


DIGITAL INFLUENCERS IN LUXURY HOTELS: A STRATEGIC MARKETING ALIGNMENT

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ABSTRACT

Faced with the scenario of constant changes to which the world is affected, new forms of communication emerge, especially those related to technological evolution. Consequently, individuals reinvent themselves, creating the possibility for a new era in digital interaction platforms. Faced with this reality, digital influencers have provided a different approach for companies to connect with their target audience, especially in the demanding luxury hotel market, understood as a market in which its consumers have high expectations in relation to personalized services, memorable experiences and ostentation. In this context, and with the objective of understanding how the contact between the enterprise and the digital influencer is carried out and how it is possible to collect data for the analysis of the results of this partnership, bibliographic and documentary research was carried out and, concomitantly, a form was applied, using the survey technique, to collect data regarding this dynamic. These, in turn, were sent to employees in the marketing area of 4 luxury hotels located in the state of Rio de Janeiro. The data obtained showed that 100% of the luxury hotels surveyed already partner with digital influencers and have a formal contract. On the other hand, most of the means of accommodation surveyed use the discount coupon as a marketing strategy and there is an equal division on the requirement of the material that influencers produce during their stay. Such results denote a relevant role of these professionals in the luxury hotel market.

Keywords: Means of accommodation, Luxury hotel, Marketing, Digital influencers.

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INTRODUCTION

The cybernetic universe has become increasingly present in the daily lives of human beings, whether for work or leisure, to the point that having a computer at home was no longer a luxury but a necessity. Companies could not be exempt from these new technological changes and soon tried to explore digital transformation through social networks, modifying their business practices. This new sales format was designed to bring the relationships between consumers and organizations closer together in an attempt to create a more affective bond with customers and, at the same time, be more active in their daily lives, reminding them that the company is always present.

By taking into account the way of life of today's society, influencer marketing has been consolidated as an essential tool for communication between brands and consumers. Thus, through digital influencers, companies have built more authentic and engaging connections, using social networks to overcome geographical barriers and directly impact the target audience. Glenister (2022) highlights that influencer campaigns can be more effective than traditional marketing strategies by creating a relationship of trust between the consumer and the brand.

In this way, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) argue that social networks have become essential platforms for brands, allowing them to connect directly with their consumers, transcending physical and territorial limitations. The use of these digital tools offers an effective means of engagement and interaction on a global scale, creating new communication and marketing opportunities. In addition, the culture that goes beyond territorial barriers is very well known by the hotel sector, given that it creates an organization with conditions of hospitality, allowing it to be present for others (GOTMAN, 2009).

One of the ways found to make brands get closer and closer to the consumer is influencer marketing, or as we know it better today, the digital influencer. The role of digital influencers, including *YouTubers*, has been widely recognized as crucial for the hospitality industry. Campaigns with content creators have shown positive results, generating an increase in bookings and promoting improvements in the brand's image, as long as they are authentic and represent real experiences. These strategies also help to reach a diverse audience, reinforcing the credibility of the venture (Hospedin, 2023).

Given the circumstances, this article aims to understand the process of partnership between means of accommodation in the luxury segment with digital influencers. To

elucidate this issue, data collection was carried out through a form sent to employees of the marketing sector of 4 luxury hotels located in the state of Rio de Janeiro. It should be noted that companies have been using the notoriety of people who have prominence on social networks to promote their companies. Taking into account that this practice becomes more common day after day, it was observed the need to carry out research seeking to understand the processes and strategies created by the means of accommodation together with the figure of digital influencers.

To operationalize the research, the qualitative methodology was used. For the collection of information, the survey technique was used. According to Johnson and Christensen (2021), surveys are widely used to collect data on the opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of a specific group, with the aim of understanding their characteristics and patterns. This type of investigation allows the researcher to seek information directly from the researched public, that is, the direct analysis of where the phenomenon occurs (PIANA, 2009).

However, it should be mentioned that in the recent past, with technologies still in their wake, it was not common to obtain customer opinions in the after-sales process. However, currently the experiences lived, especially in the luxury hotel segment, are shared with the enterprise, which makes the relationship marketing process more intimate, also understanding that the emergence of web 2⁵ and the *boom of influencers* contributed considerably to this construction of advertising called electronic word-of-mouth (MESTRE, 2018)

Taking into account these peculiarities, an online form was developed through the Google Forms platform, and the link to access the survey was shared through WhatsApp to contacts of people known who work in luxury hotels and passed it on to professionals in the Marketing sector of these means of accommodation. Regarding the selection of people to be interviewed, the approach used was a brief survey of these professionals through the social network LinkedIn.

In relation to qualitative research, according to Flick (2004), it allows it to be based on different types of theoretical approaches and different lines of thought, allowing the reflections, observations, impressions and feelings of the researcher to be transformed into

⁵ O'Reilly (2005) points out that Web 2.0 design is based on concepts that involve the architecture of participation and different network effects, and these attributes encourage collaboration and the addition of value judgments by the users themselves.

data and constitute part of the interpretation. In this way, the *online* questionnaire was prepared, containing a total of 17 questions, in which long and multiple-choice questions were mixed, so that they could answer how the partnership process of these luxury hotels with digital influencers is operationalized.

THE HOTEL INDUSTRY AND THE LUXURY SEGMENT

The tourist activity contemplates its practitioners with the most diverse possibilities and typologies, as long as it offers infrastructure for it. One of its pillars is the alternatives for accommodation or overnight stay, which can also take on various characteristics. Thus, according to Camarço (2018), lodging is considered an enterprise that aims to provide accommodation services offered in individual environments and for the exclusive use of the customer, called a guest. However, according to the observation of Malhotra and Birks (2020), research indicates that many individuals view a hotel as a building intended for the temporary accommodation of travelers, often perceiving it as an apartment structure. Perhaps, considering it in a narrower sense, this definition is correct. However, today's guest has several accommodation options at their disposal, which makes this definition limited. The services cited, in turn, qualify the meaning of hospitality, which according to Camargo (2004, p. 52), is defined as the "human act, exercised in a domestic, public and professional context, of receiving, hosting, feeding and entertaining people temporarily displaced from their natural habitat". Therefore, hospitality is the warmth of being welcomed by the host that provides the satisfaction and comfort of being in that environment.

Taking into account the function of satisfying people's need for rest, combined with food, privacy and tranquility, Oliveira and Spina conceptualize means of lodging as being "commercial establishments in the reception and service sector, which provide goods and services for payment of a daily rate or variable price, according to the quality of the equipment, goods and services contracted" (2012, p.41). However, this concept is not static, as it evolves according to demand. In this context, Oliveira (2009) mentions that the lodging sector, mainly because it involves people, is made up of such diversified enterprises that it is no longer possible to establish a single definition. After all, offering basic services to welcome and food the traveler was the beginning of the hotel industry. However, according to the same author, hosting is still a provision of services, but for certain segments, it can no longer be said that they are only basic services.

From the hundred years of development of the hotel sector, several categories, types and sizes of accommodation facilities have emerged all over the world. The industry was also influenced by the emergence of commercial airplanes and their airlines, thus having the so-called globalization. In this way, hotel chains expanded around the world with the construction of hotels and a new management format.

According to the perception of Moraes and Rosa (2016), with the constant and inevitable technological advances, especially with regard to information, tourists or guests are increasingly demanding, well-informed and autonomous, in constant search for remarkable experiences, as well as the fulfillment of desires and dreams, directly valuing knowledge and culture.

In addition, Aldrigui (2007) points out that, in a context of equal products, it is in the quality of service provision that differentiation is made. Castelli (2003), in turn, expresses that service companies, such as the hotel industry, must fundamentally bet on the quality of the human element, since the excellence of the service becomes an essential condition for the competitiveness and survival of the company, as it depends directly on how this human element is relating to customers.

In view of this evolution, D'angelo (2006) indicates that the origin of luxury arose through the separation of classes, bringing new paradigms of wealth, such as the ways of living, traveling, having fun and dressing, directing many people to displays of wealth or ostentation. Over the years, the use of luxury began to be related as a tool for the demonstration of social differentiation.

Regarding hotel developments, they currently provide services in addition to accommodation, such as *spas*, themed bars, restaurants, laundry, among others. Furthermore, the emergence of luxury hotels in the world took place through the advances of industries, since during the eleventh and fourteenth centuries traditional inns began to adapt with the expansion of the international market and the changes in social conditions. Thus, the first hotel brands and the profession of hotelier emerge (SILVA; SPOLON, 2011). Also according to the authors, the new travel trends emerged during the contemporary age, during the industrial revolution, having characteristics motivated by leisure.

The industrial revolution, the expansion of international markets, technological development and communications, inaugurated a period in which travel occupied a prominent position – tourism is still elite – victimized by wars, the crisis of the 1920s and the Spanish Civil War, but which has already established itself as a phenomenon. (SILVA; SPOLON, 2011, p. 15).

The emergence of luxury in the field of tourism renewed the needs of tourists who now demanded authenticity, privacy, quality and refinement. The exclusivity of the experiences and customizations brought by the sector has grown nationally and internationally. In this way, the hotel sector needed to renew itself due to the growing existence of luxury in hotels by offering differentiated services, such as exquisite restaurants, concierge and stewardship services, as well as aesthetic and treatment centers, all within the lodging environment.

Following this same line of thought, Pine and Gilmore (1999) highlight that the main proposal of luxury hotels is to create memorable experiences that connect emotionally with guests, offering personalized services that meet not only their needs, but also their highest expectations. These experiences go beyond the product itself, focusing on creating unique moments that can impress and build customer loyalty. And as Neto (2015) indicates, luxury hotels are part of a segment of consumer and luxury tourism and there are some aspects that can define this type of lodging medium, such as personalization, exclusivity, surprise in relation to expectations, tourist cultures, among others.

By taking into account this scenario, Crotti and Moretti (2019) assert that consumers, specifically in the luxury market, seek goods and services that refer them to memorable experiences, as well as have an impact on their emotions, since people relate luxury hospitality to the possibilities of differentiation, ostentation, and rare experiences.

Leal (2011) complements this reasoning by indicating that, in addition to the physical product, a luxury hotel should distinguish itself mainly by the quality and excellence of its services, providing luxurious details in its furniture, such as gold handles, offering baths with differentiated products, caviar masks for the skin, gourmet cooking classes, among many other possible extravagances.

On the other hand, Chu (2014) infers that a hotel cannot be considered luxury only for the *amenities*, the exposed decoration, but that it must also be analyzed for the emotional and experiential aspects of the guest. After all, as Harvey (2008) observes, it must be borne in mind that society undergoes constant transformations, organizing itself more and more in search of new spaces as a form of survival, determined mainly by new activities arising from technological advances, as well as by market specialization.

In other words, it is by seeking to continuously improve that the expectations, both of customers and service providers, materialize in moments that will be remembered and shared, creating more opportunities for better services. This is because, according to

Dourado *et al* (2016), "lodging facilities must offer structures and services that meet, or even exceed, the expectations of their customers in order to attract them and, preferably, retain them" (p.125). And lodging facilities that promise luxury should excel in these aspects. In this way, the use of information tools is vital for the development of lodging facilities, especially those in which competition is fiercer, such as luxury hotels.

INFLUENCER MARKETING IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY

In view of the accelerated process of modernization and communication of services, especially in the post-pandemic hotel industry, it becomes unacceptable, according to studies by Lovelock and Wirtz (2016) the maintenance of high standards of service is essential to ensure customer satisfaction and loyalty, since the consistent quality of service has a direct impact on consumer perceptions and future experiences. And as Kotler and Keller (2023) warn, really smart companies constantly measure the satisfaction of their customers, as this is the secret to retaining them, building their loyalty.

In this context, Hayes and Ninemeier (2005) observe that, normally, the means of lodging that are successful in this regard conquer a considerable share of the market. However, the authors also point out that this becomes progressively more difficult with increasing competition. This is due to the fact that professionals in the field, especially those in management positions, need to be aware that marketing issues can affect them. In this regard, Campos (2005) comments that competence consists of a complete and complex process, which includes factors such as knowledge, skills, attitudes, time and, mainly, sensitivity to solve situations, as well as a good understanding of what individual and group excellence should be at work.

In addition, it is noted that traveling has become synonymous with success on social networks. Therefore, companies need to make the most of this scenario to attract customers and further boost their sales. Taking into account this peculiarity, Cândido (2001, p.317) mentions that "knowledge of digital form is fundamental for any company, especially for hotels that wish to remain in the market operated competitively and profitably".

Furthermore, Beni (2003) highlights a unique distinction of the hotel sector, which in addition to having the basic function of lodging, has a characteristic that no other commercial establishment has, which is the fact that the consumer travels to the hotel to be able to use its services and not the product reaches the customer. This fact is extremely

important for understanding the reason why the contract of a means of accommodation with a digital influencer becomes totally different from other companies.

The use of digital influencers has stood out in tourism, especially as a strategy to improve customer relationships and increase brand visibility. Social networks, such as Instagram and YouTube, are widely used platforms for influencer marketing campaigns, where influencers promote real hosting experiences, generating greater engagement and trust from the public (Gonçalves, 2022).

However, for a digital influencer to partner with a means of accommodation, it is necessary to travel it, since he needs to experience and have the experience of a guest to be able to pass on to his followers a faithful *feedback* of reality. In this way, this professional will be able to make a truthful report of the indication of the enterprise, as he will have gone through all the experience that the person who is interested in going to the hotel will experience.

In addition, the internet has expanded the possibilities of research, making information easy to access for everyone, and this is the means of communication that the vast majority of tourists are looking for when choosing their next destination. In other words, using the digital platform strategically is essential to survive today, as it is necessary to facilitate the search for information through the media and make your brand stand out from others. And one of the strategies to achieve this prominence is through the digital influencer. According to Zeithaml, Bitner, and Gremler (2018), service quality is not only a matter of meeting customer expectations but also of exceeding them, which is crucial for maintaining a competitive edge and ensuring long-term customer loyalty.

Vieira (2016, s.p), in turn, defines *Influencer Marketing* as "the way in which companies reward celebrities and social media stars to create content in favor of brands, generating endorsement – and thus influencing people". Silva and Tessarolo (2017), in turn, reinforce that the digital influencer has the ability to reach a high number of followers and achieves this feat by standing out on social networks, by the opinion they emit, their behaviors and by creating exclusive content for the people who follow them.

Because they are often exposing their lifestyle, people seek out influencers to give opinions on subjects that they have already mastered or have been through, conveying confidence to those who are watching. In view of these characteristics, Eric Messa, coordinator of the Center for Innovation in Digital Media at FAAP, states that:

The fact is that every digital influencer is still an opinion leader, but I would like to reserve this new term to highlight certain people who deserve more attention from those who work with communication. I think that digital influencer is a term that would fit better to identify those people who are part of a very specific niche and, within this group, have a higher volume of connections than the average of people who belong to that niche (MESSA, 2016, s.p).

However, the internet has become more explored by its users, becoming a place with an excess of information. Given this, the strategies could no longer be the same as in the past, such as creating a travel blog or just having a website about the company, as these media are no longer enough for the public. The search for information is also more extensive and having someone that the consumer accompanies (even if virtually) their daily lives gives greater credibility to reach the final stage of the sale. Therefore, companies are betting on partnerships with an *Influencer Marketing* to talk about their brand, services, benefits, among others.

With regard to luxury hospitality, the application of relationship marketing, and its different strategies, becomes indispensable, as they use personalization as one of the main factors to provide service, especially when taking into account the various points of contact between employees and guests during their stay (Baloglu and Bai, 2021).

Thus, in the face of such a demanding market, it is necessary to pay attention to an essential element highlighted by Araújo, Oliveira and Cunha (2024), when they inform that the service provided by employees of luxury developments must be carried out through principles of quality and hospitality, since, according to them, it is from these precepts that the possibility of customer loyalty is enhanced.

RESULTS OBTAINED

It is notorious that companies are using social media for self-promotion and the digital influencer is one of the bridges that bring the consumer closer to the brand. However, this relationship needs to be studied, as there are several factors to be analyzed before forming a partnership between the influencer and the organization. In this way, through the survey method, it was possible to understand how this analysis is done and how companies decide which influencer is compatible with the means of accommodation. The survey reached respondents from the Marketing sector of 4 luxury hotels in the state of Rio de Janeiro, in which the identity and position of the respondents were kept confidential, as well as the hotels, preserving their identities.

The data obtained demonstrated a characteristic that is of paramount importance for the marketing professional of the means of accommodation, which is to always be aware of new trends. In other words, being aware of what is constantly happening is essential to build assertive communication for the company. In this sense, Kotler and Keller (2023) reaffirm that marketing management remains focused on influencing demand, whether at level, speed, or composition, as marketers need to balance strategies to meet changing consumer expectations and market conditions, promoting value for customers while managing long-term relationships.

It should be noted that demand cannot be considered only an economic factor, but a strategic element for sustainable business growth. Therefore, the strategy of using the digital influencer is on the rise, as such a union allows you to use the trends of the current world with a faster delivery of the service.

Thus, when respondents were asked if the hotel usually partners with digital influencers, the answer was 100% yes. As a result of the positive response, it was asked how the first contact is made to start the partnership process with the influencer. Thus, 3 of the 4 responses stated that, most of the time, the influencer himself or his agents look for the means of hosting and make a proposal, which can arrive through email, Instagram messages or even WhatsApp. The other respondent stated that, before starting the contact, an analysis of the influencer's profile is made and, if they are interested, the first contact is made from the company, inviting him to a partnership.

It should be noted that, to be a digital influencer, it is not enough to just create any type of content on social networks. Therefore, the influencer has a specific niche, which will define the central theme addressed in his profile. The name given to this practice is market niche and, for better understanding, niche is a small portion of a segment (MOREIRA, 2018). For example, in the hotel industry, the luxury segment is a niche and has a different type of consumer than those who frequent a hostel. The survey pointed out that all respondents confirmed this practice when asked if influencers who work with specific niches are sought. As for the main niches commented, these were people who talk about tourism and travel, leisure, families and children.

Also according to the respondents, Instagram is the main social network for attracting influencers, since they all answered that it is there that they know and research about the digital influencer. Another way to assess whether the influencer is compatible with the culture of the accommodation medium is through the "*media kit*". According to the blog

4YouSee (2016), "*media kit*" is a digital document that media outlets create and make available to their advertisers and interested parties in order to demonstrate some important information, which will serve so that they can plan their advertising campaigns, understand what types of ads they can make available in the vehicle and have a cost estimate for the campaign they want to promote.

It was observed that this practice was adapted by digital influencers so that, when sending their partnership proposal to companies, this document (*media kit*) is attached, informing about the influencer's trajectory, the number of followers on social networks, their target audience, among other relevant information. And when the responding hotels were asked if they request the *media kit* for the influencer, the answer "yes" was unanimous.

In this regard, according to respondent A's answer, obtaining the *media kit* of a digital influencer is relevant to know if the number of followers that the influencer has on social networks is compatible with the engagement he receives in the content he creates. Respondent B, in turn, highlighted that through the *media kit* it is possible to justify the cost of the stay, along with the results they expect to have, by partnering with the influencer. For respondent C, an important factor to have in this document is the age of the audience that accompanies him, as well as the location. And, finally, respondent D emphasizes the importance of knowing the audience that the influencer reaches in order to outline a strategy that yields conversion in new guests for the lodging environment.

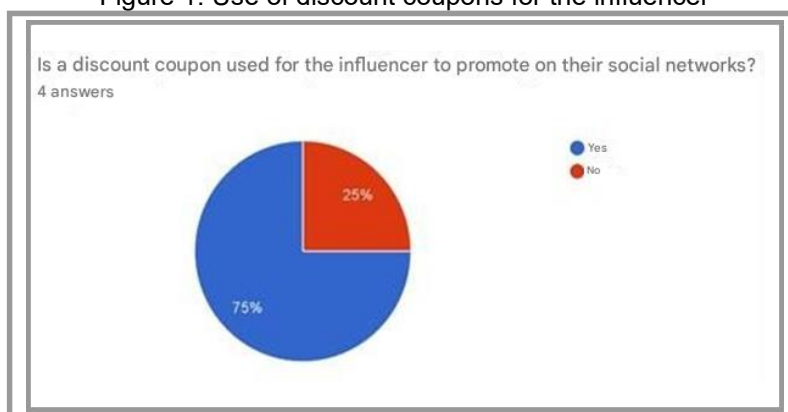
After analyzing the influencer's profile and, if he is considered compatible with the criteria required by the hotel, there is the moment to close the partnership. For this, it is necessary to make a formal contract, signed by both parties. All respondents stated that they perform this act, adding that, within this contract, the influencer's hosting is foreseen. It is important to note that during the influencer's stay, it is the Marketing professional who is responsible for monitoring the counterparts agreed upon in the contract.

Regarding this accommodation, it is in advance that the Marketing professional needs to inform the other sectors of the hotel about the arrival of the influencer. In this way, respondent A mentions that the hotel chain has a direct means of communication for *the Front Office, Royal Service, Security* and other sectors. Respondent B mentions that he makes requests for pampering to the *Guest Relations sector* and specific demands are available. Respondent C says that there are daily meetings with managers from each sector and they are responsible for passing the information to their team and speeding up what is needed for the influencer's arrival. And respondent D says that, at the time of booking, he is

notified that he is an influencer and, sometimes, a category upgrade is granted or he is awarded a special treat.

To further attract the consumer who is following the influencer and the comments about the means of accommodation, some companies release a special discount coupon for the followers of that professional. This is a form of promotion in which a value or percentage is deducted from the total price of a product or service (PAN, 2021). In the case of influencers, it is used as a code with the influencer's name, for example "INFLUENCIADOR22" and when the consumer is at the final moment of purchase, there is a space where it is possible to enter this code, thus receiving a discount on the total amount. In this sense, when the respondents were asked if they use the discount coupon as a strategy, most answered positively, as can be seen in figure 1 below.

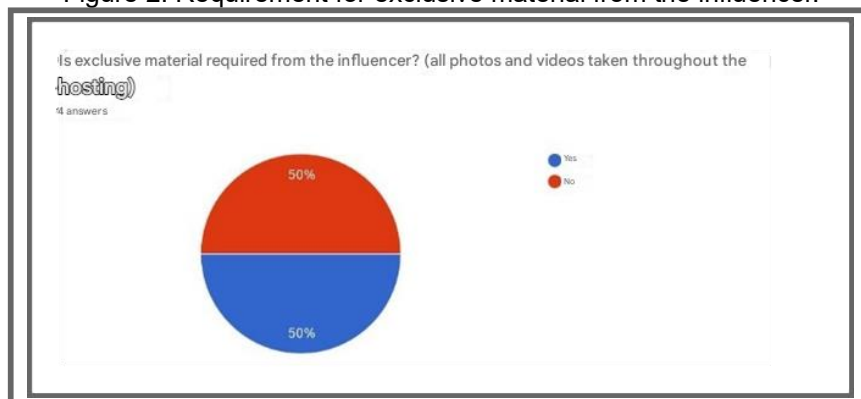
Figure 1: Use of discount coupons for the influencer



Source: Survey data

In addition, for the respondents who checked the option "Yes" was asked about the way in which the results of the discount coupon that the digital influencer disclosed are analyzed. Most respondents stated that the analysis of the discount coupon used by the influencer is done by the Marketing team itself, together with the *Revenue Management* (RM) area, which obtains the information through a system that shows the statistics achieved during the influencer's stay. Furthermore, it should be noted that one of the main functions assigned to the influencer is the capture of several photos and video recordings of the accommodation medium for their promotion. However, it is observed from the data collected that only half of the respondents stated that they enjoy the exclusive material that the influencer produces during their stay in the accommodation environment, as can be seen in figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Requirement for exclusive material from the influencer.



Source: Survey data.

As for the follow-up of the influencer after the stay, most respondents stated that they make contact by WhatsApp or email, in addition to mentioning that, in case of success in the partnership, they seek to keep in touch for future work.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data collected and the bibliography consulted, it can be seen that the luxury segment seeks to satisfy its guests by offering services that go beyond the consumer experience. After all, as can be seen in the various works consulted, having a target audience with high purchasing power and expectations requires using strategies that go beyond the beauty of the territorial space. In this way, hotels in the luxury category need to demonstrate a *status* of refinement and exclusivity, attributes that are contained in the imagination of guests, combined with exceptional hospitality and a high quality in the provision of their services.

As the bibliography consulted reveals, luxury hotels are not only means of lodging that practice high-value rates and, at the same time, have stunning structures, since their guests carry with them high expectations, which include elements such as personalization, memorable experiences and even ostentation, often acquired through the performance of professionals who seek to achieve exactly this goal, which are the *influencers*!

In addition, partnerships with digital influencers in this category of hotel development, which usually demand superior quality from both their professionals and their structures, need to be carried out accurately and thoroughly so as not to misrepresent the image of the lodging environment.

On the other hand, it can be inferred, through the analysis of the data collected from the luxury hotels surveyed, that some procedures have already become routine and

practiced unanimously, such as closing partnerships with digital influencers, in addition to constituting a formal contract. Some operations, on the other hand, still have different decision-making, such as the discount coupon and the requirement of exclusive material from influencers.

In view of the above and taking into account the answers obtained in the survey, it can be inferred that the Marketing sector of the Luxury Hotel segment in the state of Rio de Janeiro is aware of new trends and that they are looking for influencers who complement the profile of the lodging environment through an analysis of these professionals, the public that follows them, the engagement demonstrated in other works carried out, as well as its relevance.

It was also noticed the extreme caution adopted by the marketing sector in all the procedures adopted so that the experience with the influencer can be the best possible, in addition to using methods and procedures to convert the influencer's followers into future guests, which is the great motivation behind this whole process. It was also possible to see the vision that marketing professionals have about this new professional activity, how the company is taking advantage of this new promotion format and what precautions were taken to certify that the partnership was efficient and brought results.

Therefore, it is concluded that this new form of communication can still be further explored. To this end, it is necessary to develop more discussions and research on the subject, addressing other segments of the hotel industry, such as inns, hostels, in addition to following the evolution in the luxury accommodation segment due to its high added value. After all, we are facing an increasingly connected era, with a strong presence in digital and social media.

This new reality fosters the constant and effective both of the marketing sector and the professionalization of digital influencers, consolidating them as a powerful tool for enterprises that require superior quality in the provision of services, combined with hospitality and hospitality. Such investments, made in luxury lodging facilities, can contribute to achieving the desired success, as well as the loyalty of their guests, especially when they issue positive comments on their social networks.

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