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Boutique hotels share a global stage with big chains

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According to official Hong Kong Tourism Board [data](#) [1], there were over 25 million overnight visitor arrivals into Hong Kong in the first 11 months of 2017, a 5% year-on-year increase. That's a lot of accommodation demand for a city that measures only a little over 1,000 square miles in total area.

Independent travel is becoming more common. Travellers have the freedom to design their own itinerary, and choose where they stay. In a highly competitive market like Hong Kong, hotel owners and operators are always looking for ways to stand out from the crowd.

While mega advertising campaigns, hotel websites or physical brochures, and discount offers used to drive marketing for hotel properties, travellers now are increasingly basing their decisions through the experiences shared by those who have 'been there, done that.' TripAdvisor is the world's largest travel site with over 570 million reviews and opinions covering millions of accommodations, airlines, attractions, and restaurants. The unbiased 'wisdom from millions' feedback not only guides travellers to make smart and informed choices for their trips, they also help the smaller businesses – ones that have less budgets to market to global audiences – to thrive and evolve.



Take the fairly new kid on the block, Hotel Stage. Opened just over two years ago, this independently-owned boutique hotel is located in the heart of bustling Kowloon. Throughout its light, bright and minimalist interior, the 97-room property features a striking range of modern art. Created by local artists, many of these works capture the 'authentic Hong Kong' feel of the surrounding area. But how does a homegrown business like this compete on the global stage and 'get discovered' by travellers?

James Hung, the hotel's General Manager, believes direct and real-time engagement with its customers is the modern-day way of marketing, and the likes of TripAdvisor have been crucial to its success since its launch. "Right from the beginning, we were proactive in encouraging our guests to share their experiences with us, and we soon garnered many positive reviews, and through these reviews we could see people were getting to know us and make bookings," he explains. "We know TripAdvisor is one of the platforms most widely used by our guests, and also one that allows us to reach the international market."



A number of international travellers have picked up on Hotel Stage's calm and relaxed vibe, describing it on TripAdvisor as 'an oasis' in this busy part of town and, most frequently, as 'a gem'. "Our guests are often surprised by the experience of staying with us, they find Hotel Stage a little bit different," Hung explains. With accommodation being such an important part of any trip, it is comments such as these by like-minded people that can steer other travellers in Hotel Stage's direction.

But the point of difference of the hotel doesn't rest only on its ambience, or on its focus on the Arts. "Providing our guests with a very comfortable room, and the best service and experience is fundamental," he notes.



For Hotel Stage, TripAdvisor reviews are a key means to pinpoint the specifics that ensure its guests enjoy the best possible experience. While the a-la-carte breakfast and the smart phones have received a big thumbs-up from guests in their comments, other details that would be unlikely to feature on a hotel's official website have also been commended.

"Surprisingly, a lot of reviewers have highlighted our showers," Hung says. The shower fitting in the hotel's bathrooms can be swivelled from an overhead position to one where it can massage the back.

It is important that hotel staff give personalised responses to guest reviews and not just some sort of template reply, Hung emphasises. Even those with criticisms of the service they've experienced will often feel better if they see their specific grievance has been addressed. "We take guest reviews seriously. They have taken the time to give us feedback, so we should also be responsive. We never feel like we have enough resources but we do put a focus on making sure that we reply to our guests' reviews."

Sarah Mathews interview Oct 17

The responses can take the form of action as well as words, he adds, citing the example of the rack of dumb-bells that were installed in the hotel's gym after a reviewer bemoaned their absence.

Comments posted online – both positive and negative – can also be used to motivate and engage hotel staff, he says. “Guests may comment, for example, that the staff are not smiling enough or are not attentive enough. If a review is not so good, I have to tell my teammates that we need to do better.” Positive feedback is posted on the staff canteen notice board and is extremely useful in motivating staff. “Some reviews even name members of staff and then I will go and thank them personally.”

One thing's for certain, TripAdvisor provides a level playing field for all businesses, big and small, to connect with potential and repeat guests and enable businesses to play to their strengths.

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