

Travel

Six ways hotels are targeting the millennial market (and benefiting us all)



Decor in the guest rooms at Radisson RED is a far cry from traditional hotel beige. (Courtesy of Radisson RED)

By Kate Silver June 29 at 6:18 PM

Hotels, they are a'changin', as hoteliers develop properties that cater to the younger, tech-savvy generations.

New and older brands are making moves to do away with the beige, interact via apps, double as co-working and social spaces, and score shareable selfie love along the way. But don't call them "millennial hotels." While many of the perks and amenities are inspired by research on the group, the properties included below — Hyatt Centric, Radisson RED, Hotel EMC2 and Residence Inn by Marriott — aim to appeal to guests of all ages.

Scott Greenberg, president and chief executive of Smashotels, a hospitality management company near Chicago — and also the owner and founder of Hotel EMC2, a smart, new Chicago hotel with an art-and-science theme in Marriott's Autograph Collection — says he knows that if he develops a hotel that his three millennial-aged children will love, older generations will follow.

"If we attract young people, old people will show up. But if you build a hotel for old people, young people never show up," Greenberg says.

Rose Anderson, vice president of global branding and innovation with Carlson Rezidor Hotel Group, which owns Radisson Red, says she is less interested in resonating with a particular generation and more with a mentality.

“It’s not so much about the age; it’s more about the behaviors that have been kind of pegged to the millennials: very social, online, connected. We are very much targeting a millennial mind-set versus a generational audience,” Anderson says.

Even long-standing brands such as Residence Inn are putting research into uncovering what millennials want.

[Historic firehouse to hot hotel: Repurposed buildings revel in their colorful pasts]

“You don’t want to be alienating some of your customers in order to appeal to some of your other customers,” says Diane Mayer, vice president and global brand manager of Residence Inn, TownePlace Suites, Protea and Marriott Executive Apartments. “So, if you can find things that maybe are millennial-driven but that have universal appeal, that’s the holy grail.”

While amenities such as free WiFi and stellar bar programs are practically a given now in hotels looking to woo younger audiences, here are some other trends to look for on your next getaway (millennial-driven or not).

Aspiring to be Instagram-worthy: There was a time when beige ruled the roost and hotel room design was rather #milquetoast. Many hotel developers now know that a piece of cool art doesn’t just have the potential to appeal to a guest, it has the potential to appeal to everyone who follows that guest on social media.

“From a design and art standpoint, we’ve got a lot of very bold art that creates backdrops for people to take selfies and share online,” says Anderson, of Radisson RED, which has locations in Minneapolis and Brussels, as well as Cape Town, South Africa, and Campinas, Brazil.

The colorful and creative design of Hotel EMC2 banishes bland and is irresistibly shareable. The hotel commits deeply to its art-and-science theme, and is punctuated with antique books, vintage microscopes and nods to great scientific and artistic minds, such as Albert Einstein (the restaurant is named the Albert) and Leonardo da Vinci (“one of the patron saints of the hotel,” Greenberg says). In the rooms, dramatic and photogenic showers — which are inspired by laboratories of the 1920s — are a centerpiece, and are translucent on three sides (with an optional curtain), while mirrors have an infinity effect and beg for selfies.

Connecting guests with local favorites: At Hyatt Centric — which is targeting the millennial-minded traveler and has 15 locations, with plans to nearly double that number globally by 2019 — staffers are encouraged to share their favorite local spots with guests.

“It’s no longer just the job of the concierge to give you recommendations,” says Sandra Cordova Micek, Hyatt’s senior vice president of global brands. “Our colleagues are constantly being asked what their hidden gems are and what they would recommend.”

In addition, the hotel places original local guides in rooms (and publishes them on the hotel’s website). It also highlights local art and food; some properties offer area tours. At Chicago’s Magnificent Mile location, for example, guests are invited on neighborhood and brewery tours, and a hotel manager leads guests on morning runs.

Residence Inn partnered with Under Armour Connected Fitness to offer its extended-stay guests at more than 700 properties at least one running map, via the app MapMyFitness. “A lot

of people like to run or walk because it helps them be in the place they are, even if they don't get to be a tourist," Mayer says.

On the social side, Residence Inn properties host events three nights a week, dubbed the Residence Inn Mix, which include visits from local food trucks; gatherings with appetizers, desserts and premium beer (Goose Island, Stella Artois, Leffe, Shock Top and some local offerings, depending on location); barbecues; and tasting and educational events that bring in chefs from local restaurants. Mayer says that those offerings were inspired by research Residence Inn conducted that found that millennials traveling for business were looking for fun, social events that connected them to the city where they were staying.

Revamping room service — and menus: Some hotels are moving away from the stodgy, old room service trays with silver domes. Hyatt Centric tailors its room service to on-the-go guests looking to explore the city, Cordova Micek says.

"We're sort of turning room service on its ear and thinking about it as restaurant-to-go delivery. So, it's not room service on the big silver tray rolling out. It's actually having your food delivered in environmentally friendly packaging that comes in a paper bag that you can take with you if you're going to run around and see the city," she says.

At Radisson RED, guests can order grab-and-go food (such as a Belgian waffle with mac and cheese, and fried chicken) from on-site restaurant OUIBar + KTCHN using the RED app, then take it back to their room or out on the town.

At Hotel EMC2, multiple vegan options are available on the menu. Greenberg says those meat-free options were inspired by his millennial daughter.

"I think back to my daughter, who was raised on salami and eggs, hamburgers and T-bone steaks, and she comes home on vacation and marches off to the grocery store to get her vegan ingredients," he says.

Changing the form and function of lobbies: In these days of laptops and mobile offices, people like to work alone — together. Hotel lobbies are accommodating that, offering lots of work spaces — as well as plugs and free WiFi — with easy access to snacks, caffeine and cocktails. At the Hyatt Centric on Magnificent Mile, for example, the lobby is the kind of place where you could spend days on end. It's filled with playful local art, and includes a library and dozens of comfortable chairs and tables, all of which spill into the bar, which spills into the restaurant, with no walls or barriers separating the spaces.

Gone is the traditional lobby at Radisson RED: The brand banished the front desk.

"It's creating this immediate barrier between you and the guests, and I think the younger audiences are a lot more informal by nature," Anderson says. At the Minneapolis location, guests can check in using the app on their phone, then use the phone as the key to get into the room. Should someone need help with checking in, Anderson says, staffers are walking around with iPads in hand.

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Adopting a high-tech — or all-tech — approach: That Radisson RED app doesn't just give you access to your room — it's your key to communication at the hotel. It's possible to spend a

night, or week, there and not physically talk to anyone but still manage to order food at the on-site restaurant, call a cab, check in, check out, request more towels and even chat with other guests. “You want things when you want it and how you want it. The app allows them to control this and do everything,” Anderson says.

Across many brands, in-room technology is making stays more personalized and convenient. At Residence Inn, Radisson RED, Hyatt Centric and Hotel EMC2, guests can stream Netflix (and in some cases other accounts) onto the television. Hotel EMC2 guests can also control the lighting and thermostat using the TV remote control, and each room has an Amazon Echo unit that streams music, reads the weather report, looks up info on the Web or does other tasks via voice command.

At Hotel EMC2, two robots, Leo and Cleo, bleep and bloop up the elevator and down the hallway to deliver bottles of water, toothbrushes and extra linens to rooms, upon request.

Prioritizing social consciousness: At Radisson RED, you won’t find any paper — except toilet paper — in the rooms.

“We have paperless rooms and we’re very proud of that,” says Anderson, adding that millennials are very eco-conscious as a generation, and the hotel embraces that.

When Greenberg came up with the Hotel EMC2 theme, he wanted to inspire dialogue about art and science. (There’s even a resident scientist at the hotel.) He also wanted to make a difference. The hotel provides financial support from direct bookings to Project Syncere (an acronym for supporting youth’s needs with core engineering research experiments), which helps pave a path for students in underserved communities to pursue science, technology, engineering and math careers.

“Millennials want to feel like there’s something of value, that somebody cares about something and that their money is going to serve the greater good,” Greenberg says.