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AI Everywhere



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HY8



**The Signal Was
Always There.
We Just Had No
Way to Capture It.**

Pre-Stay

Are Morch

Digital Transformation Coach for Hotels, Are Morch, Digital Transformation Coach

Drawing on a career that moved from reservation phones to housekeeping supervision to manager on duty, Are Morch argues that the real pre-stay challenge has never been technological — it has always been a signal problem. The guest intent is there, the data exists across departments, but without a system to capture and connect it, every interaction starts from scratch and the intelligence is lost.

My first job in the hotel industry was answering phones for a reservation center in Charleston, South Carolina.

The work sounds simple when you describe it that way, and in some respects, it was. A caller wanted a room. I found them a room. The transaction was completed.

But I learned early that the transaction was never the point.

The calls that stayed with me were the ones where the caller did not yet quite know what they were asking for. A man would call and say he wanted something quiet, maybe near the water, not too far from the historic district. He was planning something for his wife's birthday and wanted it to feel special without being pretentious. He had a budget but was willing to go a little over if it was worth it. He had not chosen a hotel yet. He had barely chosen a destination.

What he was doing, in the language that did not exist then, was expressing intent. He was generating a signal. And I had nothing to capture it with except my own attention and whatever I could recall from a printed reference sheet about properties I had never visited.

The rule I set for myself in that role, and one I carried through every position that followed, was simple.

Always be prepared for the next guest, no matter what.

Not the guest currently on the line, who had already decided to call. The next one. The one whose signal I had not yet heard. That discipline of preparation, of maintaining a state of readiness before the demand arrived, was the closest thing to a signal intelligence system that my role allowed. It was also, I would understand much later, a form of Blue Ocean thinking applied instinctively. While other agents waited for the call to define the interaction, I was trying to anticipate the space where the guest was not yet standing but would soon be.

WHAT THE FRONT DESK REVEALED

When I moved to a front desk role at a three-hundred-room Sheraton in North Charleston, the signals did not disappear. They simply changed form.

Now I was reading them in person rather than over the telephone. And something unexpected happened.

My accent, which had caused callers at the reservation center to occasionally assume they had reached a call center overseas, became at the front desk one of my most useful assets. Guests noticed it. They asked where I was from. The conversation opened in a way that a standard check-in exchange rarely does.

My aptitude for reading what a guest needed, my attitude toward finding a way to deliver it regardless of whether it was on any checklist, and that initial moment of curiosity combined to create something I could not have scripted. Guests who might have completed check-in as a transaction instead completed it as a beginning. They left the desk carrying a small story, something unexpected, a recommendation they had not asked for, a detail noticed, a gesture made.

Those moments were not efficient in any measurable sense. They were unreasonable in the best possible meaning of the word, far beyond what the situation required, and precisely because of that, they were the moments guests returned to tell someone about.

What I discovered, without the framework to name it, was that my most effective competitive space was not the one everyone else occupied. The front desk agents who competed on speed, accuracy, and procedural efficiency were operating in a well-defined and crowded lane. The space I had found, where a Norwegian accent and genuine curiosity about the person standing in front of me created a moment of connection that a script could not replicate, was effectively uncontested. Nobody else was competing there because nobody had thought to.

That is the instinct behind what strategists call Blue Ocean thinking, the deliberate choice to create and occupy a market space where the rules of competition have not yet been written, rather than fighting harder in a space where the rules already belong to someone else.

The guest who arrived distracted, checking their phone, glancing around the lobby, could be brought into the present moment by the right exchange. The couple who arrived later than their stated check-in time and asked quietly whether the room had a good view were telling me something about what the stay was really for, and it had nothing to do with the rate they had paid.

Being prepared for the next guest meant being ready to read those signals and act on them before the guest had to ask for anything.

THE FLOOR TAUGHT A DIFFERENT LESSON

Housekeeping supervision gave me a perspective that neither the reservation desk nor the front desk could offer.

Thirty housekeepers. Multiple floors. The compressed scheduling pressure of check-out and check-in happens simultaneously. The work was entirely operational, and yet it was inseparable from the guest experience in ways that the rest of the building did not always acknowledge.

What I discovered on the floor of housekeeping was that the signals the hotel had collected about its guests, their preferences, their patterns, their unspoken expectations, almost never reached the team responsible for the physical space where the guest would form their most lasting impressions. The front desk knew things about the returning guest that the housekeeping team never heard. The reservation notes captured details that evaporated somewhere between the booking system and the room assignment sheet.

Intelligence existed. It was simply not flowing to the people who could have used it.

I also discovered something about the nature of consistency that I have not stopped thinking about since. A guest who stays at a property twice and receives different experiences on each visit does not conclude that the hotel had an off night. They conclude that the first experience was a matter of luck.

Consistency is not the absence of variation. It is the presence of a system that ensures the signal intelligence gathered during one interaction informs every subsequent one.

The uncontested space I had found at the front desk was only valuable if it could be sustained. Without a system to carry the signal forward, every guest relationship had to start from scratch.

THE MANAGER ON DUTY AND THE PUZZLE COMPLETING ITSELF

It was the manager on duty role for the evening shift that brought the pieces together.

At the start of every shift, I walked through every department before I did anything else. The front desk, housekeeping, the restaurant, maintenance, and the back office. Not to inspect, but to read. What signals were each department carrying into the evening? What had happened during the day that would shape what the night needed from the building?

That daily walk was the closest thing to a unified signal intelligence system that existed in the hotel at the time, and it existed entirely in my head.

I was the connective tissue between departments that were otherwise generating signals independently and sharing them only when something had already gone wrong. When a booking pace anomaly appeared in the front desk count for the next seventy-two hours, I was the person who connected it to a local event that maintenance had mentioned in passing and a staffing pattern that housekeeping had flagged that afternoon. Nobody had a system for doing that. Somebody had to be the system.

The discipline of always being prepared for the next guest scaled up in that role into something larger. Being prepared for the next shift. Being prepared for the next occupancy peak. Being prepared for the demand that had not yet arrived, but the signals were already describing it if you knew how to read them.

The moments of unreasonable hospitality that I had learned to create at the front desk were not accidental. They were the product of preparation, of signal intelligence gathered across every department and translated into readiness before the guest ever walked through the door. That is the entire logic of the pre-stay phase, the intelligence gathered before arrival that determines the quality of everything that follows.

I ended every shift report with a note about something specific that had gone well that day. Something a team member did that was worth recording. It was a small habit, but it came from

the belief that signal intelligence should produce recognition as well as accountability. The signals that tell you what is working are as important as the signals that tell you what is not.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PRE-STAY IN 2026

The hotel industry is now being asked to make sense of an AI landscape that promises to transform how guests discover, evaluate, and choose accommodation. The conversation is largely driven by technology vendors and distribution strategists focused on the booking funnel as a technical problem to be optimized.

That framing is useful, but incomplete.

What I observed across four roles inside the same industry is that the guest journey is not primarily a technical problem. It is a signal problem. Travelers generate enormous amounts of meaningful signals during the pre-stay phase, signals about who they are, what they are hoping for, what would make them choose one property over another, and return to tell someone about it.

Phocuswright research found that nearly 40% of US travelers used generative AI tools to plan trips in 2025, an 11-point increase in just one year, with AI becoming the new front door for travel discovery as traditional search loses ground to conversational intent. BCG and PR Newswire research cited by OtelCiro found that 82% of hotels planned to expand their use of AI in 2026, up from 63% in 2024. But investment in AI without the signal infrastructure to feed it produces more sophisticated confusion rather than more useful intelligence.

The large chains and the major OTAs are investing in AI to automate the same transaction layer that every other large organization is automating. Every one of them is competing in the same ocean, on the same terms, with the same tools.

The competitive space that opens for independent and boutique hotels is not in that direction. It is in the direction that scale prevents.

The kind of intimate, cross-departmental signal intelligence that turns a discovered property into a chosen one, and a chosen one into a returned-to one, is the intelligence that cannot be manufactured at volume. The accent that opens an unexpected conversation. The preparation that anticipates what the guest needs before they ask. The gesture is unreasonable precisely because nobody required it.

These are not features of a technology platform. They are the product of a human operating system that reads signals, stays prepared, and finds its competitive advantage in a space the chains cannot enter because their scale is what prevents them.

The signal was always there.

The question for every boutique and independent hotel in 2026 is whether they have built the system to capture it.