

Brand execs share their satisfaction secrets

What does it take to top J.D. Power's annual Satisfaction Index? Executives from some of the highest-scoring brands share the keys to their successes.

Highlights

By Patrick Mayock

"The boxes are the boxes. ... What makes the experience are the people in the box," said TownePlace Suite's Loren Nalewanski. Hyatt embarked on a "listening tour" to hear from guests what drives great experiences. Microtel regained the top spot in the economy segment by challenging franchisees to live up to Wyndham's "Count on Me" service culture.

REPORT FROM THE U.S.—While the hotel asset itself certainly plays a part in the overall guest experience, the most important driver of satisfaction is something else entirely, according to Loren Nalewanski, VP and global brand manager for TownePlace Suites by Marriott.

"The boxes are the boxes. All brands are trying to one up each other," he said. "What makes the experience are the people in the box."

Nalewanski would know. His TownePlace Suites brand last week earned the highest satisfaction scores in the extended-stay segment in [J.D. Power and Associates' annual "North America Hotel Guest Satisfaction Index Study."](#)

And he's not alone in his service-minded philosophy. Executives from other award-winning brands that rounded out the study echoed similar thoughts when asked to share the secret behind their stellar satisfaction scores.

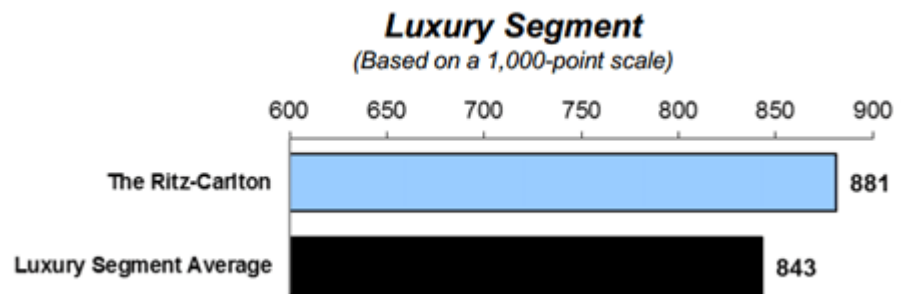
Bob Kharazmi, global officer, worldwide operations, The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company

Kharazmi is something of an elder statesman in the service game, having been the eighth person hired in Ritz-Carlton some three decades ago. For the company's less experienced "ladies and gentlemen," however, executives ensure consistency through repetition.

"Everything at The Ritz-Carlton is well-defined and communicated through our Credo card and our motto, which focuses on our ladies and gentlemen to serve one another—and our guests, consistently. We share the same message every day at all of our properties around the globe, where our ladies and gentlemen are reminded of what is important to the guest experience and, more importantly, anticipating their unexpressed needs to enhance their stay. This is reinforced regularly through onboarding, training and regular briefings like daily lineups," he said.

Those systems are especially crucial as the brand expands into new destinations, such as Banglore, India; Herzliya, Israel; and Almaty, Kazakhstan, Kharazmi added.

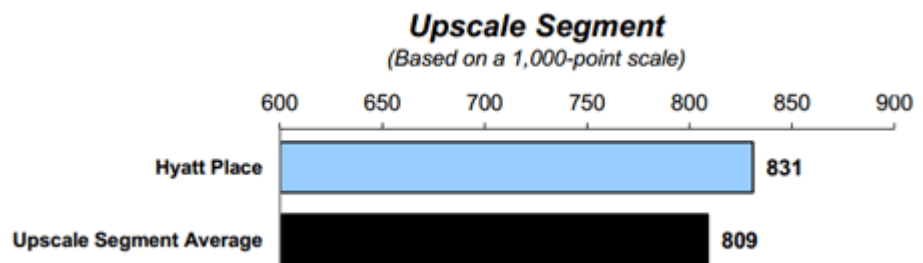
This is Ritz-Carlton's fourth consecutive year with the highest satisfaction score in the luxury segment.



Amy Patti, corporate communications director, Hyatt Hotels Corporation
To improve satisfaction scores throughout the Hyatt system—including the Hyatt Place brand, which earned top honors in the upscale segment—executives embarked on the largest “listening tour” in the company’s history. The goal? To speak directly to the source: guests.

“As a result of these learnings, we have created and are implementing a new global training program for all 90,000 Hyatt associates. We are calling this training ‘Changing the Conversation’ and ‘Changing the Experience,’” Patti said. “This approach moves away from a training manual and toward a framework for associates to work within, allowing our associates to do what they do best: creating experiences and genuine connections with our guests. This training is based on human-centered design thinking, which emphasizes empathetic listening, effective brainstorming and rapid prototyping of solutions.”

For example, whereas previous front-desk interactions were script-driven, now associates customize their pitches based on context, she said. A couple checking into the Grand Hyatt New York for a leisurely weekend stay might want to be briefed on all the amenities and extras the property has to offer. A business traveler arriving at midnight, on the other hand, will want to get to her room as soon as possible, Patti explained.

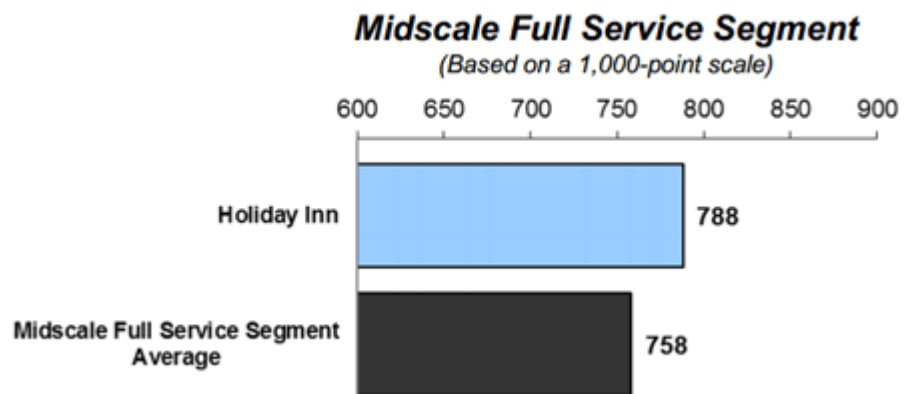


Heather Balsley, senior VP, Americas, Holiday Inn brand family
Ask Balsley how Holiday Inn topped J.D. Power’s midscale full-service satisfaction rankings for the third consecutive year, and her answer sounds simple enough: hard work and dedication. But in reality, the effort comprised a complicated web of synchronized service revamps and one of the most

ambitious brand relaunches in recent memory.

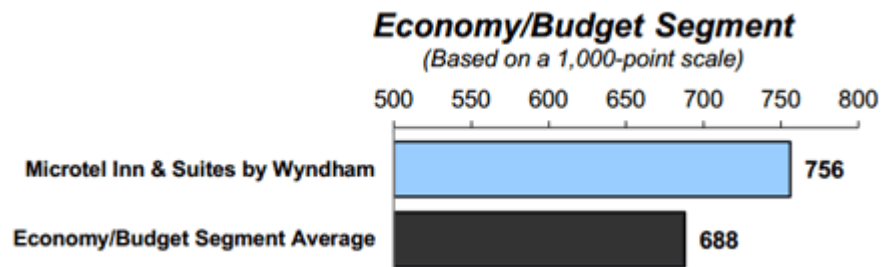
"Over the past several years, we have made a significant investment in developing a training program, tools and resources tailored specifically to our brand," she said. "These tools help us attract and select people who love our brands and can demonstrate the brand behaviors. They also help us immerse our people in our brand so that they can create guest love and make sure they know how they contribute in order to feel involved."

At the Holiday Inn Cambridge, for example, a longtime associate realized a group of long-term guests who had breakfast included in their rates had to start their shifts before hotel's restaurant opened in the morning. "So the employee went ahead and packed them their breakfast to-go to pick up from the front desk every morning. She even included a little surprise in each of their bags, paid out of her own pocket, so they were sent off to work with a healthy breakfast and a little extra thoughtful item too," Balsley explained.



Aly El-Bassuni, VP of operations, Microtel Inn & Suites by Wyndham
When Microtel, a perennial powerhouse in J.D. Power's satisfaction rankings in the economy/budget segment was dethroned from the top spot during 2012, executives went back to the basics to reemphasize service, El-Bassuni said. The company issued a challenge to every franchisee to embrace Wyndham's "Count on Me" service initiative and certify each of their GMs. The GMs were then asked to go back on property and train their line-level employees.

Through great leadership comes great results, El-Bassuni said. "As an industry the score across the board are up, but Microtel's rebounded in an unprecedented way." The brand not only regained that No. 1 positioning, but it also boasted the largest margin of victory over the second highest scorer.

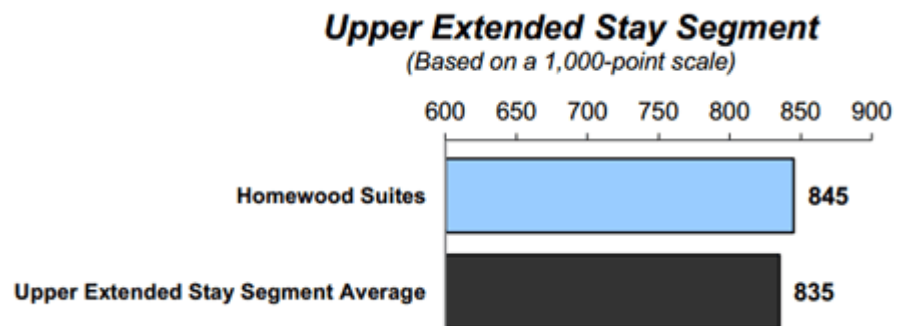


Bill Duncan, global head of brand management, Homewood Suites by Hilton. While some brands might rely on a secret sauce to drive satisfaction, Homewood Suites relies on a not-so-secret alphabet soup. First, there's LEAP—or listen, empathize, apologize and problem solve. The training method allows associates to better communicate with and serve their guests, Duncan explained.

Then there's OPOG—a promise that aims to “outrageously please our guests,” he said.

“This is all about Homewood Suites team members anticipating guest needs and going the extra mile to serve them. This can be remembering an extended-stay guest's favorite sport team and arranging for them to watch an important game in our lodge, or perhaps surprising them with a gift that has personal meaning,” he said.

The initiatives, however they're spelled out, have propelled the Homewood Suites brand to the highest satisfaction score in the upper extended-stay segment.



Loren Nalewanski, VP and global brand manager, TownePlace Suites by Marriott.

So how does Nalewanski get the people inside the box to deliver outstanding customer service? Consistency and humor.

“Every day, every shift, we do what we call our ‘daily hello’—basically a stand

up, line up or huddle. It's our way to connect at the beginning of every shift from a leadership standpoint with everyone who's working," he said.

The meetings are relaxed, casual affairs, characterized by TownePlace Suites' quirky sense of humor, Nalewanski said. But they're also a time to get things done. Associates discuss hot topics, challenges and goals. They also identify one guest to target that day to make good on the brand's "Just Because" service initiative, which emphasizes spontaneous acts of goodwill.

For example, a housekeeper who notices candy wrappers in a long-term guest's trash bin each day might slip a few of those candy bars into his fridge with a cheery note. It's a simple gesture, Nalewanski said, but one that makes all the difference.

