

Which is your favourite brand for coffee or shampoo? – PolyU co-branding research for hotel industry in the virtual world

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) has again taken the lead in the research front and is proud to have pioneered one of the first hospitality research projects undertaken by its School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) in the virtual world of Second Life, a three-dimensional virtual environment with over 16 million users.

Hotels around the world are frequently exposed to a wide range of products, a plethora of co-branding opportunities are easily available to the hotel industry. Successful co-branding can provide a hotel with the competitive edge and differentiation that strategically fit with their branding objectives. To understand the brands preferred by hotel patrons, a unique study was planned, designed and conducted by SHTM Assistant Professor Dr Basak Denizci Guillet in PolyU's Virtual Hotel in Second Life in order to define the optimal level of co-branding in a hotel room setting.

Mr Paul Penfold, SHTM Manager (Educational Development), said, "The use of the Virtual Hotel does not only provide researchers with new tools for collaboration with other academics and fellow researchers worldwide, but also enables researchers to create innovative environments for conducting their studies."

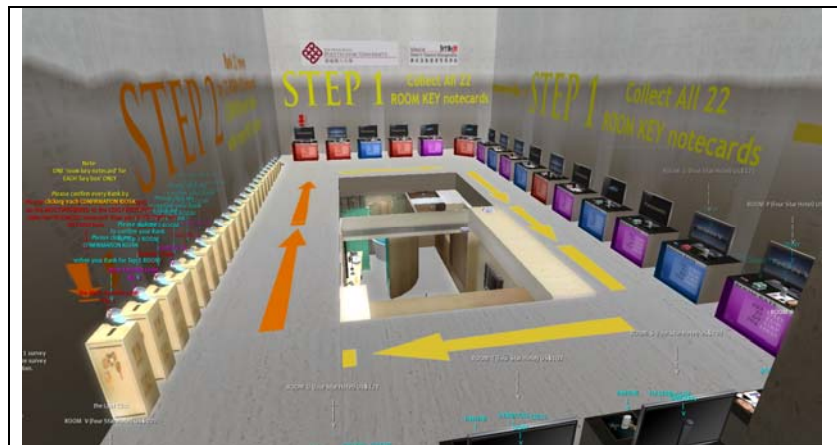
Over a four-week period, participants visited the hotel rooms, reviewed the amenities and selected their preferred brands. Participants came from 39 countries including USA, Canada, UK, Germany, Holland, Australia and Hong Kong. Preliminary results indicate that coffee, TV, toothpaste, shampoo and shower gel are the most preferred products to be branded in a four-star hotel room setting. The most preferred brands for each item was also identified. While Starbucks, Nescafe and Folgers were the top three coffee brands favoured by respondents, Sony, Panasonic and Samsung were the most preferred TV brands respondents would like to see in the rooms. Respondents also indicated that Dove, Pantene and Herbal Essences topped their list as the most preferred shampoo brands, whereas Colgate and Crest surfaced as their No. 1 brands for toothpaste.



One of the three virtual hotel rooms used in the first stage of the study

According to Dr Denizci Guillet, “A similar research conducted in the real world would have to allow participants to stay in a hotel in order for them to try the range of brands available in a variety of hotel settings. It would be a very expensive exercise for any researchers and also very difficult for them to reach a truly representative and international hotel patrons.”

The second stage of the study involves conjoint analysis which is instrumental in determining the trade-offs that hotel customers are willing to make in their purchase decisions as well as in developing pricing strategies for hotels.



A snapshot of the platform designed for use in the second stage of the study

This study serves as a guideline for multi-branding in a hotel room setting for the purpose of positioning the hotel brand. Data collected will be used by researchers in determining the most preferred amenities to be branded as well as their brands as favoured by respondents with different socio-demographic backgrounds and traveling patterns. Over 700 participants from around the world took part in this research and the results will be published later this year.

PolyU's School of Hotel and Tourism Management is a leading provider of hospitality education in the Asia-Pacific Region. It is ranked No. 4 among the world's top hotel and tourism schools based on research and scholarship, according to a study published in the *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research* in 2005.

With 60 academic staff drawing from 18 countries, the School offers programmes at levels ranging from PhD to Higher Diploma. It was awarded the 2003 International Society of Travel and Tourism Educators Institutional Achievement Award in recognition of its significant contribution to tourism education, and is the only training centre in the Education and Training Network in Asia recognised by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation.