

THE LANGUAGE OF LUXURY

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Introduction



What constitutes the luxury experience for the hotel guest? It's the work of a moment to come up with a list. It might include the highest standards of décor and facilities, excellent cuisine and a prime location. For some guests, it will be the gym or the spa, for others it will be a secure, reliable Wi-Fi service. At the top of the list, or somewhere very near it, will be attentive, unobtrusive service delivered by highly professional, well-trained and informed staff.

So far, so obvious. But there's another, easily overlooked element of luxury that matters just as much: voice. We'll call it the language of luxury.

A considerable amount of time and resources is spent cultivating the identity of a luxury hotel, establishing its culture, and positioning its appeal to a highly discerning clientele in a competitive market. Read through the literature and web copy produced by a hotel, and it will soon become obvious that careful attention has been paid to the language used to convey its particular style and character, all the way down to the choice of font and design - even the white space on the page.

It's a useful exercise to read the same copy aloud to hear its tone and to hear the 'voice' of the hotel. Read the brochure or find your way to the 'About Us' page of the website to hear this spoken. While the language of luxury varies from one hotel to another, from hip boutique to long-established icon, it speaks in well-modulated tones, chooses its words carefully, and doesn't drop its guard for a moment.

Since the staff of a hotel are its living, speaking ambassadors, it stands to reason that hotel staff, from front-of-house to maintenance, will also choose their words carefully. This is not to suggest that every sentence uttered to a guest is a ringing example of perfectly crafted prose; it's simply a question of being tuned to the same pitch and speaking from there. This e-book is a guide to the phrases that are in the key of luxury - and a few that aren't.

We know how luxury looks. This is how luxury sounds.

1.

Meeting and greeting



Flight delays. Bad weather. A mix-up with the hire car. A packed diary. Fretful children. A missed lunch.

These are just some of the unseen stories that might come through the hotel doors, heading straight for front-of-house. By this time, it is to be hoped that the doorman will have soothed some of those ruffled feathers with a quiet display of calm efficiency, but check-in is the moment when the hurrying and frustration falls away. Walking through the doors is to enter a haven.

The same goes for the client who lives a charmed life, has arrived after a journey that has been an exercise in smooth connections and traffic-free roads and who arrives full of bonhomie. The expectation of a calm, professional welcome is the same.

Whether it's a guest's first stay at the hotel or their tenth, this is the moment when the language of luxury is most kindly received and when the hotel speaks aloud. It's also quite possibly the most welcome contact the guest has had since his journey began.

If this is a guest's first visit, the front desk will be their first impression of the hotel, and the one that lasts the longest. Make sure the language you use to greet them is friendly, approachable, and above all professional. For some clients, checking in is the last remaining hurdle between them and the luxury experience, and they want to clear it quickly. Your task is to do this efficiently, calmly, and to let the guest know that this hotel has a human face and a human voice.

Meeting and greeting: five dos and don'ts

Don't ask the person in front of you if they're checking in.

Do say, "Welcome to the hotel. Do you have a reservation with us?"

Don't silently tap away at the keyboard while the guest waits at the desk.

Do engage your guest in light conversation. You might ask: "How was your journey?" - but be sure to listen to the reply and respond appropriately.

Don't conclude the check-in process and hand over the keys with a cheery, "There you go!"

Do Ask if there's anything else you can help with.

Don't say, "No problem" when the guest thanks you.

Do say, "It was my pleasure" or "You're very welcome".

Don't speak as if you have a script in front of you.

Do inflect your voice, speaking clearly, distinctly, and sincerely.

2.

Day-to-day service



You encounter your guests throughout their stay as they come and go, book tables, seek information about some of the hotel's services or ask for information about the local area. There will be chance encounters too – on the stairs, in the lift, along the corridors or the bar.

Some, most, or all of these may result in an exchange between staff and the guest. Many will be simple requests that are easily solved, others may be less readily answered especially if they're outside your area of expertise. It would be impossible to rehearse responses to every scenario, but as long as your language is in the luxury register, these chance conversations will contribute to the overall impression of the hotel.

The right choice of words reassures the guest that he is in good hands. It reinforces the impression that the staff are knowledgeable, professional and helpful, and that the comfort and convenience of the guest is their highest priority. Every exchange between staff and guests is an opportunity to demonstrate this.

Retune your ear to the sound of particular conversations. The lone guest does not want to hear the judgement implied in, "Just you, Sir?" when he arrives at the restaurant in search of a table. Nor does a guest feel particularly well served by staff who tell him what he needs or has to do, or when he draws a blank from staff who regretfully announce that they don't know the answer to a question. And if it really isn't part of your job to know the answer to a question, remember: your guest is only interested in finding out what he needs to know.

Simply putting yourself in the shoes of the guest can be enough to see where slippages or carelessness in language can take the shine off the luxury experience – and to see how thoughtful, open responses can add to its lustre.

Day-to-day communications: five dos and don'ts

Don't start any sentence with, "You have to..." or "You'll need to..."

Do start with, "May I suggest..." or "May I ask you to..."

Don't say, "I don't know".

Do say, "Let me find out for you".

Don't ask, "Just a table for one?" when a lone guest arrives for a meal.

Do say, "Good evening. Would you like a table?"

Don't say, "That's not my department".

Do say, "Let me find someone who can help you."

Don't ask, "Are you all right?"

Do say, "Allow me to help".

3.

When things go wrong



If there's a hotel anywhere in the world that runs on such smooth rails that nothing ever goes slightly awry, we'd like to hear about it – but we won't hold our breath. However large or small the establishment, a luxury hotel is a complex business and it's inevitable that something will go wrong sooner or later – a power outage, a dripping tap, a double-booked table, staff shortages due to illness or bad weather.

It falls to the staff to communicate helpfully, calmly and clearly, regardless of what is going on behind the scenes. Staffing a hotel is a little like an ensemble performance, with everyone on stage at the same time, and the curtain always up. When part of the scenery falls away or a prop doesn't do quite what it should, it's time to improvise – and time to pay careful attention to language.

When things aren't going to plan, watch out for raised voices, or the perilous journey into the higher octaves; aim to keep your voice at the same pitch you normally use when things are going smoothly. Speech should be measured, calm and decisive, using language that leaves no room for doubt that matters are in hand and that whatever has gone wrong is being put right.

This is an essential element in the presentation of a calm, unruffled exterior and to keep any flurry of activity quietly and invisibly in the wings. In the event of temporary or even trifling difficulties, the same rule applies. Speech, language and non-verbal communication play an important part in trying circumstances.

Equally, when talking to a dissatisfied guest, maintain eye contact, and use positive verbal and non-verbal language. If there isn't an immediately obvious answer, secure a beat of time with some grace notes of sympathy and understanding.

Under pressure: five dos and don'ts

Don't pretend everything is fine when it's obvious that the guest thinks it isn't.
Do reassure. "We will do our utmost to rectify this" or "Allow me to look into this".

Don't leave room for doubt with phrases such as, "It should be..." or "I think that..."

Do be decisive. "It is" is better than "it should be", and "I will check" is better than "I think..."

Don't change the tone and pitch of your voice.

Do speak in well-modulated tones, firmly and clearly.

Don't interrupt an unhappy guest.

Do wait to hear all they have to say before explaining how the problem will be solved. Start with, "I'm so sorry to hear this. We will..."

Don't offer an apology and leave it at that.

Do offer a solution or say, "Let me consult my colleague, Mr..."

4.

Speaking as a team



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Few people work in total isolation, even when it can feel as if a particular role seems to be separate from the rest of the team. But while the doorman may be physically apart from everyone else for much of the time, his role within it is as fundamental to the success of the team as the group players in the hotel restaurant, or the front-desk staff.

Every team member brings their own nuances and inflections to their job; after all, nobody wants to check in to a hotel staffed by automata delivering robotic responses. But when a luxury hotel has cultivated a look and an ethos all of its own, it is complemented by the language of luxury and every team member needs to know its rhythms.

It's equally important to know how the team works as a whole, and to know everyone's role within it. This will be invaluable when answering guests' questions, avoiding the formulation, "I'll find out who can help"; better by far to say, "I'll refer this to Miss J straight away."

Management and staff can fine-tune language to meet the high standards of luxury language in a number of ways, outside of the usual training sessions. A useful exercise is to take a minute every now and again to see and hear the hotel from the viewpoint of a guest as he journeys from room to gym or bar. There are few better ways of seeing any cracks in the edifice than by walking around in someone else's shoes, seeing what has become familiar as if for the first time.

Phrases enter the language – no problem, it's all good, sure thing – and in pretty short order, they're tripping off the tongue without a thought. They have their place in daily discourse – just not within the confines of the luxury hotel. It's easy to slip unthinkingly into these registers without being aware that it has happened. Team members can look out for those slippages and perhaps use this as an opportunity to draw the team together. Line up a reward by dropping a coin into a box every time a particularly virulent phrase or word slips out, and put the funds towards a Christmas team gathering.

There is, of course, a fine line to be drawn in communication between intrusive and subtle, self-effacing and invisible, formal and formulaic. But we are all making these fine adjustments all the time, employing different registers according to where we are and who we are speaking to. If a team is working well together, speaking the language of luxury soon becomes reflexive and instinctive, part of the same adaptation to environment that is happening all the time.

Speaking as a team: five dos and don'ts

Don't blame other team members when something goes wrong. Don't say, "This should have been done by..."

Do say, "We'll see to this right away".

Don't blur the distinction between being at work and relaxing with the team.

Do remember to speak in the hotel's voice when working in the hotel.

Don't work in isolation.

Do get to know your team, learn their names and what they do.

Don't forget that the hotel has its own guide to speech.

Do find it in the hotel's brochures and web pages.

Don't forget that a hotel depends on team working.

Do remember the grammar of luxury, and learn to speak it as a team.



Conclusion

One isolated instance of careless talk in the luxury hotel won't bring the house to an outraged standstill. Two instances give the impression that a pattern might be emerging. More than that, and vernacular speech is on its way to becoming part of the hotel's culture, where it will sit very oddly indeed.

If a building could speak, what would it say? How would it sound? A local bar will be loud with the unguarded, demotic chatter of people kicking back, relaxing and talking; everything about the bar's design is chosen to make that easy and if it isn't, people are probably heading somewhere else. The neighbouring restaurant, however, is likely to be quieter, finely tuned to create enough ambient noise so that voices don't land in a hollow, echoing well or struggle to make themselves heard.

And the luxury hotel? For its guests, it is a sanctuary from the daily whirl of business, meetings, travel and running a home. It is an alternative world, a vision of how things really should be. It's the task of the staff and management to maintain that vision through deed and effort, and to interpret its voice using the grammar, vocabulary and language of luxury.

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