

# Hygiene orientation: transformation of the hospitality business post covid-19 and a case study from an emerging economy

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**Abstract:** *Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic caused fear among customers and affected normal life around the globe due to prolonged lockdown. It has disrupted the entire ecosystem of the hospitality industry and also has significant impact on worldwide tourism and hospitality services. Hospitality service providers are trying to attract customers and influence their perceptions by highlighting different safety and hygiene related factors. The hospitality industry needs to focus on a strong positive image of safety and hygiene in the customers' minds and cultivate hospitality service expectations by reducing fear and adversities of COVID19. In this article, we introduce the concept of cleanliness orientation, a construct that has become highly relevant in the hospitality industry. We construct cleanliness orientation around three constructs namely cleanliness, hygiene and safety. We then describe this orientation with respect to a case study on 'WeAssure' initiative of ITC Hotels group during the lockdown situation.*

**Keywords:** *hospitality services, safety and hygiene, cleanliness orientation, Coronavirus pandemic, use of disinfectant,*

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## I. Introduction

The concern about the safety from infection and poor hygiene conditions of the hospitality service during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has arisen among consumers. Issues related to safety due to the pandemic is not only a concern among developing country consumers like Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS countries) but also among the developed ones like the United States of America and the European countries as well. Hospitality and tourism are the main sources of national income in many European countries that have high per-capita income. Coronavirus disease, caused by the Coronavirus is contagious, causing mild to moderate respiratory illnesses in medically healthy individuals to serious illnesses, even leading to death, in older people and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, chronic respiratory diseases, and cancer. This has generated very high psychological instabilities among people around the globe, primarily in the developed countries as well as in emerging economies.

Several reports and initial researches substantiate the effect of the pandemic on the hospitality industry. These authors have opined that the hospitality industry has been experiencing a sudden recession due to prolonged lockdown and customer's fear of infection (Kaushal, & Srivastava 2020). Decisions have been taken to shut down hotels, restaurants, theme parks and cinemas. It has disrupted the entire ecosystem of the hospitality industry, and all these have had a significant impact on worldwide tourism and hospitality services. (3) "In the third week of March 2020, at an all-India level, the hotels sector witnessed a decline of more than 65 per cent in occupancy levels as compared to the same period of the previous year," according to global real estate consultant JLL. (6) According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, the COVID-19 pandemic could cut 50 million jobs globally in the travel and tourism industry. The virus is hitting organizations hard across the globe. It would take almost 10 months for the hospitality sector to revive from the damages caused by the pandemic. (7)

Human interaction embodies the core of the hospitality industry. Thus, companies seek to create unique and personalised experiences by creating human interaction centric memorabilia by addressing the needs and wants of contemporary consumers who are looking for something novel. While the importance of experiences in the hospitality sector is unquestioned, the understanding of how to deliver personalised experiences during the pandemic is virtually absent in hospitality literature. The biggest challenge that the Coronavirus has created in the psyche of hospitality consumers is that they don't know what may be the effect if they return to their previous ways of experiencing hospitality services during the pandemic or after the pandemic. Such uncertainties induce a lot of fear, anxiety, frustration and anger. Consumers are living through a communal change, and although restrictions on the hospitality sector may be lifted, there will be remnants of the trauma, the panic, the heartache and the emotional pain. The hospitality industry has been one of the most affected industries during this crisis so far. (4)

Based on this rationale, this paper aims to explore how hospitality companies can develop and implement strategies to create high-end personalised guest experiences during and after the pandemic. Following a single case study approach, this paper contributes by developing a process model, proposing technology as a platform of co-creation. A two-fold information and experience flow are introduced between companies and consumers throughout multiple experience touch points. This exploratory study suggests high-tech as a critical factor in the co-creation and facilitation of high-touch experiences.

Though the pandemic also had negative effects on the food manufacturing industry, reports corroborate that food-borne illnesses in the food industry are yet to recede. While the threats occurred due to COVID-19 in the food manufacturing industry, food borne illness incidents in the foodservice industry have been reported yet to recede (Bas et al., 2006; Kramer and Scott, 2004; Morrison et al., 1998; Motarjemi et al., 1996).

### **Theoretical illustration**

Decisions related to hospitality service purchases like visiting a restaurant or staying in a hotel post Covid-19 would be made under uncertainties because after the pandemic decisions of customers would be based on incomplete information. Established chains as well as standalone hotels and restaurants have distinct consumer perceptions about their brands. Restaurants and destinations compete on their perceptions of their brands and locations. The hospitality industry has never experienced such a sudden recession impact on all its critical performance factors. This pandemic generates deep fear and confusion, and threatens consumers in an intensely emotional way. Since COVID-19 is increasingly proliferating across the whole world, the primary focus of hospitality businesses would be the safety of their customers along with the safety of their own people (19). Hence, during this pandemic, hospitality service providers will try to attract customers and influence their perceptions by highlighting different safety and hygiene related factors through their marketing communication and promotions. Restaurants would try to promote themselves in such a way that would induce a strong positive image of safety and hygiene in the customers' minds and cultivate hospitality service expectations by reducing fear and adversities. Today, owing to the pandemic, the global situation in tourism and hospitality has been wedged by challenges, primarily the European countries and the south Asian countries that earn a high percentage of their GDP from tourism (18). Researchers have opined that it is imperative for the hospitality industry to revive through solidarity, innovation, and resilience (19). It needs to start recovering soon since travel is one of the most essential components of hospitality services. (4) Researchers have also opined that integrated communication needs to take the lead role in reaching out to the customers in a placid and proactive manner and restore confidence in the customers in their decisions to start patronising hospitality services again in a safe condition. Hence, promoting hospitality business should be done in a positive manner where safety and hygiene benefits of the customers need to be highlighted (20). The customers, once they arrive at the purchase/consumption point of hospitality services, need to be treated emotionally and sensitively so that their inhibitions are reduced. [3]

### **Effects of Covid-19 on hospitality service**

The pandemic has knocked many aspects of the hospitality business at large. Despite the technological advancements implemented in the hospitality business, the industry fraternity or the governments did not have an immediate response to manage the pandemic. The Covid-19 outcome reminds the researchers and industry experts how essential it is to conserve customers' trust and secure their confidence so that they start patronizing and continue to do so in the future. This needs to be done through safety and hygiene resources, which at present are the main elements in the hospitality industry. Hence, it is very urgent to establish global strategies for the implementation and preservation of safety and hygiene patrimony, considering these as the main source for sustainable development in the hospitality industry after Covid-19. (4)

At the same time, researchers have opined that, the efficiency of current work models will have to be re-evaluated and, employee safety and well-being need to be treated with utmost priority [3]. Scholars have recognized that the safety measures practised by hotels and restaurants for their employees are key to the

formation of the customers' image of the safety and hygiene practices of the hotels or restaurants. And, this has a major influence on their emotions, motivation and decision to support hospitality service (Yuksel and Yuksel 2007).

Hence, the hospitality industry needs to focus on optimising work safety utilization in various operations and prioritising in the areas which affect the hotels more. There should be a reasonable balance between hygiene alertness, reinforcement of the safety measures and guest managing priorities, employee's safety and others. Scenarios could emerge wherein cash strapped stand-alone hotels are acquired, yet hotels which have a strong and possibly unique guest facing scheme will survive. There could be a reshuffle to maximise work allocation and optimise resource costs. (5)

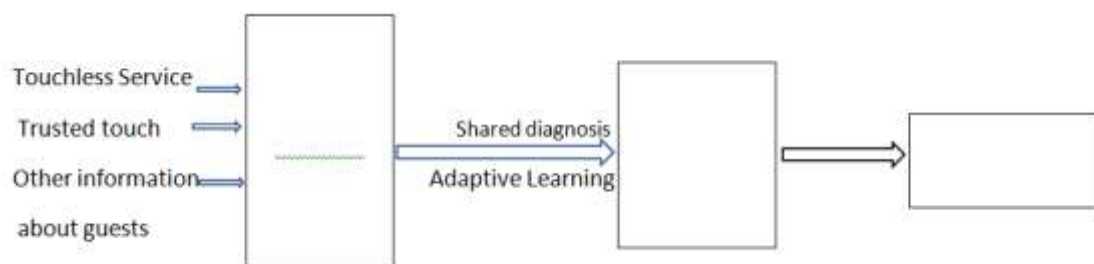
### **The recovery measures:**

The pandemic has impaired the entire hospitality industry to a great extent and hospitality service delivery would walk into a new era in the post-pandemic world. The hospitality industry needs to adapt a new approach towards its customers. Innovations in hospitality service delivery need to be developed seeking the benefit of the customers and focusing on the perceived safety and hygiene concerns that give emotional retreats. [3] The relationship between each brand and the consumers begins with building trust; similarly regaining customer confidence after the pandemic will be the first step in overcoming the Covid-19 crisis. Hospitality service providers need to take stringent sanitary and hygiene measures to retrieve the customers' confidence, with new practices to monitor and control the environment in which the business takes place. (3)

### **Operational impact and improvement - Hygiene Orientation**

Various prerequisites of hygiene orientation necessitate understanding the customers through systematic information gathering, creating alternative hygiene practices that give perceived safety to the customers. Again, it is imperative to cultivate an organizational culture that can successfully satisfy the safety and hygiene needs of the hospitality service consumers. This is the time for hospitality service providers to understand and consider altering the designs of service delivery and guesting activities that will increase guest satisfaction and at the same time help reduce other overheads like energy and water consumption and reduce food waste. In addition, these are times when the hospitality industry should invest in niche markets, and discover innovative ways to endorse the identity of each hygiene related activities they perform in the establishments. (4) These can be done by minimizing all discretionary operational and capital expenditure.

Reconsidering or postponing maintenance and other capital expenditure where possible to conserve cash, initiating an advanced revenue management system and pricing models that would respond to market developments quickly (2), and reducing fixed costs and examining all possible ways to survive in the current crisis are strategies that need to be adopted. (4)



**Figure 1 - Hygiene Orientation**

Research indicates that a safety and hygiene-oriented culture may provide a solid foundation for intra structural assessments which will help to diagnose the traditional status quo of the hospitality industry and then adapting and intervening changes for superior value-creating capabilities. A business is hygiene-oriented when the culture of the company is systematically and entirely committed to the continuous creation and implementation of superior safety and hygiene for its customers. That quality of hygiene orientation can be introduced by touchless services, and by trusted touch where it is indispensable and also by collecting and coordinating information on what is the latest state of perception of customers in terms of their need for safety and hygiene. Competitors' approach towards current needs, employee's hygiene protocols and other significant market influencers which can also be considered in building hygiene orientation.

To achieve sustainable performance post Covid-19, a hospitality service providing organization needs to develop and sustain competitive advantage more by safety and hygiene and less by quality and other utilitarian attributes. This is owing to a paradigm shift from the earlier competitive advantage that was based on structural characteristics such as quality, market power, economies of scale, or a broad product line, to

capabilities that enable a hospitality business to consistently deliver safety and hygiene value to its customers. This, after all, is going to be the meaning of competitive advantage post Covid-19.

### **Cleanliness Orientation**

The core of hygiene orientation is the focus on cleanliness. To create value for customers, hospitality companies continuously need to understand perceived value consumers get from the cleanliness of the environment where hospitality services are being created, served and consumed, not only during the pandemic, but also as it evolves over time. Consumers' value from cleanliness can be created at any point in the function by making the buyer perceive that the company is more oriented towards cleanliness in its service operations. A cleanliness-oriented hospitality business needs to understand the cost as well as the short- and long-term return dynamics not only of its immediate consumers but also of its entire target market as the demand in the prospective markets post pandemic would be derived from the demand in the immediate market. Therefore, a hygiene-driven hospitality business needs to develop a comprehensive understanding of its customers' safety and hygiene perceptions and analyse how customers in the immediate and future markets perceive value. Employees of hygiene-oriented hospitality companies need to spend considerable time with their customers. Managers and employees throughout the business may call on their customers in a constant search for new ways to satisfy their cleanliness needs.

To maintain the relationships that are critical to delivering superior cleanliness value, companies need to pay close attention to highly clean service delivery, both before and during sales and consumption. The role of employees being important in this effort, hospitality companies need to take great care to recruit and retain the best people available during the pandemic as well as post it and provide them with regular trainings. Companies may even involve their customers in developing cleanliness and hygiene protocols as well as involve them in making motivation and reward system decisions for maintenance of cleanliness orientation. Involving customers and employees in these key areas forges strong customer and employee loyalty.

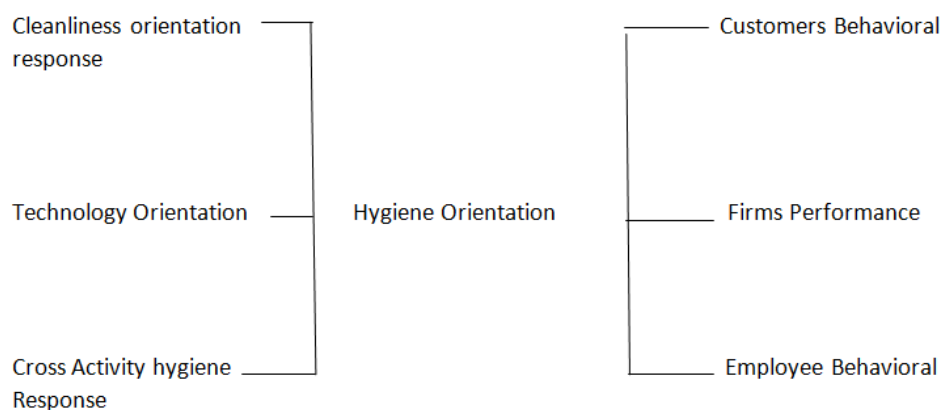
### **Focus on dis-infection**

Creating customer value during as well as after the pandemic requires more than just focusing on cleanliness. The key questions are what type and style of disinfectant mechanism, and what process of implementation would make target customers perceive the hospitality company as hygiene oriented. Value creation during the pandemic requires that the seller identify and understand the principle of customer's short-term benefits and preferences in terms of safety from infection as well as long-term difficulties and inhibitions they may accrue as the virus poses threat of infection even after two to four weeks from the date one is infected by that.

A hospitality company also needs to adopt a holistic and competitive perspective of its current and principal potential competitors' hygiene management. For example, a team of Marriott employees travelled the country for six months, staying in economy hotels and collecting information about their facilities and services. Armed with this information about potential competitors' strengths and weaknesses, Marriott invested \$500 million in the Fairfield Inn, its budget entry, achieving an occupancy rate 10 points higher than the industry average in one year. Hence, the hospitality industry need to continuously examine the competitive threats it pose in terms of value-creation capabilities related to this pandemic. This is crucial information for a hospitality company in developing its contingency competitive hygiene orientation strategies.

### **Cross-activity hygiene coordination**

The third component of hygiene orientation of hospitality companies is the coordination of personnel and hygiene related capabilities from throughout the company to create value for customers. Any point in the customer's value perception is an opportunity for the company to create value for the customer. This means that any individual in any function in a hospitality company can potentially contribute to hygiene value creation. To accomplish this, an effective hospitality company has to focus on building value for the consumers. Such companies need to manage the resources and capabilities to address the pandemic through small multifunctional teams that can move more quickly and easily than businesses that use the traditional function-by-function, sequential approach. For example, cross-functional teams call on customers to identify additional opportunities for value creation through cleanliness and disinfection activities. Preliminary market research is essential to help hospitality companies understand what type of hygiene capability is expected by the customers and what is feasible to deliver. The team needs to get involved during the planning of cleanliness and disinfection activities to ensure that the service can be delivered at a reasonable cost and with high perceived value. Executing teams need to constantly discuss their capabilities and limitations with the higher management in order to leverage capabilities and avoid limitations when promoting hospitality services. All functions contributing to creating customer value in this way will ensure more creativity in hygiene and other value additions that can increase effectiveness and efficiency for the customers.



**Figure 2: Antecedents & Consequences of hygiene Orientation**

Hence, from above discussion the major components of hygiene orientation are cleanliness orientation, dis-infection focus, technology orientation and cross-activity hygiene coordination. Experiences of various hygiene orientation have extensive consequences on both customer and employee behaviours and responses and it affects industry's performances also. Hygiene orientation provides a unifying focus for the efforts of the companies towards hygiene and projects individual activities, thereby leading to a performance that would reduce adversity and fear from the minds of the customers. There exists a strong relation between better cleanliness and higher hygiene perception in hospitality service consumers.

Hence, organizations need to focus on their employees and customers and be aware of the expectations that they have about the impact on cleanliness. Thus, managers of the hospitality business have a very crucial role to play. This includes,

**For managers:**

- Managers should talk to their team members and customers to manage expectations and maintain faith and confidence.
- The companies should also focus on human resource, talent and communication to provide clarity to the people, and on maintaining engagement and in boosting morale during this difficult time.
- The companies need to offer the guests different options for cancellation to retain the customer in the long-term.
- Covid-19 being a dynamic and fast-moving pandemic, the industry should ensure that they keep abreast of changes to the prevalent situations and the impacts that they will have. Companies need to be prepared to quickly respond to the changes outside of the ongoing operating and business processes.
- A separate governance structure needs to be set up to allow swift decision making, communicating and implementing. Downtime during the pandemic needs to be utilised to re-evaluate the business, to analyse whether the present employees require training and development, whether to produce new products, or to become more flexible and to look for new opportunities. [2]

**Future strategy:**

Under such circumstances, the hospitality companies need to strictly adhere to the advice of the public health authorities and need to adopt safety initiatives including the following (5):

- Social distancing is the key measure to be taken by the establishments to stem the spread of coronavirus. Restricted number of people should be present at the time of check-in. There should be minimal physical contact while maintaining highest standards of service. Room services should be provided with disposable meal trays. Separate laundry washings need to be provided for individual rooms and deep cleaning and sanitization of guest rooms should be mandatory both in the morning as well as in the evening and, also whenever the guest's desire.
- The hygiene-oriented hospitality companies need to maximise emotional exchange while minimising touch points with their guests. Guests need to feel secure in terms of cleanliness. At the same time companies would need to offer certain critical services that are crucial at this time. This could be, for instance, extra bandwidth for no additional charges to stay connected with work and family even more than ever. Senior hotel managers would need to be more entrepreneurial to attract new business from existing customers as well as new customers. While doing so, cost management will be a key area of quicker recovery and success. There needs to be rigorous measures of cost mitigation on the one hand and yet again, maximising relevant and distinguished services, on the other, to attract guests. (5)

Hygiene oriented hospitality companies need to prepare their employees and organizational systems well enough to be able to adapt to the new norms and expectations of their guests. If required, they need to upgrade their systems & processes. Despite the presence of supporting resources, hygiene-oriented hospitality companies need to implement automation and high-end technology in areas such as housekeeping, preparation of food, check ins/outs, keyless accessibility of rooms and entertainment, amongst others. The team members need to be imparted multi-skills trainings and also upgrade their skill sets to make them compatible to the present requirements. These companies should implement the best practices followed by both indigenous as well as international competitors and a sound communications plan needs to be created in order to connect the guests. (5)

Researchers have opined that the need for people to travel and see the world and create memories with their cherished ones may not diminish permanently, although there could be some temporary decline in the demand. High risk-prone and adverse customers may take time to come out initially, but in the long run these people may join the trend. (5)

Hygiene oriented hospitality companies also need to be market oriented. When the world comes out of this pandemic, there would be numerous beginnings and learnings for the hospitality industry. The hospitality industry would have to function, operate, practise safety and hygiene protocols and engage guests and cater to their needs, keeping in view the desires and expectations of their guests and customers. (5)

### **Technology orientation**

Technology orientation is characterized by the degree of commitment an organization is required to have to acquire and implement technology in their business processes and functions (Gatignon and Xuereb, 1997). During this pandemic, those hospitality companies who are technology oriented would have greater advantages in their operations and in creating customer value. Researchers have opined that hospitality service companies need to understand that the customers will have their own set of priorities when they book their stays or tables. They will feel more inclined to trust brands of hotels and restaurants which have displayed a strong technology centricity along with hygiene and cleanliness and, have more optimistic approvals from fellow travellers. (5) Researchers have stated that customers will arrive with a new desire for a touch-less hospitality service experience. Industry experts have opined that customer will prefer to check-in with their mobile devices, receive digital keys on their mobile devices and proceed directly to their rooms. They will want to check-in for their spa treatments or fitness classes and activities, dining reservations and golf tee times directly on their phones. They will want to complete any intake questions on their own devices. They will use their mobile devices as an ID to present and access their privileges and facilities as a guest. Touchless mobile payments will be the preferred method of payment instead of transactions on pin-pads. Guests will avoid the crowds at the bars and order from their pool chairs, tables or room services via their own devices. Check-outs will forever change as guests would be able to review their room folios on their devices, bypass the front desk and settle payments and bills with their mobile phones. Hotel marketing may change forever as brands would focus on their cleaning processes, sanitized environments and a touch less experience enabled by mobile technology that a guest already has access to. (4)

Industry experts have opined that the requirement for change for the hospitality industry is greater than any other industry, but it is different among hotels and restaurants, and, air and cruise lines. Both business and leisure travellers are cancelling planned trips and not scheduling any for the near future. Hotels and airlines are operating at half capacity. Hotels which are equipped with strong digital presence and strategies are being able to steer the business to their advantage during this pandemic. (8)

Researchers have recommended that the hospitality industry should focus on solving immediate challenges and reinforce new business opportunities through investments in technology. Groups of hotels that are hygiene oriented would remain agile and adapt technology to maximize workforce and operations to influence customer experiences. This would ensure winning customer loyalty and also provide with a faster path to recovery. For instance, Radisson Hotel Group has announced its Radisson Hotels Safety Protocol, a new program of in-depth cleanliness and disinfection procedures, in partnership with SGS, the world's leading inspection, verification, testing and certification company. (4)

### **People need touch they can trust.**

Hospitality industry experts have opined that social distancing is a practice that we may need to adopt even after the dangers of the pandemic subsides. People may be reluctant to get too close to others if they don't feel safe. But physical contact is an essential ingredient for human well-being. People shake hands with everyone in a meeting room, or kiss someone's cheeks at a cocktail party. As an industry, hotels and restaurants can provide a safe haven by maintaining the highest standards of cleanliness and hygiene, where people can mingle without inhibitions in a benign environment administered by trained professionals. Consumers should feel safe in the facilities provided by the hotels and restaurants. (4)

### **Preferences of domestic travel:**

Industry experts believe that international leisure travel will be curtailed since people are hesitant to travel overseas and avail long distance flights. The significant outbound market will hence, look at domestic travel options. (5)

The focus for hygiene, safety, health will take priority and will propel the domestic traveller to invest in quality accommodation and thus, reappear in domestic travel. (5) The location of hotels and business segments would also play a vital role in this. Till travellers gain confidence and get over inhibitions of flying again, hotels/resorts located in close proximity to major cities stand to gain more benefits than other hotels located elsewhere as they can be reached by driving. In the city, staycations will become more popular and city business hotels will have to create safe and creative experiences for couples and families. Short stay leisure, wellness vacations in small groups and family group leisure with entertainment for children will get more priority and become more popular among certain segments of the travellers. (5)

### **Research Design:**

The emergence of interaction between several stakeholders for a hospitality company during this pandemic is addressed here through a case study approach. The case study approach can help in demonstrating how a company can adopt hygiene orientation to handle the dynamics of the hospitality service in the present situation. According to Yin (1994), case studies are rich, observed descriptions of particular instances of a phenomenon, or emphasize the rich, real-world context in which the incident occurs. Thus, the primary notion of describing a case study is to adopt cases as the basis for developing theory. (Eisenhardt and Greenberg's, 2007).

Researchers generally recommend multiple methods for data collection for case studies, one of them is published sources. For this case study, we have followed secondary sources, primarily web-based information published by the company and industry analysts.

### **Case Study - ITC WeAssure Program**

When the world is struggling with the Covid-19 disaster and trying to find new challenges, the hotels are restoring their hygiene and safety protocols to reassure guests that they can stay unstressed in these hotels once again. Among them are the ITC Hotels group and its new WeAssure initiative. (17) Through this case study we explore and analyse the strategies implemented by the ITC hotel industry during the lockdown situation and subsequent to the lockdown caused by the pandemic. The company websites, the Economic Times and information available from various other websites on the internet were scrutinised to acquire data about the 'WeAssure' initiative taken by ITC. This analysis reveals the special endeavour that ITC had undertaken to satisfy their customers with their resourceful activities and strategic measures.

"WeAssure", is a novel initiative of ITC to combat the pandemic situation and restart business. It is a first of its kind health, hygiene and safety initiative reinforcing ITCs globally recognized accountable luxury culture. 'WeAssure' initiative of ITC Hotels seeks to create stringent sanitation and hygiene conditions by generating an enhanced and protected world for its customers.

ITC Hotels are one of India's largest luxury chain of hotels. The ITC group operates four brands with more than 100 hotels in over 70 destinations across the country. ITC hotels are recognised for their green luxury hotel chains in the world with 10 LEED® platinum certified hotels. The hotels of ITC aim to reflect India's fine tradition of hospitality, generosity, custom, culture and ethos with globally benchmarked services. The brand operates according to the principles of environmental stewardship. It features luxurious accommodation, state-of-the-art business facilities, renowned signature cuisine and award-winning wellness experiences. ITC Hotels also offer a wide array of choices ranging from mid-range properties to heritage palaces, forts and resorts, for both leisure and business travellers. (16)

Namaste at ITC Hotels is inspired from our ancient scripture 'Atithi Devo Bhava' which prescribes the dynamics of the host and guest relationship. Namaste acknowledges the honour in being a host and fulfils responsibilities towards the guests without compromising the standards. This thought keeps the Indian values alive, pure and timeless. (11)

Senior management of ITC's hospitality business soon realised that business must adopt hygiene orientation to survive during the severe pandemic. Consequently, ITC Hotels announced the launch of its "WeAssure" initiative in collaboration with medical professionals and disinfection experts to further enhance the existing hygiene & cleaning protocols across all ITC Hotels. The programme is also designed to address the safety and wellbeing of the associates of all ITC Hotels. Feeling the need and importance of approval from recognised bodies, the company got the program accredited by National Accreditation Board for Hospitals & Healthcare Providers (NABH)- the leading standards organisation for sanitation, hygiene, safety and infection control practices. (10)

### **We Assure Benchmark hygiene orientation Standards**

Industry experts have stated that NABH is one of the leading standards organisations for sanitation, hygiene, safety, and infection control practices that conforms to hospital level hygiene standards. ITC Hotels are working to improve their existing procedures and actions to acquire an accreditation certificate from the National Accreditation Board for Hospitals and Healthcare Providers (NABH) and thus, are meeting the requirements of hospital-level hygiene standards. The programme specifications are an assurance of the visibly stringent cleanliness and disinfection processes that benchmark clinically hygienic standards. This programme is attempted to provide the customers with the required satisfaction of their desired hospitality service experiences without compromising on quality. And this experience would be made available to the customers with expertise from the domain champions themselves.

'WeAssure' programme of ITC hotels is a path breaking cleanliness protocol of the hospitality industry. The hotel group is also partnering with DNV GL Business Assurance. DNV GL Business Assurance is one of the world's leading certification bodies that works towards ensuring that businesses stringently enhance their clinical levels of hygiene and safety measures. The company assures that the performance of the organization can be evaluated in the form of model which is built around the three pillars of health, hygiene and safety. This certificate of declaration is aimed to project ITC hospitality business as evidence of the rigorous hygiene protocols being followed to ensure the safety of the guests and associates at ITC Hotels, across India. The senior management of ITC are of the opinion that this partnership will help ITC Hotels to attain advance levels of improvement in all facets of operations post Covid-19. (11)

Industry experts believe that 'WeAssure' is a holistic programme that concentrates on all facets of hotel operations. It incorporates the revised protocols in back-house activities involving the receiving stores, back offices, laundry as well as public areas with sensitive cleansing measures for guest luggage, elevators and room service. (11), Mr Nakul Anand, Executive Director, ITC Ltd. is of the opinion that WeAssure will make company personnel committed to delivering world-class luxury experiences that address the most important needs of wellbeing and safety through responsible practices that are immensely relevant in the unprecedented circumstances that the world faces today due to this pandemic. (11)

Hospitality industry around the globe is presently struggling to adjust with the ever-changing 'new normal'. The hospitality industry is heavily affected due to lockdowns and the air rife with the fear of infections, ITC's 'WeAssure' initiative not only guarantees the health and safety of the guests and customers of ITC Hotels but their employees as well. (14)

### **Sizing up the situation**

During present times, the philosophy of leading hospitality service companies should focus on hygiene orientation and the well-being of guests, associates and partners. The management of ITC hotels have stated that they are in the middle of an unprecedented circumstance and the safety and well-being of their guests and associates is their top priority. They have closely monitored and examined the effects of the Covid-19 outbreak both directly and indirectly, collecting relevant information from government and medical authorities, adhering to protocols outlined by subject matter experts and are constantly evaluating the concerns shared by their guests. Besides deep stringent cleaning of the hotel spaces, in keeping with the primary criteria of hygiene orientation, ITC WeAssure initiatives also include unique training and learning programmes for ITC associates, employees and suppliers. Hotel spaces have been re-engineered to support social distancing norms, and guest experiences are being ensured with zero to minimal physical contact with ITC employees (17).

### **Sensing the market need and addressing it**

#### ***Disinfection and Hygiene***

To ensure high level of hygiene orientation, ITC's WeAssure initiative includes sanitisation of crockery, cutlery and tableware. The company has also introduced advanced and stringent deep-cleaning protocols to sanitise all rooms and offices matching clinical standards. Under the WeAssure program, ITC Hotels have remodelled hotel layouts to support safe distancing between the guests and, also between guests and associates.

#### ***Technology orientation in WeAssure service***

ITC hotels, being a technology-oriented company, have implemented digital ordering and e-payment in all its hotels. The company has re-engineered guest experiences with zero contact/ minimal associate engagements. The group has adopted contemporary technology and uses advanced disinfectants to make sure all surfaces of its hotels are clinically clean. This includes UV sanitisation and use of ozonisers and advanced disinfectants. The company has also introduced ISO 22000 certified facilities with microbiology lab, which uses advanced disinfectants for long-lasting protection.

#### ***Cross department coordination in WeAssure program***

ITC has contacted Savlon, is a name to reckon with as one of the most trusted hygiene brands for homes and hospitals. Savlon has gained repute for effective sanitisation and gentle action on the skin. In the WeAssure



program, ITC Hotels in partnership with Savlon have ensured that all hotel equipment is efficiently sanitised. Earlier, the group had repurposed its perfume factory in Himachal Pradesh to manufacture an additional 1,25,000 litres of Savlon hand sanitizers. ITC has introduced Savlon's trusted germ protection techniques in the WeAssure programme. (17)

In addition to using Savlon's expertise in hygiene and disinfection, ITC Hotels has also invested in training and e-learning programs for its employees and associates. The company has used resources within the company and has also appointed external consultants in training its direct stakeholders. In the eAssure programme, ITC Hotels has changed the cancellation policy of reservations since many customers may need to change their travel plans at the last minute. For instance, ITC will allow full changes or cancellation without a charge for up to 24 hours prior to guests' arrivals, including reservations with pre-paid rates, for customers with existing reservations for any future arrival date. For changes in group bookings, the company interacts closely with their guests to manage the changes on a case-by-case basis. The hotels are actively cooperating with their guests to address the needs of each group, including moving events to a later date. ITC Hotels are accepting all expired loyalty schemes and have also extended their expiration dates. For instance, Club ITC Green Points scheduled to expire by the end of March, 2020 has been extended till the end of December, 2020 (15).

## II. Discussion and conclusion

The specifications of WeAssure program clearly demonstrate safety orientation capabilities of ITC with structured cleanliness and disinfection processes. This programme is attempted to provide all three components of hygiene orientation - cleanliness orientation, dis-infection focus, and cross-activity hygiene coordination. Such hygiene orientation through WeAssure program provides a unifying focus of ITC towards hygiene and projects individual activities, thereby leading to a performance that would reduce adversity and fear from the minds of the customers. Such way the hospitality companies can give customers with the required satisfaction of their desired hospitality service experiences without compromising on quality hygiene.

To reduce infection, hospitality companies across the globe may take preventive measures by adopting hygiene orientation in its operation and organizational system . As the COVID-19 pandemic wreaks havoc the world over, fear of travelling, whether on business or for leisure is also added to these anguishes. As a result, the hospitality business has been dislodged from its previous place as these circumstances together bring an unprecedented phase in the history of the hospitality industry. The tourism and hospitality industry has already faced mass-scale cancellations for travel bookings and hotel accommodations, hence the hygiene orientation proposed by us is expected to give leverage to these companies. It might help the hospitality sector revive faster than its organic recovery.

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