

Net Positive Hospitality Podcast transcript

Communicating Net Positive: How Hotels Share Sustainability with Guests

3rd September 2025

Becca (Podcast host) 00:09

Welcome to the net positive hospitality podcast, brought to you by the world sustainable Hospitality Alliance.

Speaker 1 00:17

Customers now want credible messages you will no longer be able to say, as a company, I am eco friendly whenever possible. What does that really mean? That doesn't wash anymore.

Becca (Podcast host) 00:31

Here at the Alliance, we see members and partners drive net positive within the industry. We are witnessing innovation and great progress made in Data Management, food waste, accessibility, employability and much more. But what impact can consumers guests have on sustainability, specifically in hotels. Hotels have long sought to nudge guests about reusing towels and reducing water consumption in their rooms. What difference does it make this episode analyses the challenges Accor were having with their messaging on sustainability. A global leader in hospitality, Accor worked with booking.com one of the world's leading digital travel platforms, and the University of Surrey on a new study which assessed how to deliver effective and engaging sustainability communications to guests. The report sets out some of the challenges hospitality providers face when communicating with guests on sustainability and identifies how brands can positively influence guest behaviour. I went along to the University of Surrey to speak to student Sophina Naz, who worked on the study.

Speaker 2 01:37

So, yeah, this is the hallway, and here you will see offices of a lot of faculty member. This is Dr Nadine, Dr Leon. So most of them have already left because it's around. So the Hospitality and Tourism programme in this school, it's world number two as per Shanghai ranking. And in the UK, it's number one, so it's at the top, and most of that is because we do impactful research, should

Becca (Podcast host) 02:01

we again see what impact you make in your digital lab? Yeah, sure.

Speaker 2 02:07

So, yeah, in digital lab, this was one of the biggest projects that we did, and especially a PhD student. So we got funding two, three years ago to buy the equipment, but we didn't have opportunity to collaborate with the industry. And then echo. Group of Hotels came to us. They told us their communication assets are not working, like people are not looking at the sustainability messages. They are not engaging with it, and the changing behaviour comes next. So that was not happening. This is eye tracking equipment. So when the participants look at the screen, their eye patterns wherever they are looking or where they are spending more time. Sometimes when they are happy, they spend more time. Sometimes when they are mad or they are put off by some

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message, they also look there. So we also use facial expression analysis camera that tells us whether they are feeling good or bad about it. And then we also have GSR equipment that we attach to their wrist, like the ones they have lie detector in the police shows, yeah, I combined the eye tracking pattern with the facial expression and then with the GSR. GSR may use the heartbeat, like if someone is having a peak, if someone is feeling good about something, or if he reads a word that put him off, he would have a spike in heartbeat so that that is captured by galvanic skin response that equipment is

Speaker 3 03:24

in that box. Can I have a go? Yeah. Can you test me? Yeah, yeah, sure. Yeah. Sit here, right?

Speaker 2 03:35

So before they experiment, there is a on the screen that appears. You have to follow that with your eyes, just to make sure you're seated properly, and eye tracker can catch your eyes.

Becca (Podcast host) 03:45

So I'm all wired up here, and Safina has got the programme running, and I'm just going to start. So I've got the mouse gonna click Next.

Speaker 2 03:55

Whenever you see a message, you have to read that and then respond after

Becca (Podcast host) 03:59

that. Okay, so there's a series of images of a hotel, there's a bed, a bedside table, and some water, and a lovely hotel restaurant, a message that's come up that says more than words. It looks like there's quite a lot of words there, and I'm struggling to engage. And I'm sure the computers are trying to the computer is going to notice that,

04:28

but I can see your eyes.

Becca (Podcast host) 04:30

Yeah, it's quite a lot of words to take in. It doesn't this message probably doesn't work. Well, yeah,

Speaker 2 04:39

it's one of the existing one. Yeah, there's nothing emotional,

Becca (Podcast host) 04:42

nothing emotional, and it's just too much for me to read. I just want to eat my food. Okay, so here comes another one says. It says, Your comfort comes first. There's a picture of a world with a leaf on top a carefree and relaxing experience for the smart food process. Us relax for the comfortable and peaceful. I mean, that's nice that it starts with relaxing, and it's looking it's focused on your experience and comfort as we take away the worries of food waste, we partner with Orbis to convert food waste into a valuable resource. I mean, I think that's that message is better than the last

05:18

one. Yeah, this is what we design as a comfort

Becca (Podcast host) 05:21

appeal? Yeah, it's a lot nicer to read, and I feel more open to it. So now I've got to answer, would this hotel message convince you to reduce food waste? I think it would. It makes it put me in a nice spot. What this hotel brand promotes about its product service is true. To discuss the findings of the white paper, we brought together Accor and booking.com along with sustainability manager Professor Xavier Font at the University of Surrey in the UK.

Speaker 1 05:51

At the University of Surrey, we do a lot of research on what consumers do and how they behave in relation to sustainability, and we've seen a lot of surveys where we people just ask consumers, How sustainable are you? And we don't think that we learn very much from those anymore. There's nothing that new from them. So instead, we wanted to do something that was much more applied, and we also wanted to use our digital lab to be able to see how customers responded to different messages and doing some AB testing. Hello,

Speaker 4 06:18

Cinera is in charge of sustainability for Europe and North Africa within the Accor Hotel Group. I mean, one of the challenges is that probably the marketing teams, the communication teams within the company, don't really feel legitimate to talk about sustainability, and that is becoming a bit of challenge when building up communications on sustainability with guests at Hotel levels. So this is probably one of the challenges, and this study certainly helps us to tell them that they're legitimate and they just need to understand the way they need to do they should do

Speaker 5 06:58

it. My name is Thomas. I am the programme manager@booking.com looking after our customer facing sustainability efforts. We see that accommodations have made great strides in acting more sustainably. We see this from the increased number of certified accommodations that we have on our platform now. But of course, all of these investments need the engagement of the traveller if you're going to really get the true value out of them, accommodations tell us that certifications alone aren't enough to ensure that the guest acts in a more sustainable way. We see that in our yearly research, but it also comes up in other research that we do throughout the year. Accommodation providers really want to try and bring the guest on that journey with them, but they don't really have the strategies or tactics to make that happen. So the research was designed to sort of get at those points like, how do you support the accommodation who may be not to advance in their journey, doing a lot of sustainable efforts, but not really sure how to engage the guests in a way that will get the guests to make a more sustainable choice

Speaker 1 07:58

in that moment, we've seen so many cases where businesses do amazing work, and then they're just very shy about how to communicate it, or it looks like the communication has gone through the hands of the legal team, and they've just made sure that this is like this quality approved thing that is so bland that doesn't mean anything to anybody anymore. So in our research, we find that more than 70% of all sustainability actions are never communicated, and the majority of those are communicated are miscommunicated in the sense that they're not as persuasive as they could be if we put a little bit more, a bit more oomph, a bit more interest in how we wrote them. So that's why it was great, really. When when Accor and booking approached and said, Let's do this together, we noticed that a lot the customers that are interested in sustainability, they already know what they're looking for, right? And don't. They don't want to be treated like children, essentially. So when you tell them something this too good to be true, they're sceptical. When you tell them something that is too vague, then they're saying but what are you really telling me? So essentially, they're looking for a little bit more care and attention in the kind of communications we're putting in place. And so, for example, we try to play with the messages around, how do we show

sustainability as a source of pleasure or comfort? And we found that pleasure works, but also people are highly sceptical, so you need to be, you know, be very, very selective as to when and how you use it. Actually, for a lot of people, comfort was much more of a safe zone. If you show them that being sustainable was also comfortable, as opposed to going to be a compromise. They really were aiming for that, but you still had to give them something that had some evidence behind it so vague and generic messages wouldn't necessarily work. What we also found is that a lot of customers just wanted to start with the very basics, right? If they were already sustainable at home, they wanted to be able to do the things already were used to from doing at home, and even that alone was something that many properties were not providing or. The Messages gave the impression that wouldn't be provided for

Speaker 4 10:04

them. And adding to what Xavier said, I would add that probably sustainability is not an ad hoc topic. It's got to be embedded within the state. So we when we communicate, and this is what they were saying, we shouldn't put it as an ad hoc topic and not embed it. And when it comes to generate terms, eco friendly has massively been used, and they are saying, well, eco friendly at the end of the day, it means what it means? Probably nothing. So that was quite interesting, because it's massively used, and at the end, we perceive that it doesn't really tell anything concrete. And then also, these little notches would be probably one of the successful things to do in the future, where you really focus on little things that very concrete, also the fact of making them feel part of it. I mean, it's not as top down giving messages. It's more embedding them within our purposes, meaning, help us with you know, save the planet, planet with us. So all those terms are probably more engaging to them and more appealing to them, because they feel part of it and like Saviour was saying like they do at home.

Speaker 5 11:33

The thing that surprised me from the research was that one that we just mentioned around enabling the guests to be as sustainable on their on their on their holiday as they are at home, because I've seen myself in it, and I never really thought about how I get frustrated when I travel. My partner and I always have these sort of frictions when I try to do all of these things, and he gets a bit confused and a bit miffed by it. And I get frustrated when, you know, you hang up your towel, and then you come back and the towel has been replaced, or you take all of these steps and then it's just undone, and you're like, well, if I'm trying to play my part and you don't enable me to play that part, I just it stood out to me, because I was like, oh, that's actually me. That's who

Speaker 1 12:12

I am. And that those contradictions just have this then spike on customer scepticism. So the moment that a customer finds something that you as a business through a signage, or otherwise you'd ask the customer to do something, and then the business doesn't do it. Anything else you ask the customers to do will not be trusted anymore,

Speaker 4 12:33

indeed, avoiding gift based messaging, which also is in some cases, very popular, very massive use. And you know, clients are saying, well, avoid that, because it's not happiness. And you know, conferences certainly can coexist together, and we shouldn't feel guilty.

Speaker 1 12:57

A further thing to add to this is that because of legislation, but for many other reasons, customers now want credible messages, right? So they, you know, they you will no longer be able to say, as a company, I am eco friendly whenever possible. What does that really mean? You know, it's like being it's like saying I'm a good person whenever possible. That doesn't wash anymore, right? So

if you say specific things you're doing, and you give the customers a clear role, and particularly if you say, look, as a business, I've done 90% of the work, you just have to the final 10% the customer will believe, okay, that's that's fair, but very often the messages feel like the business is passing 90% of the responsibility to the customer. Then that's not fair, is it? I think when readers look at the report, they'll essentially find that most of what we say is common sense, and they'll also realise that common sense is not very common, and much of what we have here is, I mean, they'll say, Duh, yeah, of course. I've tried to do this. The beauty of this report is that by having the AB testing, by showing two different version of the same message. It's saying, Look, you could have written it like this, and it wouldn't work so well because of ABC, but actually, if you write it like this, it can work better. Then we're going from generically saying you need to communicate in a more persuasive way. It's like, what does that really mean? And instead, we move into saying, we'll avoid this kind of language and use this language instead, you know, empower customers by saying sentences like these, not like that. And I thought, you know, actually Christina, when you guys at Accor came and said, We're willing to use our current messages as the test bed for this, this was really brave of you, right? Because other hotel groups would have not done this and but we're all learning together through this, right?

Speaker 4 14:41

Thank you. Thank you for for your word saviour. I mean we need to there, and we are building up on sustainability and the way how to run it, and, you know, embedded throughout the customer journey, and the only way is just to confront the reality, and we shouldn't be. Afraid of it, we are not afraid of it. And you know, we have many brands, and one of the learnings as well is that we have tried to adapt the message to every single brand. The same message adapted, and at the end of the day, you realise that you are not clear enough to the client. So testing what we were doing. It was very, very important to us. And you know, liaising with you, partnership with you, it was very important as well, because we do not have the same methodology that you apply to identify if we were on the right track or not. So it was a pleasure to do it and confront ourselves to the reality and afterwards, which is the most important thing, once we know we need to act and re work on all the messages, and obviously focus more into those inviting, encouraging messages and acting together messages and so on, and avoiding the general terms, as you said before,

Speaker 1 16:04

and let's be honest, the beauty of this is that it was with you guys as well at Accor because unless somebody has been living under a rock, they know that you are pioneers in sustainability. And the fact that we could say even a company with a track record that you've got still has space for improving in the way in which you communicate. It pretty much saying anybody can learn. But and I find that very often we are very averse to experimenting and trying new things. I don't mean we as the three people who are in this call, right, but as a sector, we believe that we're very innovative, and yet much of the communication has not evolved from the day that the first towel sign was hang in a bathroom in Scandinavia. And he's like, but why we're not trying harder, why we're not trying different things, you know? Why we're so scared that the customer may respond badly?

Speaker 4 16:52

Well, just to add on that, Xavier, our purpose is pioneering responsible hospitality, connecting cultures and you know, so at the end of the day, it's part of our culture, and now it's our purpose. So we need to challenge ourselves

Speaker 5 17:10

to add on to Xavier's point around, you know, being worried about what the customer might think or might do, we see that there is a change in behaviour from the traveller. They become increasingly aware of the impact of their travel on the communities and the environment. So when we think

about sustainability, there's always this, what are we going to lose? But there's a lot to gain from accommodations acting in a more sustainable way, and embedding sustainability can also improve the guest experience, and you have an opportunity to sort of redefine what luxury means, and I think that people, more often than not, are willing to make that change. They just need to be supported on how to make it because they're not always informed to do it themselves. Why this research is important for booking? Well, we spoke about it earlier, where core has this unique position of in stay. We have a position of the online world, and our goal is to make it easier for travellers to make more sustainable travel choices. And for us, we surface certification information to the guests when, when they're booking, and this research helps us understand how to do that in a way that they will then make an informed decision, hopefully choosing the certified accommodation. But we touch the guests in many phases, sort of in the dreaming phase, where they're thinking about going on a vacation. So how do we bring sustainability into that? In the booking phase, so they're actively choosing and filtering out their accommodation that they're looking for, and then in the pre stay and post their phases. So how do we bring the message of sustainability into all of those touch points? Or not? In some points, it may not make sense to bring it in, but in a way that will make the traveller feel like they made an informed decision, and hopefully they'll make another more informed decision. Again,

Speaker 1 18:58

my thinking here is whatever you want the customer to do differently, you need to experiment more with ways in which you communicate with them. So So think much more about what message you want to put across and trial them and follow a, you know, fail fast and learn fast approach to communications. We're not proposing that you decide a new way of communicating something, and then you roll it out across your whole chain without testing it. So you need to do you need to have one place where you're doing multiple tests and you don't stop testing. You're like testing is just has to be part of your continuous improvement, and in the way in which you do it, in any other aspect of designing your experience and your services, you also have to do it in the way in which you communicate sustainability,

Speaker 4 19:46

indeed, right to be confirmed that is the the way to do it here,

Speaker 5 19:52

yeah, I completely agree with service point. It's easy to say, but just start read the report, take one of the tactics apply it. See. See how it goes and improve and and, and don't be afraid to start bringing the traveller on that journey with you, because they want to know. They want to play a role. Travellers tell us that they are the best version of themselves when they travel more sustainably, when they see sustainability efforts, when they travel, they're very likely to bring that back into their everyday life. So you'll find that actually, if you start talking about it, they'll get more engagement, and it will build your own confidence, and it sort of helps you progress, not only in bringing out more messaging to support your journey, but also investing in other sustainable initiatives at your property. So I would say, Yeah, super easy to say to start, pick a tactic, pick a strategy, test a couple of different versions, see the reactions you get, and just continue to improve on that. We have plans to sort of bring this research into support accommodations as well, so bringing this to the masses. So we did this research together, but we have many accommodations who we work with continuously, and the idea is that we then bring that research to them throughout the year, so we also help improve their own messaging of their properties.

Becca (Podcast host) 21:11

So let's round up the key takeaways of the study. Highlight sustainability practices, show how guests can easily contribute balance appeals to pleasure and comfort for optimal results, empower

guests, don't constrain or dictate to them, help guests act as responsibly as they do at home. We'll end with Safina. Do you feel like this is a real, key central point in how the hospitality industry can move towards net positive, putting the customer first, and trying to get into the mind of the customer and make them make those sustainable changes. Yeah. So most of the

Speaker 2 21:47

problems that we are having are coming from irresponsible human behaviour, and when we try to communicate them, we are making them rebels of the system, rather than making them work with us. So this is the entire point of the whole research. And this is something I personally believe in for a century. Psychologists used to think if we focus on what is going wrong, then we can make people feel better. But positive psychology came up with an opposite point of view. They want to focus on the positive emotion side of the human and flourish and prosper that part of the human experience or human well being to make them better. Well being have a higher level of well being or happiness. So that is the core of this entire research. And this is what my sustainability research is all about. This is the core of my PhD as well. I want to focus on that side of the person, person, or a human, where they want to feel acknowledged, recognised, or being applauded, or being told that they can actually make the difference. They don't have to change the world. Even if they reduce the two minutes of their shower, it can save them like 30 or 20 litres of water, because there are different, contradicting stats. That's why I am being flexible, flexible in my statement, because I have seen stats up to 30 litres. So imagine if one person saves 30 litre, and you tell, tell the person that you will save 30 litre, that will make a bigger impact, because he will feel better that I have the power, and I can actually make a difference, and I have the ability to do it, and it's doable, and that the change that is actually happening, it's not something hypothetical. So emotions and facts empowerment all together. That's from a behavioural scientist perspective, who is a strong believer of positive psychology, I think that is a key to making the net positive impact.

Becca (Podcast host) 23:47

For more on the study and for more in this podcast series, head to the Alliance's website.