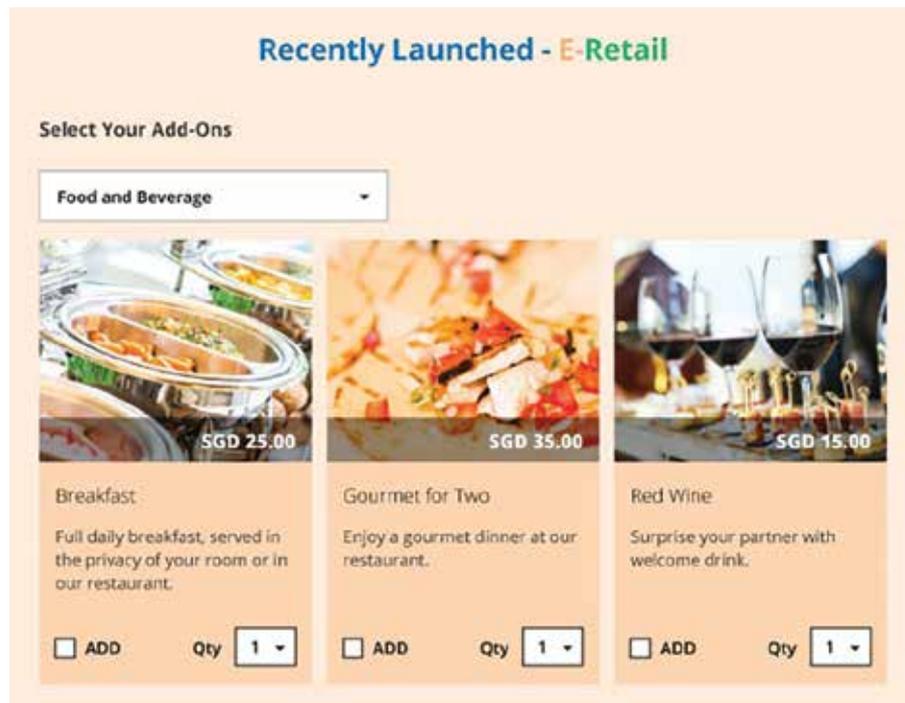# In the tech seat with Cetin Sekercioglu

The travel industry veteran who co-started Upgrading.cc, a platform for hoteliers to upsell prior to guests' arrival, shares his thoughts on technology that impact the hospitality industry.

By Lee Xin Hui

A capture of the newly-added 'E-Retail' upgrade function, which allows hotel partners to decide on the type of offerings and price points they want, and include them as part of their special promotions.

Formerly a hotelier with stints in Shangri-La Hotels & Resorts and Millennium Hotels & Resorts, Cetin Sekercioglu is no stranger to harnessing technology to revamp traditional aspects of the hospitality business, including digitising an F&B loyalty and reservation programme in 2001, initiating a Bookers' Club concept where bookers can redeem rewards for rooms they have booked at the hotel, and launching TV shopping channels for customers to purchase items they fancy in the hotel through a few clicks on the remote.

Last year, he started an online platform, Upgrading.cc, which uses data analytics to push relevant upgrade options to hotel guests from the time of booking prior to arrival, allowing hoteliers to increase upselling revenue gains.

Since launching in Q3 2018, the platform has secured hotel listings in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Australia and UAE, and is currently in talks with 10 hotel companies in Asia and in the second stage of contracting. According to Sekercioglu, its primary focus now is signing up partners in South-east Asia before scaling up in China, North Asia and Oceania.

Where does hospitality stand at the moment when it comes to being high-tech, in comparison to other sectors of the travel industry?
Unfortunately, the hospitality sector is far behind its peers, such as the airlines, in adopting technology for their operations. Due to the nature of the business where there is heavy reliance and dependence on humans and different hotel ownerships with different views, the hospitality sector finds it difficult to embrace new innovation in technology and digitalisation. I hope to see a change in this in the very near future.

As a seasoned hotelier, what's your view on some challenges that are commonly faced by your peers in achieving sustainable revenue growth?

With an increase of public segment bookings going to the OTAs, hotels need to create a very clear brand value and perception of differences in their product offerings, service delivery, people and image to regain share from the OTAs and stand out among the crowd.

Another recurring challenge is the availability of talent – how to recruit, train and retain them in order to provide the level of consistency and excellence in your service delivery.

There is also a need for hoteliers to change their mindsets and business models to explore every opportunity in technology, digitalisation and innovation, and work towards creating a customer-centric organisation by understanding the behaviour of its guests from booking to departure across various hotel categories.

How can hospitality technology facilitate and enhance guest experience while driving revenue for the properties?
Technology can be applied to many areas in the hospitality industry ranging from food preparation, room cleaning, billing to cocktail concoction, to name a few. Besides saving on extensive labour costs, it allows staff to focus more on customer experience or interaction instead.

But technology and customer experience must work hand in hand. If you engage a robot to deliver in-room dining, you have to also ensure that the food delivered is timely and of consistent high quality.

Cetin Sekercioglu, co-founder of Upgrading.cc.

In terms of the check-in process, a technology like Upgrading.cc can help because it enables a customer to secure his upgrade online prior to arriving, hence allowing the front desk staff to focus on other matters such as enhancing customer experience instead of trying to secure an upsell, which prolongs the check-in process.

For hoteliers who have been experiencing success with front desk upselling, how would you convince them to make the switch?
The advancement of technology such as smartphones that double up as room keys has unwittingly reduced guest interaction at the front desk with lesser or almost no opportunity to upsell. Also, the new tech-savvy group of customers – think millennials and soon-to-be Gen Z – prefer doing transactions online where they can search, compare and purchase with instant confirmation. Upgrading.cc responds to this shift in trend with our intelligent platform that allows customers to purchase upgrades online prior to arrivals.

Lastly, it is important to remember that changes in the hospitality industry are not driven by the hotel management, but by the customers – we cannot stick to the traditional method of doing business, rather we have to listen to the needs of the end-users and be part of the changes to stay ahead of the curve.

What emerging technologies do you think will have the biggest impact for hospitality and travel in the next decade?
It will take some time to really see the results but obviously blockchain, AI and robotics are three potential technologies which can have the biggest impact in the hospitality and travel industries.

In the next decade or even sooner, there will be more innovations in online booking, social media and distribution technology which will further disrupt the current way of doing business.

Having said that, I urge the hospitality industry to create an ambidextrous organisational culture to explore and exploit at the same time, and not to rest on its laurels in order to keep pace in the high-tech environment. ■