Make an entrance

Ward Hellewell reveals how just a few small tweaks to your front of house can leave a lasting impression with guests
You never get a second chance to make a first impression. And in the age of social media, when bad reviews can be out in the public domain faster than you can say ‘I hope you had an enjoyable stay’, making that good first impression has never been more important.

Here’s two cases in point from TripAdvisor. First, a negative review. ‘As we walked through the door I felt uncomfortable, the entrance looked run down.’

Here’s a positive response. The owners are upgrading the hotel in question and the entrance area has just been completed. ‘The lobby is impressive – if this is what the rest of the hotel will look like then it is very promising of things to come... Would definitely recommend it and I can’t wait to see the whole hotel renovated.’

Naturally, you’re going to want to get more reviews like the second example. Here’s some ideas to help you do just that.

**Word on the street**

It’s easy to forget that many visitors’ experiences start long before they’ve even stepped foot inside the building. Therefore, it’s vital your premises has that all-important ‘kerb appeal’, to avoid visitors being tempted to drive right on past. Step back and take an objective look. Do you need to repaint, replace rotten wood or refresh window frames with a coat of paint? Are the windows spotless and the letterbox, keyholes and door handle polished and gleaming? Is the entrance obstacle free, well signposted and well lit at night?

The four-star silver Arches Guesthouse in Whitby improved customer expectations by toning down a gaudy exterior that made the building stand out, but not in a good way. Dave Clements, owner of the family-run hotel, explains how a refurbishment and a new colour scheme gave the Victorian building a more traditional look that he says appeals more to the hotel’s core customers. ‘The building was bright pink from the previous owners, so we repainted it pale yellow, which is much more subtle and in keeping with the rest of the buildings around it,’ says Dave. ‘We also refurbished the railings at the front and around the tops of the bay windows to the original standard. We wanted to make sure the work was done properly, because we felt that’s what our customers would expect.’

That kind of attention to detail, says Dave, is important in assuring a positive first impression, which is then carried through to the rest of the guest experience. ‘It was worth taking the time to do it right, because our guests notice that type of thing.’

**Stepping indoors**

A reception is the most important area of all when aiming to make a good impression. It’s where you anticipate the needs of guests. It’s also where you introduce a sense of style, and a glimpse of exactly what can be expected from the rest of the visit. Aim for calmness, not chaos, and a sense of order and friendly efficiency – a hint of what’s to come.

‘We always try to get underneath the skin of what a hotel wants their guest experience to be, as there’s not one rule that fits all,’ explains interior designer Anna Hart from Anna Hart Design. ‘The main thing is to aim for a clear welcoming feel that reflects who you are – it should set the tone for the whole hotel experience. ‘Think about your clientele – and decorate and furnish your reception area accordingly. For example, if you’re a family-friendly hotel, then you should have hard-wearing furniture that you won’t mind getting knocked about a bit. You might also want to go for brighter colours and bold artwork. If you’re aiming at an adult market, go for a more measured approach.’

As first impressions go, 42 The Calls – a converted 18th-century mill in Leeds – ticks all the right boxes. The décor of the contemporary lobby and lounge, with their minimalist chrome and leather interiors and bold, modernist colour schemes, is in direct contrast to the traditional exterior, which incorporates many of the original features and working mill mechanisms. This contrast results in an unexpected
‘wow factor’ as guests sweep through the door. Arranging furniture to encourage mingling, and introducing welcoming touches such as wine on arrival and lit fires in winter, ensure the area is a place people want to spend time in.

General manager Belinda Dawson says, ‘As soon as guests come through our revolving doors into reception, they’re impressed. We always make sure there’s someone there to greet them with a drink and, in winter, we have fires burning and warm mulled wine – perfect for those really cold nights. We’re a small hotel with only 41 rooms, so we want it to feel intimate.’

The reception layout, in particular, adds to the cosy atmosphere. ‘It has a very homely feel, which makes guests feel instantly relaxed,’ says Belinda. ‘There are sofas and easy chairs and a small honesty bar – it’s an area our guests like to spend time in rather than going straight to their rooms.

‘The reception desk is on wheels, too, so it doesn’t dominate the space and can be tucked away. Our regular guests see the hotel as a second home. Often, when checking in, they’ll say, “It’s like coming home”. It’s important they feel welcome.’

Anna Hart adds, ‘Have plenty of open space if you can. There might be people checking out at the same time as others are checking in, so you don’t want it to feel overcrowded and chaotic. Keep furnishings to a minimum and use bold artwork and maybe a feature light to create an interesting area.’

**HOW TO PROVIDE A WARM WELCOME**

Don’t make the mistake of thinking that ‘good enough’ will do. Visitors have high expectations, even the tiniest things can cause disappointment. Anna Hart shares five small ways you can make a big difference – fast.

- **Be upstanding.**
  
  Most people will be standing up when you’re dealing with them at reception, and it’s good to talk to them at eye level. Don’t have your receptionist sitting down on a low chair – they should also be standing or sitting on a high stool.

- **Set the right tone.**
  
  Music can be nice, if it’s right for your hotel, but keep it subtle – it shouldn’t be intrusive, as you need to be able to have a conversation with guests.

- **Check and check again.**
  
  Cleanliness and keeping things well maintained is obviously important, but it’s easy to forget. Add hourly scans and tidy-ups to your routine.

- **Anticipate guests’ needs.**
  
  Place umbrellas by the door, have tea, coffee and water available at all times, and clear the area of obstacles and clutter – remember, guests will have luggage and may use a wheelchair or pushchair.

- **Spruce it up.**
  
  Aim to decorate every year, even if it’s just a lick of paint.

**Sending the right signals**

Striking the right balance between providing information and minimising clutter and confusion is also an important consideration for an approach or reception area.

‘Signage is key from the very beginning – it’s how people are going to find you,’ says Anna. ‘It should be obvious how people are going to get from the car park to the reception to their room – you don’t want people to be standing around feeling confused. Tie in signage to your branding, and use other methods – for example, a clearly defined path from the car park to the reception – to help people find their way.’

Award-winning Haynes International Motor Museum boasts an immaculate exterior arrival area with attractive branded signage. Uniformed staff are on hand to greet visitors, while souvenir catalogues and leaflets are displayed neatly on the reception desk. The entrance to the exhibition halls is clearly marked and visitor traffic flows are obvious and logical. Advice and information, including updates regarding any temporarily closed exhibits, is easy to find.

‘First impressions are vitally important,’ says the museum’s sales and marketing manager Chris Scudds. ‘We want our visitors to feel relaxed and informed from the beginning, and ready to maximise the experience that awaits them. It’s all about surprising and delighting them as they move deeper into the museum from one exhibition to the next.’

As guest expectations continue to grow and change, and opportunities to share experiences with the wider world increases, a welcoming reception is a sure-fire way to enhance their experience. No matter how many good design boxes you tick along the way, great customer service and a genuine, personal welcome will always go down well. If you do nothing else, make sure you greet visitors with a smile – a moment of genuine welcome is more important than anything.