

Checking in (not that kind) Online Hotels reach out to guests who 'check in' on social media sites.

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Some aspects of the ultimate hotel experience were never designed to be shared with the public: Gourmet room service. That first glorious soak in the Jacuzzi. Easing on that ultra-soft complementary sleep mask. And let's not forget check-in.

Better still, let's forget check-in: Suddenly, stepping over the threshold in many hotels is tantamount to declaring your presence to the world. Smartphone apps such as Foursquare and Facebook Places have now made it easy even for non-celebrities to alert the media – in this case, the social media – that they have indeed arrived in style.



Hotels love this virtual red-carpet too. Guests often check in online first to alert their friends and other contacts of where they have landed before engaging in the real, more traditional check-in with the front desk agent, credit-card in hand.

For brands such as the Portland, Ore.-based Provenance Hotels, this kind of online checking in before front-desk check-in has been well worth checking out in terms of its goodwill and publicity. All but one of the six properties – the Nashville-based Hotel Preston – participate in the social media buzz that allows guests to update their status on Facebook, Twitter, or simply on the two apps themselves. Provenance made its debut on Foursquare about a year ago, said Provenance social media manager Jen Joyce. They added Facebook Places in December.

"Some people only use Facebook, some use only Foursquare, so we wanted to make sure we capture all our guests who might be out there," Joyce said.

The check-in apps simply represent "another way to get people into the property," she said. Best of all, participation costs nothing on either side of the screen. These apps already list major hotels, restaurants, businesses, sports arenas and other public entities on their maps, so all that's required, upon arrival, is for the guest to load the app – which is also free – and click on the "check in" button.

For hotels, the payoff is twofold: It boosts the hotels' visibility online – everyone gets to see who is staying where – and then hooks up participating guests with unique hotel specials, such as gifts or discounts on future stays, simply because they declared their arrival to their friends first.

"If you check in on Foursquare, for instance, and show the front desk your check-in screen, they take down your name and e-mail address and phone number and when the first of the month comes around, we draw a winner for a one-night stay," said Joyce.

With Facebook Places, the rewards vary from hotel to hotel. Guests checking into the Hotel Max six times receive a book featuring all the artwork on display throughout the downtown Seattle hotel. Guests who check into the Hotel Murano in Tacoma, Wash., six times, receive a coffee-table book of glass art, and two tickets to that city's Museum of Glass.

"Each gift is geared to each hotel," Joyce said, and the gifts are designed to show the guests how much their boosterism is appreciated.

Of course, it all goes beyond a what's-in-it-for-me strategy of marketing. There's a lot of goodwill built into the social media packaging too.

"This is another way for us to reach out and make the guest experience a little more interesting," said Joyce, who engages in friendly communication regularly with guests through Twitter and Facebook to let them know about the deals.

"It's just another way to put your brand out there," she said. "And it makes our job a whole lot easier when we have all these people as our Provenance Army on social media."

Some things haven't changed with the digital age, however. Checking in and registering – with the hotel, in this case – is still a matter of checking in as they always have, said Joyce. For now, anyway. "They still have to do that the regular way."