

James Kinney on Branding Through Events

Josiah Mackenzie and [James Kinney](#) discuss how hotels can use music to improve their content strategy, increase social currency, and romance guests.

Josiah: A line in your brochure caught my attention; it says that you created [James Kinney Live](#) to create intimate experiences that successfully communicate the culture and feel of a particular brand. Can you explain that a little bit?

James: What I see from a macro standpoint is that a lot of brands - if they have a million dollars to spend on marketing, advertising, external communicates - say, "OK. Let's throw half of it at Google and half at Facebook, and maybe we'll spend a little bit on mass media i.e. TV, billboards, radio, etc."

But what I found through my research and what works is that people really don't want to be spoken to that way. People want to be wooed. People want to be romanced by a brand. When consumers can be romanced by a brand, then you, like I say on my site, turn ordinary people into extraordinary advocates of your brand.

What we believe and what a lot of people agree on is that you can use a shotgun approach out to a million people, but your ROI or your REO - return on engagement - may only be one to five percent from that. We feel like if you make 50,000 true believers, those 50,000 people tell 50,000 people, and then you're in a whole new ballgame.

Again, it goes back to the romance of your customers, the romance of your clients. Through the initiatives that we program and the way that we help and consult brands on how to woo and romance their guest - specifically for the hotel industry - that immediately turns into ROI, immediately turns into dollars; it really strengthens their brand and at the end of the day, their bottom line and their market share.

Josiah: Your tag line is "Increasing social currency through music." What role does music - especially live music and live music events - play in creating these unique brand experiences?

James: Music, as you know, is one of the most powerful mediums that we have in the world. Music has been around since mankind itself. And live music, specifically, there's a human interaction that exists within live music that is in no other form.

When you're in a quiet movie theater, there's an experience of seeing a movie, but there's nothing like having the person that's creating the art right in front of you, and how you engage with that person, whether it's hearing the singer hit an amazing note that makes you feel good, a guitar player playing a riff that makes you think of your childhood or a drummer playing a beat that makes you want to dance.

Since we started the 44 Live Music Series for Morgans Hotel Group - literally Josiah, every night - we see brand engagement at its finest. We see everything from small children that are there in the hotel on vacation with their family to businessmen in their 50s and 60s staying an hour or two extra at the bar because there's something happening.

The energy automatically changes through live music like no other medium. You can go and see the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater and watch people dance; you can go see a play on Broadway, but live music, specifically, is one of the most powerful mediums and it's been demonstrated through time.

For example, you can go see a Bruce Springsteen concert with 80,000 people singing one chorus that he wrote. That's why live music is such a powerful medium in order to communicate the brand, and that's why we chose that specific medium as our primary tool that we use to communicate for these brands, and it's also my background as a person.

Josiah: How are hotels best positioned to host these live music events? Do they have a unique edge that perhaps another type of organization would not have?

James: Absolutely. I feel like hospitality companies and hotels specifically are in an extraordinary position because real estate is king and most established hotel brands have real estate throughout the world, or throughout the U.S., or throughout Europe, whichever geographic location they have.

And when you look at the state of the music industry as a whole, it's lost about half of its revenue. So a lot of amazing talent is looking for a way to market themselves, generate income and gain new fans.

You can almost look at a hotel as a train station. You have a unique make up of people from all over the world, all different age types, races, religions, etc. The music that you play there is a great test of what you have as an artist; what you're doing is in front of complete strangers that are not biased.

If you're playing in a rock club, for example, you at least know that people are there to go see rock or they're there to see live music. In a hotel, your music has to be good enough to really make people stay.

It's a true testament of who you are as an artist and what you have to give. But specifically going back to your question, hotels have an extraordinary opportunity to become mavens of culture.

And I believe that when hotels become mavens of culture, it increases their brand; it increases their bottom line.

Going back the 44 Music Series that we have at the Royalton... we've had Grammy Award nominees, Grammy Award winners - literally the best in New York City - play right in the lobby of the Royalton and people absolutely have that wow factor, like, "Wow, I never expected this to be here."

And because of that, we've seen an increase in sales and in their social media and digital assets as well, because the artists are tweeting about the property.

Josiah: Can you tell me how you match music genres to hotel brands and what goes into the selection process?

James: My content strategy is first to meet with the director of food and beverage, meet with the regional director of nightlife or the powers that be, if you will. I get a sense of what they think that their brand is and how they want it to be communicated. Then it actually goes into everything from the cocktails on the menu to the food that's served, and the actual ambiance of the room.

The Mondrian Soho is a completely different property than the Royalton in Midtown. I know that in Midtown Manhattan, the crowd and the demographic is very different than it is at Mondrian Soho or at Hudson. And based on how the room feels to me, that enables me to program music that is conducive to the room so that if you are drinking a sazerac or a scotch, that is much more conducive to a warmer vocal type or jazz or soul than vodka and rock and roll.

If the hotel is conducive to rock and that's what I feel that it is, then we'll go in a programming direction of rock. And from rock - which is a very vague term - we may go rock genre John Mayer, Jack Johnson or we may go rock as in Alice in Chains and Nirvana, or we may go rock as in James Taylor and Billy Joel.

I have to walk the property and feel it and speak to the marketers and operators of the property in order to really discover what kind of brand should be communicated.

Josiah: It's interesting that you talk with the food and beverage manager, perhaps one of the first people as you're beginning a project, because it gives the impression that this is a very holistic experience that's more than just a marketing play.

James: Oh, absolutely. It has to be; a lot of marketers don't give people enough credit these days. We're constantly bombarded with advertising and marketing and what we specialize in is creating an authentic experience. I put myself in the place of some guy that's been flying for eight hours, just got off the plane, just walked into the hotel, and perhaps his room is not ready and he has to sit in the lobby. What kind of experience is he having at that point?

Food and beverage - coupled with the auditory experience and the visual experience that he has, as well as the service in the hotel - really makes a big difference. As a marketing firm, we work on providing customer service for guests, the taste of the drink, the temperature of the

drink...

Obviously, we're not the chef at the property, but we absolutely take feedback and give feedback to make sure that the experience as a whole is met, and the music is just one piece of this larger puzzle.

As humans, we've got five senses; we try to appease all five of those senses when a guest walks in. If you can hit at least three of the five senses, then they're more apt to tell 10 people about a positive experience or go on Yelp and give a positive experience versus only giving them one positive experience.

Regarding food and beverage, we're there to increase the sales of food and beverage. At the Royalton, David Seoul is the Director of food and beverage; we've got a very intimate relationship. We meet weekly, so that we can make sure that we're not only increasing food and beverage, but we're increasing rev par as well. Through the music, people buy hotel rooms. So it is a holistic experience, yes.

Josiah: What would a hotel think through as they're working with you to launch a series of events? Is there a checklist?

James: Absolutely. Starting from the top down - at the process' inception - I would meet with the President down to the Director of food and beverage. On the marketing side - the CMO of the company down to the Director of Marketing, as well as the hotel's operational and engineering people.

From there, we clearly identify where they are and where they want to go. I believe wholeheartedly in business that you succeed when you solve problems. I want to know from them, "What's the problem? What are you trying to accomplish here? Are you just trying to put on word class entertainment that people talk about? Are you trying to sell more margaritas between the hours of 5:00 and 8:00? Are you trying to sell more brunch items on Sunday from 10am to 4pm?"

Once I identify the problem and what exactly they need moving forward, I design a program that tackles that, specifically.

Josiah: Could you tell me a little bit more about the success that you brought to the Morgans Hotel Group?

James: We started the Royalton Hotel on November 16th of last year, and since November 16th of last year, we have had Sasha Dobson, who is one of Nora Jones' best friends. She did a South American tour with Nora Jones. We've had Cedric the Entertainer - one of the largest comedians in the world. We've had K.J. Rose, who was on BET's Music Matters. We've had Rafael Zedick - a multi Grammy award winner who just played with Mick Jagger at the Grammys. This week, we have Jerome Bell - who's Top 40 at American Idol this season.

From a stats standpoint - on the nights that we program entertainment - we've seen an increase in sales of 14 percent. In addition to that, our Twitter numbers for [@RoyaltonNYC](#) are up 308 percent since we've begun.

Josiah: It's great to see that live events like these generate a lot of content; this is something that I've been exploring and it seems like sometimes it's a challenge for hotels to get people engaged in social media. What's going to get them talking? A live event that someone's experiencing... it almost seems like the optimal experience or the optimal environment for some social media activity to take place, right?

James: You are absolutely right. Absolutely right.

Josiah: Do you get people tweeting and all kinds of other content created around these?

James: Yeah; as you know, content is king, and there's this big thing around social media where people go "Oh, if I just tweet that you get 25 percent off of your next drink," then you're going to have a herd of people coming over to your hotel. As you and I know, that's not the case. Although we're in a very value minded society after the housing crisis, content is still king.

Whether you're doing music or a movie screening or live dancers or whatever in the world it is that you're doing, the content itself is how you communicate the property's brand. We have so many artists that are on the verge and that are famous coming to the property; when they're tweeting and they're taking pictures -- "Oh, we're at Royalton NYC at Morgan's Hotel," we've automatically increased their content strategy and their social currency and - specifically - their digital assets through people taking videos on their cellphones to just saying where they are, checking in on Foursquare; all these things are very real in the digital world that we live in. But saying that you have a special on pancakes just doesn't work anymore.

Josiah: No, no, absolutely not. That's very interesting, James. Is there anything else you'd like to discuss?

James: I'll just say, it's a very exciting time right now for hospitality brands; there's this whole celebrity culture. Look at the chef world and how the chef thing has just blown; the hospitality world and hotels are an extension of that - everything from the James Hotel to the Morgans Hotel Group to a lot of these boutique brands. The brands are quasi-celebrities in their own right, even though they're not a human. *Hotel brands have a amazing opportunity at this point to be mavens of culture.* It's not just a place to stay anymore. It's a place to do a movie premiere from Sharon Stone. It's a place to do a concert from John Mayer, and it's a place to launch a new chef menu by Bobby Flay.

If I had anything to say to hotel brands out there, it's: take advantage of this exciting opportunity to be the creators of content. One thing I always say is, "Why buy overpriced culture or pop culture when you can create it?"

Josiah: Very good. How can our readers contact you?

James: Anyone interested in branding their property or properties and making more money should give us a call; they can reach my cellphone 24 hours, seven days a week (817-675-3122), or they can email me at James@JamesKinneyLive.com. We do business nationwide -- East coast, West coast, North and South.

Josiah: Thanks very much, James. I can honestly say that this is one the most intriguing and inspiring conversations that I've had in a while. It sounds like you're doing a really cool thing, taking the agency model and really following the direction that marketing is going. I think this is going to reach a lot of good people; the more people I can send, the better. Let's just go out and change the world.