with staffing, and increasing reliance on self-service options for guests will allow managers to deploy staff where they are most needed.

Respondents, though, note that the software required to deliver on guest expectations is not always up to the task. Operators are anxious for their providers to upgrade their capabilities, and are disappointed in some of the legacy systems in the market.

Operators also note that the increasing reliance on self-service tech will increase demand for a certain type of employee: IT tech.

Here's a look at some specific and representative statements:

Resorts believe the continued evolution of self-service technology will impact them and their customers in several ways.

"Guests are getting more and more demanding, and there are more of them. They want better service but they don't want to pay for it, so it'll have to come via more automation."

"Self-service technology will continue to evolve. Staffing will become more of a luxury. Lack of staff will push continued move to self-service technology."

"We see it ramping up significantly, especially in the F&B space."

"We will likely be implementing more self-service options for guests."

"People are more knowledgeable when it comes to self-serve. It's less of an irritant. More user friendly."

"We see it reducing staffing needs at call centers, ticket windows, etc., as guests purchase, redeem, and navigate their experience without a human touchpoint."

"The best consumer experience will be provided by a fully integrated tech solution that accounts for every touch point on your unique customer journey—from destination marketing, to airport transportation, lodging, retail, dinning, on and off mountain activities. The best of these UX solutions will incorporate municipal services and small business to leverage public-private partnership to increase customer recruitment and retention, alleviate congestion, and increase efficiency."

"This technology is something we need to move toward, but the cost associated with it is making it more difficult."

"It not about self-service, it's about efficient, logical service."

"We see continued reduction of the need for in-person interactions at customer service centers upon arriving at resorts. More at-resort mobile app guidance for guests, to help them move about the resort."

"Without solutions to the housing crisis, I believe this to be the future."

"Once budgets and vision align, there will be an increase is self-serve technologies."

"We will likely be implementing more self-service options for guests. Sales kiosks may be a thing in the next 5 years for us."

"I imagine that areas could eventually offer pay by the run when RFID gates start reading credit cards. Self-service checkout for the cafeteria isn't far away."

THE CHANGE IS BEING DRIVEN BY CUSTOMERS FIRST AND FOREMOST. RESORTS SAY IT'S SOMETHING GUESTS WILL INCREASINGLY EXPECT.

"We believe self-service and mobile are expected today. In the near future it will be common to see EV charging in parking lots, summoning vehicles to a pickup area, modifying/add/canceling reservations on a phone, or even calling for a ski instructor on the mountain through an app."

"Guests will continue to demand the convenience of transacting with their phones. Having to transact with a person will be perceived as a negative part of the guest experience."

"The more we can reduce barriers to entry, the happier our guests will be, and (hopefully) the more they will ski! We are hopeful that our investment in technology will continue to pay off in that regard."

Self-serve technology will also help resorts serve guests better by deploying staff more efficiently, and perhaps by meeting guests' expectations despite fewer available employees.

"I hope that it lets us focus our staffing to be more efficient and helpful where it matters."

"We will need to have self-service processes in place to relieve the bottleneck at our rental operation."

"It will move more and more in that direction as labor shortages and the increasing cost of that labor will affect having staff do functions that guests can do themselves. AI will be a factor as well."

"We see reducing staffing needs at call centers, ticket windows, etc., as guests purchase, redeem, and navigate their experience without a human touchpoint."

"We will be reducing labor, increasing the quality of the guest experience."

"With a lack of good employees, we have to move towards self service!"

TECHNOLOGY INSIGHTS

But it will become more important to increase staffing in one area: the IT department.

"We are going to need more IT people."

"Need qualified IT staff. Tech savvy people."

Some operators say that the technology itself must improve before it can fulfill its promise.

"Current technology has many problems, and staff don't understand the technicalities well. This may be due to too much turnover and using low skill/low training folks with new systems constantly being implemented. Hopefully the current tech will become less frustrating for employees and guests alike."

"More fluid and connected tech, that is easy to use and learn for customers and staff. There's lots of great tech, but not enough of it connects easily into reports and other uses."

"Self-serve needs to be idiot-proof."
"In places where we've tried to add technological advances, it seems to have been disliked by the guests and staff."

"The ski industry is way behind, and legacy systems aren't getting the investment needed to modernize and catch up. There's a great opportunity for someone to come in and capture a large market share by offering modern, evolving, good solutions."

A few operators worry that self-serve tech is too impersonal.

"Self-serve tech is good for speed, efficiency, convenience. But it's not warm, welcoming, and individually personal."

"We will probably lose new customers, because skiing is a very relational business."

"It could potentially help based off hiring challenges, but could also take away from the personalized feel (thinking of rentals, not ticket kiosks)."

"It will ruin skiing."

USING GUEST DATA
GUEST DATA: THE CURRENT VIEW

Unlike self-service tech, most resorts do not seek to mine their guest data to provide a more personalized experience. Most do not pull data on individual guests currently, and don't see that as a long-term goal, either. Instead, a large number of resorts—41 percent of our sample—use guest data to understand higher-level trends in guest demands, and use this intel to inform planning for the future. Nearly a quarter of respondents, 24 percent, do not currently gain insights from guest data.

If there's a theme to this study, it is empowering guests to control their resort experience. That extends to, as one operators says, "giving our guests a voice in our decision-making."

Not everyone is on board with that idea, of course. One operator says that the resort's main focus when it comes to guest data is "how to leverage more money from guests." Throughout this guest data section of the survey, though, the idea of empowering the guest takes precedence over mining the data on individuals to sell them more services.

Another expression of this: only a small percentage of operators, just 12 percent, use guest data to guide their marketing to broad segments of their audience, particularly younger skiers and riders. The same percentage, 12 percent, use data to pinpoint specific guest needs and anticipate them.

Stepping into these functions would seem to be an opportunity for more resorts to pursue, as it can help guests and potential visitors understand what their options are and point them toward choices that are likely to suit their needs. It's likely that guests would appreciate that level of attention and understanding. Winter resorts can be sprawling and multi-faceted, and guests don't know what they don't know. Even the best self-service systems can't provide the degree of advice needed to help guests find the best local transportation options, the most suitable restaurants, or the most appropriate terrain. Guest data can help provide that guidance.

Why don't more resorts take the necessary steps to mine their data at present? It often comes down to not having the resources or trained professionals work with the data. Most marketers understand how data can be leveraged, but don't have the time, staff, or budget to do it. However, our respondents anticipate that the cost/benefit ratio will swing in favor of data mining over the next decade. A reallocation of resources and changes to staffing are likely to follow.

Yet a whopping 75 percent cite this use of data as an opportunity over the next 5 to 10 years. These operators recognize that by segmenting their audience, they can tailor their marketing to different groups simultaneously, whether that means families, season pass holders, or weekday visitors. That can not only serve the customer's wants and needs, but also create a financial return for the resort.

Several other data points in the survey demonstrate resorts' commitment to using technology to improve the guest experience. As one respondent says, "Our collective industry priority should be to make the guest experience better in every way."

There a high degree of agreement with that sentiment. More than forty percent (43 percent) plan to use technology to give guests more control over management of their own profiles and records, for example.
That would help resorts integrate customer data so that it is accessible across all guest-facing services. This widely acclaimed goal, cited by more than half of our respondents (53 percent), would provide the same complete data to every department that can use it. A visit goes more smoothly and with less hassle if guests only have to input their data once—think rentals, F&B, and lodging—or not at all, if they have visited the resort before and their resort profile is up to date.

GUEST DATA:
THE VIEW TO THE FUTURE

Opportunities for data usage
While many resorts seem reluctant to use detailed data to push sales, and prefer to use data to give guests more control over their choices, they are willing to use data for general marketing purposes. For the future, resorts see more targeted marketing as the greatest opportunity for increased use of customer data—so long as resorts can serve guests with information and services they value.

As noted earlier, just 12 percent of respondents use guest data to market to particular segments of the broader market at present.

GUEST DATA CONT.

Industry-wide effort

More than a quarter of our respondents (28 percent) believe the industry can take this a step further. They suggest that this seamless flow of data should move between multiple resorts, even if they are not owned by the same parent company. One operator added that data could also be integrated with public and private transportation systems. Again, this shared data would further ease the guest journey, even on their first visit to a new resort. Clearly, resorts understand that this sharing of data makes the guest journey more pleasant, which is the overriding goal of our respondents.

Striking the right balance

How to mine guest data without encroaching on your guests' private space is a tough topic in the ski industry, especially for non-destination resorts. For many guests, time on the hill is a break from the constant intrusions of daily life. So some resorts are apprehensive about prying too deeply into a guest's data or pestering them about products they are not interested in buying.

It doesn't have to be that way, of course. There's a huge opportunity for operators to show guests that the resort is keeping their needs and wants at the forefront of their tech service efforts. The proper use of customer data can enhance the guest experience in ways guests will appreciate, and not consider intrusive.

Technology can make it easy for guests to find the information they need, when they need it. Further, resorts can chose to sharply limit their "automated" communication and marketing efforts to avoid overwhelming or annoying their customers. Long story short: there are ways to strike a happy medium and provide just the right level of information to each guest.

THE RESORT OF THE FUTURE

Helping Guests Get the Most from their Experience

Self-service tech and guest data can play a large role in shaping the resort of the future, according to our respondents. Each of these can help provide the excellent customer service, personalized touch, and increased convenience that operators rate high in importance. They place less emphasis on introducing new activities (at least in winter) and infrastructure, perhaps because a lot of emphasis has been placed on infrastructure in the past several years already.

Greater convenience is considered most important to deliver over the next 5 to 10 years. This was chosen by nearly four in ten respondents (39 percent). Resorts agree that this means giving guests the power to pre-purchase when they want, make changes as the need arises, and to guide themselves throughout their time at the resort. Self-service of the best kind, in other words.

Of course, resorts themselves have a hand in providing service, too. More than a quarter of respondents—28 percent—believe that providing excellent customer service and a personalized "human touch" will be the top priority over the next 5 to 10 years. Clearly, the judicious use of customer data could help achieve that goal.

Perhaps the ultimate expression of this attention is, as one operator says, to offer "both 'human touch' and 'less hassle,' while segmenting people into each bucket that they want to be in—high touch vs. low touch."

PLANNING FOR YEAR-ROUND OPERATIONS

To get an idea of how resorts are thinking about creating a year-round guest experience, our survey asked about three separate approaches, and offered resorts a chance to write in anything else they might choose to cite. Respondents were free to name all the approaches they follow.

The most popular option was introducing new, diverse activities that take advantage of what the resort's location has to offer—such as mountain biking, golf courses, and other off-snow activities. More than half of the respondents (52 percent) said they are pursuing this course. That makes sense, since expanding summer operations by utilizing existing facilities helps keep costs down while increasing revenues. In addition, new activities hold the promise of attracting a new set of visitors, thereby expanding a resort's customer base.

Second most popular was adopting new or improved operational strategies, such as

fine-tuning dynamic pricing, or expanding local business collaborations and events. More than a third (35 percent) chose this path. Again, this approach helps increase revenues, with little additional expense. In that way, these strategies can help boost a resort's margins.

Leveraging tech solutions to highlight new activities and off-season pricing was named by a quarter of respondents (25 percent). This approach, too, has the potential to increase revenues with little expense, and with relatively little effort. It also requires no outside partnerships, which means resorts can act upon this option relatively easily and quickly.

For operators who plan to introduce new activities to attract year-round visitation or expand local collaborations and events, there is clearly an opportunity to leverage tech to highlight these activities as well as their off-season pricing. It's essential to properly market any new activity, and technology can play a big role in that. A full marketing plan should be part of the launch of any new line of business for the resort.

That can be a significant task. Given the constant evolution of technology, it can be a challenge to stay up to date on the state of the art. So it's important to work with a technology partner who has sufficient knowledge and industry experience to provide the support you need to meet this challenge.

A strong partner can help you understand the latest and most effective media options and make sure you have access to them. If your tech supplier lacks that capacity, it might be time to see if others might be able to provide a better alternative.

Biggest takeaways from the survey:

1. Resorts believe that providing the best possible experience to guests is the industry's top priority. They expect that technology will play an increasing and major role over the next decade in both managing their business and raising the guest experience to new levels.

2. To enhance the customer journey, many operators believe that self-service tech will expand to more and more aspects of the resort experience, from ordering F&B to lodging check-in and room access. To the fullest extent possible, resorts aim to give guests more control over their experience through self-service technology.

3. Though at present relatively few resorts use customer data to analyze the behavior of individual guests, resorts hope to add this capability in coming years. Doing so will grant resorts the ability to provide easier access to information and services of the greatest interest to each visitor, thereby enhancing the guest experience. This applies across a single resort, of course, but resorts also believe they can share some of this data between resorts as well, even non-affiliated resorts. Our survey respondents recognize the huge value this would have for the guest experience, and do not appear overly concerned that this will allow other resorts to cannibalize their customers.