

# HYB26

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# **Synthetic Persuasion: AI and the Evolution of Marketing**

Pre-Stay

**Neil Foster**

*Hospitality Technology Advisor, Tectonic Hospitality Services*



**Neil Foster maps the collision between hospitality's two tectonic forces — human connection and operational optimization — and argues that AI has become the primary mechanism through which synthetic persuasion now operates: shaping discovery, engineering desire, and guiding decisions through systems so seamlessly embedded that they no longer feel like persuasion at all. The critical question he leaves open is whether that same technology can amplify genuine care rather than replace it.**

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*We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.*

— Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night*

## DISCOVERY, DESIRE, AND DECISION: BENEATH THE SURFACE OF HOSPITALITY

The landscape of modern hospitality sits at the cusp of a violently transforming world. Beneath the visible surface of hotel operations, booking systems, loyalty programs, guest engagement platforms, online travel agencies, revenue management systems, and AI-powered marketing engines, pressure continues to build between two cornerstone priorities of the industry: human connection and operational optimization. Like tectonic plates negotiating equilibrium beneath the earth's crust, these forces are grinding together in a powerful convergence, reshaping the commercial structure of hospitality and the nature of the persuasion.

Historically, hospitality marketing relied on human influence. From reputation and storytelling, one makes a new discovery. The atmosphere, like the alluring aroma of freshly baked bread, leads to desire. Decisions ultimately came down to trust, sealing the deal with reputations on the line, based on promises of safety, consistency, and being cared for. Human risk management. Whether recommended from a seasoned Les Clefs d'Or concierge, a reputable travel agency, or a close family friend with similar tastes, persuasive power anchored in experience, expertise, and recognizably human intent is powerful.

Artificial intelligence now embeds itself beneath much of modern hospitality infrastructure. With information sources unverifiable, incentive structures unclear, and accountability nonexistent, the trust placed in these systems can only be attributed to the "wisdom of the crowd" phenomenon, credited to Aristotle. Along the modern customer journey, recommendation engines influence visibility, dynamic pricing systems dictate perceived value, and customer data platforms predict booking behavior. Veering off the path with an unemptied shopping cart, conversational systems simulate attentiveness. The convergence of the trusted human with controlled algorithms: synthetic persuasion has arrived.

Unlike traditional persuasion, which is concerned only with sharing value, synthetic persuasion is an entire electronic ecosystem of prediction, shaping, and optimization. The guided journey reinforces human behavior through increasingly invisible systems of influence.

Countdown timers, dynamic pricing, flash deals, one-click payments, "you might like this," internet web trackers — all designed to minimize hesitation and convert. Like flowing lava, a digitally mediated landscape has all but engulfed the traditional human-influenced marketplace, and its influence increasingly shapes reality.

Whether technology buries authentic human connection beneath optimized systems or serves as a foundation for meaningful human care to scale without losing its soul will ultimately determine the future and fate of hospitality.

## DISCOVERY: HYPERREALITY AND THE SIMULATION OF HOSPITALITY

The first tectonic plate may be described as the "human connection plate," representing hospitality's relational and expressive side. Embedded in the psychology of belonging, hospitality at its best forms a "warm" interface of human connection. Anticipation, welcome, empathy, storytelling, recognition, and care remain central to the experience despite major technological advances.

With a pinch of healthy friction sprinkled into the mix and a keen pursuit of the interesting questions over the easy answers, the strongest connections emerge from the messy unraveling of ambiguity. Hospitality has never been perfectly efficient, and this may be by design. Wherever "friction" appears, an opportunity for authentic human connection exists. Hospitality and humanity at their best are brought to light wherever humans draw from untapped creativity, flexibility, and resourcefulness to navigate uncertainty together. Nothing beats the rare moment we are called to rise to the occasion. Fully frictionless leads to lost opportunities.

Opposing the qualitative force of hospitality is the "optimization plate," representing the analytical and procedural side of commercial operations. Juxtaposed against the warmth of human connection, optimization forms the cold counterbalance of business obligations. Optimized efficiency is driven by predictive analytics, automation, conversion metrics, process orientation, labor efficiency, scalability, and shareholder returns.

Optimization is increasingly pre-empted by AI-enabled systems. Revenue management platforms dynamically adjust room pricing based upon demand elasticity, competitor positioning, booking pace, weather patterns, and consumer behavior. Recommendation engines determine visibility across online travel agencies. Loyalty systems continuously evaluate profitability scenarios, predicted spend, and high-lifetime-value guests. The objective is transparent, especially for scaling up: reduce uncertainty, eliminate friction, and maximize measurable outcomes.

On the guest side, an equally significant shift is taking place. As philosopher Jean Baudrillard described, the real becomes hyperreal when simulations become more influential than the underlying experience. In the hyperreality of hospitality, guests access information indirectly through layers of digital interpretation, tailoring perception before the tangible experience begins.

For the traveler, a customized, curated landscape of hotels — shaped by review scores, sponsored placement, algorithmic ranking, AI-generated summaries, influencer content, scarcity prompts, and personalized recommendation engines — is filtered and presented online for viewing pleasure. It has become increasingly rare and difficult to find hotels organically, as representation progressively precedes reality.

For the guest, the hotel's digital identity comprises reviews, photography, reputation score, search ranking, and social visibility, carefully controlling perceptions before a guest ever enters the lobby. The hotel exists for the guest first as a simulation.

Online travel agency ecosystems intensify the phenomenon further, where platforms such as Booking Holdings and Expedia Group no longer function as neutral marketplaces. Through algorithmic ranking, behavioral targeting, urgency messaging, and recommendation systems, visibility is shaped by invisible forces. A guest may believe they are freely discovering the "best" option while navigating an environment carefully optimized to influence perception and conversion. The most powerful systems of influence feel natural. In *The Truman Show*, the environment draws out specific behaviors while preserving the illusion of autonomy. Similarly, consumers remain largely unaware of the invisible architecture guiding perception, emotion, and decision-making around them in new and unfamiliar places. As media theorist Marshall McLuhan famously observed, "The medium is the message." The systems through which guests discover experiences are restructuring how hospitality is discovered and communicated.

## DESIRE: FEEDBACK LOOPS, HYPER-PERSONALIZATION, AND EMOTIONAL ENGINEERING

If discovery commands attention, desire draws emotional pull. Hospitality marketing has always relied upon aspiration and imagination to connect with potential guests. Unlike lodging, hospitality promises intangible benefits. Luxury hotels sell status, a wellness retreat facilitates reinvention, a resort promises escape from everyday life, and a boutique hotel shares culture. If the aim is to also travel inward as much as outward, emotional possibility is as valuable as the physical product. Desires are aroused through creativity, storytelling, and atmosphere, and individuality is a hunger to be satiated. We relish the idea of choosing from the "buffet" while being pushed towards the "set menu" of synthetic desire. Ironically, our options are increasingly ready-made by the well-fed optimized algorithm.

Two guests searching for the same room may now experience entirely different emotional responses, depending on their inferred psychological profiles. One guest seeking safety and convenience may see family-oriented imagery, while another finds messaging relating to exclusivity, status, or a romantic getaway. When dynamically engineered desire is the path, "all roads lead to Rome." Accordingly, the systems offer customized imagery, messaging, pricing, package structures, and promotional timing based on behavioral analysis feedback, running continuously behind the scenes.

Recommendation systems train and reshape through continuous feedback loops in a perpetual state of iterative refinement. The more interaction with the platforms, the more effectively those systems predict future behavior — and in turn, those predictions influence future consumer choices, which then retrain the systems again. A classic feedback loop, the synthetic persuasion machine grinds on, binding product with predetermined desire. At what point does personalization become manipulation, and when does predictive convenience threaten to eliminate independent thought and decision-making?

Aldous Huxley reimagined a population governed in a state of pleasure, surrounded by convenience, subject to conditioning, and filled with engineered desire in *Brave New World*. Unlike the obvious problems with embracing a dystopian life of sacrifice and misery, resistance is the unlikely response to a lifestyle of comfort and amusement — until it's too late. Soon, the guided journey of desire will become so deeply embedded psychologically that visibility into the mechanics of choice will eventually be lost in a sea of frictionless booking flows, emotionally optimized guest messaging, and hyper-personalized recommendations. Malicious intent is not necessarily the intent, and in many cases the systems are genuinely designed to improve the guest experience and operational efficiency — yet invisible influence remains, nonetheless.

Another, more optimistic scenario emerges from the tectonic collision: not lava, love. When implemented thoughtfully, artificial intelligence may be the perfect tool to amplify authentic hospitality rather than erase it. Through intelligent systems that empower employees with better-quality information, administrative burden is reduced, with more space for meaningful human interaction. A front desk associate may deliver superior care with support from systems displaying intelligent guest profiles. Wherever the technology eliminates repetitive operational minutiae, it not only encourages improved personalization of service delivery but also introduces potential for positive friction to emerge — relationship building. Technology, configured for love, is an amplifier of humanity instead of a synthetic substitute for it.

As John Culkin observed through the work of Marshall McLuhan, "We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us." Lava or love, the tools we build today and how we use them will inevitably influence the impact of human connection and how we desire.

## DECISION: TRUST, AI AGENTS, AND THE FUTURE OF HUMAN-LED HOSPITALITY

If hospitality is premised on trust, an obvious difference between human and synthetic persuasion is relatability. Earning our emotional trust in identifying safety, belonging, anticipation, comfort, and care is therefore the greatest obstacle to overcome. With widespread acceptance of synthetic persuasion in the discovery and desire phases, full AI agent-initiated decision-making is within reach.

Early demonstrations of consumer-facing AI agents suggest it's now possible to do it all: comparing hotels, optimizing itineraries, entering loyalty details, and ultimately making purchasing decisions. A "human in the loop" is only needed as a gatekeeper for final validation and as custodian for account and payment details. In a future without cues for human intuition and emotional nuance, we're all-in on trust — and any distinction between authentic care and synthetic empathy becomes nearly impossible. If AI agents do the thinking, feeling, and doing on our behalf, is it still hospitality?

On the ground, the role of instinct-driven hotel managers connecting with guests has pivoted to data-oriented optimizers guided by dashboards, predictive analytics, and optimization systems. The digital feedback loop, changing human behavior and leaning towards left-brained optimization, has already impacted the structure and needs of hospitality leadership.

Human hospitality still very much depends upon intuition, empathy, creativity, and emotional nuance alongside logic, measurement, and efficiency. The successful leaders of the future can harmonize both.

## **CONCLUSION: BENEATH THE MACHINERY OF OPTIMIZATION**

The tectonic plates beneath hospitality remain locked in perpetual negotiation: optimization, simulation, and efficiency to one side; human connection, authenticity, and intuition on the other.

Artificial intelligence has already impacted the engineering of discovery, the formation of desire, and the pathway from options to decisions. In the process, hospitality risks drifting toward a world where synthetic persuasion becomes increasingly indistinguishable from authentic human care.

The future of hospitality may ultimately depend on whether intelligent systems become the lava that buries human connection beneath optimized performance, or the foundation upon which authentic human care can scale without losing its soul.

Beneath the layers of optimization, the defining question of hospitality remains unchanged: in a world increasingly shaped by technology, will people still feel genuinely seen by one another?

