



How “green” are North American hotels? An exploration of low-cost adoption practices[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the so-called “green,” or environmentally friendly, practices of American hotels. As such, it examined how green hotels in the United States are regarding no-cost or low-cost practices. Respondents included 166 hotels, which were identified through a random sample of hotels from the American Hotel & Lodging Association and included chain and independent properties as well as properties of various sizes (based on the number of rooms). The study findings show that chain hotels were at the time of the study stronger adopters of green practices than independent hotels were, likely due to leveraging economies of scale through uniform corporate practices. In addition, hotels in the Midwest were found to be the most environmentally friendly in terms of their use of no-cost or low-cost green practices. Additional results indicated that size (classified by number of rooms) had little effect on the extent to which hotels were trying to manage energy consumption.

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1. Introduction

Almost every industry today embraces sustainable business practices to some extent, at least in principle. This is not surprising given that “the worldwide economy burns,” every day, “an amount of energy the planet required 10,000 days to create. In other words, 27 years’ worth of stored solar energy is burned and released by utilities, cars, houses, factories, and farms every 24 h” (Hawken, 2005). Human beings consume 40% of the net primary productivity or green material produced on Earth each year, 35% of the productivity of the oceanic shelf, and 60% of freshwater run-off. It is claimed that if every human being were to consume as much as the average US inhabitant does, four Earths would be required to support that level of consumption (Sanderson et al., 2002).

Companies and industries also consume at prodigious rates. The focus of this study, the hospitality industry, does not over-pollute the environment compared with many other industries, nor does it consume immense amounts of nonrenewable resources. This does not mean, however, that the industry has no effect on global resources (Chan and Wong, 2006). The lodging industry is the

most environmentally harmful hospitality sector, and can attribute 75% of its environmental impact to disproportionate consumption of “non-durable goods, energy and water, followed by emissions released to air, water, and soil” (Bohdanowicz and Martinac, 2003).

Waste, the most visible source of the impact of human activity, rightfully occupies center stage in the effort to improve the environment. Since the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, at which 172 nations met to craft an environmentally sound framework for economic development, corporations across the globe have accelerated their efforts to minimize waste (Post and Altma, 1994). Another major concern is water use, as indicated in a study of European hotels by Bohdanowicz and Martinac (2003), in which it is estimated that guests typically use anywhere between 24 and 40 gallons of water a night (including water used for related house-keeping functions). In that study, one chain reported an average of 116 gallons per guest-night, with another reporting an average of 59 gallons. Consider, too, that along with water usage come the costs, both financially and environmentally, of heating the water. For example, the gas used for heating rooms and hot water in hotels in the United Kingdom alone costs US \$228.9 million and creates 5 million tons of CO₂ emissions yearly (Kirk, 1995). Multiply those numbers by the number of guest-nights that occur across the globe on a daily basis and you begin to understand that the lodging segment of the hospitality industry racks up formidable consumption statistics that suggest considerable potential for positive impact.

The purpose of this study, then, is to examine the extent to which hotels in the United States have embraced eco-friendly, or “green,” operational approaches. In particular, we are interested

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in examining the adoption of no-cost or low-cost practices that have been shown to mitigate or reverse environmental damage. Although little stands in the way of adopting no-cost or low-cost green practices, some operators may not understand the value or ease associated with adopting such practices. To enhance the utility of the study, we analyze differences among properties based on hotel size, chain affiliation, and geographic location, and identify which segments lead the way in following green practices.

2. Literature review

The origins of the environmental movement can be traced to the first Earth Day in 1970, although its seeds had been sown some years before. Environmental concern grew rapidly in the 1990s, however, following alarming reports by scientists that the Earth's atmosphere was warming, marking the beginning of the so-called green decade (Kirkpatrick, 1990). With the green decade came green consumers, as people began to understand how consumption habits affect the environment. Riding this wave of environmental concern, the concept of the green hotel emerged and since then spread across many segments in the lodging industry. The Green Hotels Association (2008) defines green hotels as “environmentally friendly properties whose managers are eager to institute programs that save water, save energy and reduce solid waste—while saving money—to help protect our one and only earth!” This definition is based on key green management practices in the hotel industry, including saving energy and water, managing waste, and educating guests about the environment (Kotler et al., 1999; Middleton and Hawkins, 1998). For the purposes of this study, the term “green” means environmentally friendly, that is, doing business in a way that reduces waste, conserves energy, and generally promotes environmental health.

2.1. Reasons to go green

Studies show that hotels go green for a variety of reasons. These include economic benefits, strengthening employee organizational commitment, facing public scrutiny, improved investor relations, and general social good (Gan, 2006; Juholin, 2004). The hotel industry's negative impact on the environment also provides it with an opportunity to use its size to promote corporate responsibility on a meaningful scale. It can do this through educating its staff and customers, embracing eco-friendly practices, and influencing complementary industries such as hotel suppliers. Such activities would benefit both the environment and the hotel industry itself, since travel and tourism depend on the attractiveness of local environments (Bohdanowicz and Martinac, 2003).

According to a study by Bansal and Roth (2000), the three main incentives for businesses to go green are competitiveness, legitimation, and ecological responsibility. Competitiveness reflects the role that going green can play in improving profitability. Going green can improve long-term profitability not only by lowering expenses, but also by transferring these savings to customers. Legitimation means complying with environmental regulations to avoid being shut down or sanctioned in some way. Legitimate businesses are lawful businesses, but a firm can be legitimate in this sense even if it is more reactive than proactive in terms of sustainability. To call a firm ecologically responsible is to imply that it chooses to go green simply because it is the right thing to do. Going green in today's marketplace adds value to the brand image, however, so there is likely considerable financial benefit to doing the right thing.

One important reason to go green is therefore the customer. Customer behavior is not always highly visible, but in the current climate of economic uncertainty, it is easy to see the effect of customer behavior on, for example, automakers. High gas prices have

prompted consumers to buy energy-efficient cars or alter their driving patterns. Automakers in Detroit seemingly were unprepared for this shift in the market and needed time to plan for a new approach. Similarly, customers expect hotels to be green, and if a property fails to adopt environmentally responsible practices or communicates such adoption ineffectively, it may lose potential customers to the greener competition (Butler, 2008).

In addition to being beneficial to the environment, there are other advantages to being a green hotel. We have already hinted at the financial benefits a property can gain from going green. According to one study, green buildings achieved energy savings of 25–30%, averaging around 28%. The study quotes a remark from a conference sponsored by the California Sustainable Building Task Force with the US Green Building Council:

Financial benefits of green design are between \$50 and \$70 per square foot in a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) building, over ten times the additional cost associated with building green. The financial benefits are in lower energy, waste and water costs, lower environmental and emission costs, and lower operational and maintenance costs, and increased productivity and health. (Butler, 2008, pp. 238–239)

The study adds that a 30–50% LEED energy savings would achieve economic savings equivalent to an increase in the average daily rate of \$1.80–3.00 for a limited-service hotel and \$4.00–6.75 for a full service hotel.

Unfortunately, some hotels go green as a marketing ploy without really *being* green. This is done quite easily because the criteria used to certify a hotel as green are inconsistent across the various accrediting associations. This leaves the consumer not knowing how truly green properties are, or how to compare properties that claim to be green but are certified by different organizations. Unscrupulous hotels may simply claim to be green without troubling to obtain legitimate accreditation, or pay a fee to join an association that attests that properties are green without checking applicants' qualifications. In other words, hotels can label themselves green hotels in a way that makes it difficult or impossible for the consumer to verify the authenticity of these claims (Pizam, 2009). Fortunately, there are organizations such as the aforementioned Green Hotels Association and LEED certifications that provide some legitimacy to claims of being a green hotel.

2.2. Chain affiliation and going green

In an independently owned hotel, the manager or owner generally enjoys considerable freedom to operate his or her facility. As a result, the extent to which the property is sensitive to environmental concerns depends on the operator's knowledge, attitude, and willingness to act. Conversely, the environmental policies and initiatives implemented by chain-affiliated hotels are developed at the corporate level and maintained across the entire chain (Álvarez Gil et al., 2001).

Chains have the resources necessary to undertake well-informed environmental protection activities and to execute them efficiently. For example, hotel chains can transfer successful practices established in individual units to other units, leveraging an information advantage not available to self-reliant independent hotels. Furthermore, as Bohdanowicz (2006) noted, many chains support individual units by requiring them to follow certain standards and programs, and providing training in the application of techniques and methods for environmental protection. Based on these differences between chain and independent hotels, we construct the following hypothesis:

H1. Chain-affiliated hotels are stronger adopters of green practices than are independent hotels.

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