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The costs of inaction

A lot of people in hospitality don't believe they can afford to take action on sustainability. The real question is, can you afford not to? Here I show the costs of inaction when it comes to conservation, using real-life examples from around the globe.

This is what you're missing out on when you don't conserve:

- Conserving can cut energy costs by up to 50%. Sustainable behaviour isn't a financial hit you have to take in the name of a good cause. Be it water usage or equipment repair, inaction costs you a huge amount of money.
- Guests and staff alike want brands who share their values, and live them. Inaction costs you the loyalty of those you need most to succeed. From retention rates to user reviews, the doers become leaders.
- Sustainable hospitality earns the right to charge higher premiums. The numbers are in and guests will happily pay more for an incredible green experience. Those who choose inaction have no business charging more.
- Your local community benefits. Conserving is good for you, and it's good for the causes you choose to support as well. Plus, guests love knowing they've been a part of it.

Piecemeal steps may seem like the 'sensible' option, but part of the paradigm shift this book argues for means looking at green behaviour differently. The costs of doing nothing are damaging; the rewards of taking action are life-changing.

A horrifying surprise

As a small hotelier, when I first came to assess the facts – the amount of resources we were using, the level of waste and scale of carbon emissions – they horrified me. This can be a bitter pill to swallow, but sometimes we need to take medicine to make us better. I felt that beneath the facade of our tourist accommodation with high quality linen, stylish furnishings and tranquil gardens, I was actually *offering a dirty business*. Our waste was just conveniently out of view.

It seemed totally contradictory to the ideal I was offering guests – almost a lie. Just because much of the resource use, waste, and pollution is invisible doesn't mean it does not exist. The more I knew, the bigger the lie felt.

Consuming better

This is the chapter in which I introduce a brave new world. It is also where I show why it makes good business sense to conserve. We can all dream about a better world, but to deliver it requires open minds and actionable knowledge.

I will introduce the risks of inaction, sharing surprising details and eye-watering facts backed by proven scientific research. My aim is to draw attention to what can erode or enhance your value proposition, and undermine or strengthen your value architecture, to deliver an exemplary hospitality service for the 21st Century.

The premise is simple: we must conserve more, so we consume less. Only by doing this will we maximise the capital investments we have made in efficiency and renewable energy and water. We can prevent ‘rebound’ and ‘backfire’ not by leaving these technologies on autopilot, but by working with them to improve our adaptive skills.

Insight: Conserving saves money

An in-depth study of 15 accommodation businesses in New Zealand found owners claimed they had a good understanding of energy efficiency. Only five said they could reduce their energy use – the others believed they were already running efficiently. An audit of each business found further opportunities, missed by most managers, to save an average of 20% and up to 40% of energy use. Notably, 37.7% of the measures identified to save energy were behavioural, requiring no capital investment (Becken, 2013). These exclusively behavioural factors included policies and practices for staff to avoid wastage.

Conserving is a very cost-effective approach. Note that guests’ direct electricity use was not considered in this study. Since our paying customers are responsible for 50% of the resources used in hotels and almost all in other types of accommodation (like extended stay suites and apartments, cottages, timeshare lodges, villas, and holiday homes) then one might expect overall behavioural savings involving both staff and guests could have a substantial saving for almost no capital cost.

The hard truth

What I have talked about so far is all well and good, and you might even think it’s a worthy good cause, but you might also be wondering, “How much?” “What’s the cost to my business?” “Will it really benefit me?” You might even be asking yourself, “Should I bother with this at all?”

Amazon founder Jeff Bezos believes that a successful leader is someone who is able to face hard truths. This sounds simple but is difficult to do. Many of today’s hospitality owners and managers are aware of climate change, biodiversity loss, overpopulation, and tourism’s impact on the local community. They are also

aware of forthcoming legislative changes, social trends, and risks as a result of these challenges. Yet every day at the front of their mind are the pressing needs to meet KPIs and remove complexities to keep the business running smoothly. Hospitality is fast-paced and involves a great deal of human interaction, and the human brain is attending to the here and now.

On balance, a manager might feel they cannot tell staff and business partners hard truths if they don't offer responsible solutions. Changing shower heads and light bulbs (all reasonable actions) do show progress, but they also deflect attention away from long term sustainability truths. It is difficult to come up with more substantive solutions when one is time-poor. This is hospitality's hard truth.... we find it hard to allocate sufficient time to think more deeply about global challenges and our local responsibilities.

After 14 years of research, testing, applying, and trialling, I wish to share with you a substantive solution: *conserving*. Conserving can inspire colleagues, motivate staff, and bring joy to guests, which, as a manager, is what you require if a solution is to work. Conserving saves costs; it reduces maintenance, equipment wear and tear. Conserving empowers you to redesign your guest experience and restructure how you operate positively. It provides a consistent vision, guiding you and your team on how to adapt. It increases profits, decreases risks, and demonstrates a progressive, positive hospitality business that attracts investors.

I write this not to sell you an ideology, but to share evidence of a way forward, because we are all in this together. I have conserved at my own business with great success, as well as in multiple properties around the world. Conserving offers opportunities at every resource and waste touchpoint in your business. It applies to every level of your business, like training housekeeping staff to place bed rugs attractively on the beds in cooler weather, or offering menus indicating the carbon footprint of meals, or filling guests rooms a floor at a time rather than scattering them over a skyscraper, or directing guest donations and financial savings to help protect the local environment.

In the next chapter, I explain how, by taking my five steps, you can achieve realistic targets and advance sustainable hospitality so it becomes a truly beneficial commercial advantage. It has transformed hospitality firms both large and small around the world, and can transform yours as well.

The risk of inaction

A business needs a long term vision to survive and thrive. Avoiding challenges won't resolve factors like being poorly prepared for extreme weather events and consequential dissatisfaction of guests uncomfortable in their rooms.