



The NY Times Business section had a column the other day by Amy Tara Koch, talking about the features of “smart hotel” technology, and how these “enhancements” are perceived by various guest cohorts. The quotation marks, which were used in the column, are a spoiler alert: Ms. Koch doesn’t much care for high-tech features like voice-activated lights, chatbot concierges, and QR codes.

While she doesn’t mention her age, she does say, “Some (young) travelers I’ve talked to love it.” She cites favorable reviews from a 25-year-old and a 33-year-old. As for Ms. Koch, she finds the app-based experience “infuriating. And overwhelming.” She quotes a 67-year-old guest who calls the technology “a new system to waste mental energy.”

I’m divided on this. Despite almost certainly being older than Ms. Koch, I love many of the current guest technologies, and have consistently been an early adopter of travel and hospitality features like app-based check-in and electronic room keys.

But she makes an excellent point: “Frictionless functionality does not engender character or soul; people do.”

Eliminating human contact in the customer experience can be empowering and enjoyable – just a week ago I experienced a humanless car rental which I found delightful. But of course it can go too far. The “soul” Ms. Koch writes about is essential to building loyalty. It’s not vital to me that my room is “personalized” with my preferred temperature and drapery settings. But when I CHOOSE to interact with travel and hospitality associates, it is important to me to be recognized by name and program status, and to be thanked and appreciated for my loyalty. No machine can effectively do that job.

As I read the column, an old piece by Tom Wolfe immediately came to mind. When the New York Hilton on Sixth Avenue, now known as the New York Hilton – Midtown,

opened in the mid-1960s, it was a wonder of modernity, with a number of then state-of-the-art features, like automatic elevators, automated systems rather than live associates to call room service or set a wake-up call, and illuminated in-room signs to deliver messages.

Many of the bugs had yet to be worked out, and Mr. Wolfe had a field day making fun of the soulless machines and sterile ambience. (Mr. Wolfe's whole career was sort of a field day making fun of, well, almost everything. And his style, revolutionary at the time, doesn't quite hold up today, compared to that of other "new journalists" of the era like Norman Mailer or Hunter Thompson.)

Wolfe's fifty-year old critique is remarkably similar to Ms. Koch's column. Not only do these two pieces remind us that change is constant, progress is in the eye of the beholder, and the new often meets rejection. They remind us that the human touch, the emotional connection that completes the customer experience and fosters – or impedes – loyalty, should never be entirely eliminated. We must take care that frictionless doesn't become soulless. [Your thoughts?](#)

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