

Adoption of Organizational Changes toward Experiential Marketing Strategies: A Study Based on High-End Hotels in Central Province, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Experiential Marketing is a trend in marketing that involves customers engaging with a brand in a two-way relationship. This research focuses on the implementation of Experiential Marketing practices in the hospitality industry, specifically in Central Province Sri Lanka's high-end hotels. The scarcity of studies on experiential marketing strategies and adoptions highlight the need for this study. The study evaluates the current Experiential Marketing strategies and explores the potential of implementing Experiential Marketing with appropriate internal changes. The research aims to evaluate the Experiential Marketing strategies implemented by high-end hotels in Sri Lanka using qualitative methods such as interviews and content analysis. The researchers follow a step-by-step guide for data collection, analysis, and interpretation, using purposive sampling for transferability and visiting selected high-end hotels to enhance credibility. The study suggests that personalization of services is crucial for making customers feel unique, and hotel touchpoints should be augmented with experiences. The research also suggests that internal changes within an organization can lead to excellence in resource optimization, strategic modernization, and agile adoption. Implementing an integrated management framework can enhance Experiential Marketing strategies and drive better results. The findings will contribute to the academic discourse on Experiential Marketing and provide practical insights for the high-end hotel industry in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: *Agile Structure, Customer Touchpoints, Experience, Experiential Marketing, Internal Changes, Strategic Modernization.*

1. Introduction

Researchers are exploring the impact of experiential marketing on branding, providing insights into the current strategy for creating value for brands and customers. Experience is a unique occurrence with emotional importance brought on by contact with stimuli associated with a product or brand (Österle et al., 2018). High market competitiveness leads to product and service imitation, affecting consumer choices more by emotional aspects. Experiential marketing focuses on creating unforgettable memories and engaging with customers, enhancing brand equity and enhancing sensory and emotional experiences, thereby enhancing customer mental availability (Dias et al., 2021). Experiential marketing enhances brand experience, improves the marketing mix, and encourages quicker, more satisfying purchasing decisions in various industries, particularly in emerging countries (Philip & Hezekiah, 2021).

Experiential Marketing, a strategy focusing on creating unforgettable experiences for brands, is becoming increasingly popular due to technology and social media. However, research on its use in Sri Lanka is limited, making it an emerging trend and a valuable subject of study.

Sri Lanka's natural tourism industry faces intense competition from star-class hotels, necessitating creative marketing strategies to meet customer expectations. Offering unique products and a holistic customer experience concept is crucial. However, limited studies on experiential marketing in Sri Lanka make it challenging for Sri Lankan people to get a clear understanding of the emerging trends of experiential marketing and what kind of internal changes need to be adopted in their entities to align with this trend, especially in the hospitality industry, which is highly based on selling experiences since those are often modelled on practices from foreign countries.

Researchers conducted a study in the Sri Lankan hospitality industry to determine if experience marketing and destination trust can enhance foreign tourists' perception of Sri Lanka as a desirable destination. (Chandrasiri & Wijesundara, 2022). Further on how the hotel sector in Sri Lanka retains their customers and customer satisfaction through EM. (Ishara, Poornima, & Gayathree, 2020). In line with Experiential Marketing some of the researchers discuss about how service providers in the Sri Lankan tourism and hospitality industries use virtual reality to more effectively create value for customers. (Muwandeniya & Eranda, 2022). Several studies have explored the benefits of experiential marketing in various countries (Gräve & Frederik, 2019), but few have considered the alignment with high-end hotels in Sri Lanka, a top tourism destination in the central province. There is a scarcity of research on the internal organizational alignments needed to address this trend, including the restructuring of workflows, enhancement of employee training, fostering of collaboration, and integration of technology to create immersive customer experiences, and especially targeting the Sri Lankan context.

So, the first objective of research is to identify and evaluate the experience marketing strategies currently employed by high-end hotels and following the second objective is to examine the required changes in the internal environment of high-end hotels for experiential marketing strategies to be successfully implemented. Exploring the changes and adaptations required to adopt experiential marketing practices effectively and improve customer experience within the internal environment of high-end Hotels.

The research provides practical insights for hotel marketers in the Central Province of Sri Lanka's high-end hotel industry. Hotel operators may create effective marketing plans that concentrate on giving consumers memorable experiences by knowing how the internal environment of an organization adopts these experiential marketing practices. It led hotels to think about how they can achieve mindshare with customers while achieving market share by implementing experiential marketing strategies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Experiential Marketing (EM)

EM involves customer involvement through two-way engagement, aiming to capture attention and create an emotional attachment to create a positive impression about the brand or product (Schmitt & Bernd, 1999). High market competitiveness leads to product and service imitateness, with emotional consumer choices influenced more by experience seekers, making brands a source of differentiation for experienced companies.

The term "experience" began to be associated with "management" and "marketing" in the late 1990s, due to publications by marketing practitioners and consultants, including Tynan and McKechnie (2009), Carbone and Haeckel (1994), Pine and Gilmore (1998) and Schmitt and Bernd (1999). This new approach was relevant not only from the customer's perspective but also from the supply side. Scholars introduced concepts such as engineering customer experience, EM and the experience economy. As literature evolved, it expanded to cover different aspects of experiential concepts in different fields. These include customer experience management, brand experience (Schmitt, et al., 2009), service experience (Klaus & Maklan, 2012), EM (Tynan & McKechnie, 2009), customer experience quality (Lemke, Clark, & Wilson, 2011), online customer experience, travel experience (Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009), retail customer experience (Lemke, et al., 2011), customer experience measurement (Klaus & Maklan, 2012), customer experience design (Verhoef, et al., 2009) and customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). These studies emphasized the importance of co-creating experiences to create value.

Digital technologies have further enhanced the impact of EM. Social media and virtual reality (VR) allow brands to create and share immersive experiences with a wider audience (Dholakia & Durham,

2012). Digital platforms can be utilized by hotels to provide virtual tours, interactive booking experiences, and engaging content that showcases their distinctive services.

As Lekstutytė and Alina (2016) mentioned, EM helps companies differentiate their brands by creating unique experiences that appeal to consumers' five senses, heart, and mind, utilizing consumer aesthetics, rest conditioning, variety seeking, and psychotherapeutic resources. Using EM is essential because it produces memorable and captivating customer encounters that improve brand perception and client loyalty. According to Schmitt & Bernd (1999), EM goes beyond traditional marketing's emphasis on product attributes to engage customers through sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and relational experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). By expanding the audience and increasing engagement, the incorporation of digital technologies, such as social media and virtual reality, enhances these benefits even more (Dholakia & Durham, 2012). Through customized and immersive encounters, experiential marketing, for example, can enhance client happiness and help brands stand out in the hotel sector (Bilgihan, et al., 2016). To maintain a competitive edge and retain customers, EM must be implemented.

2.2 Experiential Marketing Strategies

EM builds enduring customer relationships by developing worthwhile customer perceptions, generating memories, and encouraging engagement and product and service trials (Datta & Veto, 2017). Accordingly, events involving sensory, emotional, and social information create more vivid images associated with the particular brand (Carlson et al., 2017). Both offline and online strategies can be implemented as EM strategies.

The EM approach is a holistic concept that consists of other marketing aspects like event marketing, viral marketing, guerilla marketing, buzz marketing with Instagram settings, etc. that give opportunities for differentiation and be a topic for customers (Klepek & Martin, 2014). Product showcases, immersive experiences, relatable content stunts, and brand activation with mini-events incorporating product sampling are strategies used to engage customers. It goes beyond traditional marketing strategies that incorporate new technological applications like artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and virtual reality to become key drivers in incorporating tracking EM with technology like wearables, Near Field Communication technology, Radio Frequency Identification technology, Quick Response codes, mobile event apps, facial recognition, handheld scanners, etc. that impact EM strategies in the dynamic environment and lead to a more personalized customer experience (Rust & Roland, 2020).

Digital and social media platforms significantly influence EM strategies, requiring a multisensory experience for customers. The strategy should consider sensory, feeling, cognitive, action, and relational dimensions for maximum results in experiential management. (Larocca et al., 2020). Despite the success of quantitative metrics, measuring the impact of marketing strategies on consumers is a major challenge because it has not been demonstrated that those metrics provide appropriate proxies

for evaluating EM campaign outcomes (Gräve, 2019). The main results, or outcomes, of an EM campaign, include outcomes of customer mindset, customer behavior, product market performance, and financial aspects (Katsikeas et al., 2016).

2.3 Organizational Changes For Adopting Experiential Marketing

Within this dynamic business environment, change is essential to the growth of an organization. Organizations need to continuously improve their strategies, operational processes, and structures (Andrews & Richard, 2008). According to Lewin's model, organizations need to pass three stages, including unfreezing, changing, and refreezing, to go through organizational change (Hussain et al., 2016) Linking EM with business strategy is a new viewpoint, and it was discovered that these two fields are interconnected across six dimensions of business strategy: customer orientation, distinctive company capabilities, barriers to imitation, internal marketing, employee empowerment, and visionary leadership (Gupta & Seema, 2012). Organizations face barriers in transitioning to personalized experiences, which consume significant financial resources. To address these constraints, many event organizers partner with other brands and sponsors, considering factors like data privacy and security (Urdea & Petrișor, 2021).

Considering all those factors, organizations need to make the following kinds of changes if they are to adopt EM strategies: Within the organizational structure and the system, Cross-functional teams have to collaborate in EM to achieve a common objective. To make sure that the marketing message is consistent and smooth across all touch points, it is critical to bring together individuals from various departments and backgrounds (Lettenmaier, 2018).

Further, it requires a customer-centric approach. This includes placing the customer's needs and desires at the forefront of all marketing strategies to further personalize the experience and foster emotional attachment (McLoughlin & Aaker, 2010). To be more flexible and responsive to customer needs, organizations must flatten their hierarchies. A complex hierarchical structure frequently impedes communication and slows down decision-making (Wells & Spinks, 2015). Other than that organizations need to change their resources and capabilities as well. Technology is frequently used in EM to give consumers fully immersive experiences. To effectively engage customers, firms must be willing to invest in technology and accept new and emerging technologies (Lettenmaier, 2018).

3. Methodology

Researchers adopted the interpretivism philosophy by assuming that reality is subjective, multiple, and socially constructed. Accordingly, the research approach is inductive, aiming to develop a theory of cultural influence. The researcher opted for a multiple case study as a research strategy, hoping to gain insights from industry professionals within the hotel industry regarding their use of EM strategies.

Aligning with Yin's recommendation to use multiple case studies to gain broader insights, an in-depth investigation was necessary to fulfil the research objectives (Yin, 2018). The methodological choice is a mono-method qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews and document analysis.

Purposive sampling was used to select the case studies in the study. Accordingly, the researchers focused on four high-end hotels, including 4- and 5-star establishments, in the Central Province, resulting in a multiple case study containing four different scenarios to align with the purpose of the study.

In the data collection multiple data sources were used to generate an in-depth understanding of case studies (Eranda, 2021). Accordingly, secondary data was collected from magazines, reports, journal articles, literature, books, company documentaries, internet protocols, websites and existing case studies. To collect primary data, the researcher conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews and observations aimed at uncovering the respondents' experiences, knowledge, feelings, perspectives and issues related to experience marketing strategies. Data analysis was conducted employing the steps of coding, categorizing, synthesizing and theorizing using the NVIVO.

Qualitative research quality assurance involves reliability, transferability, and trustworthiness. Reliability is achieved through multiple data sources and data verification. Credibility is established through familiarity with selected hotels, primary and secondary data collection methods, purposive sampling, and a step-by-step procedure for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This ensures the validity of the research.

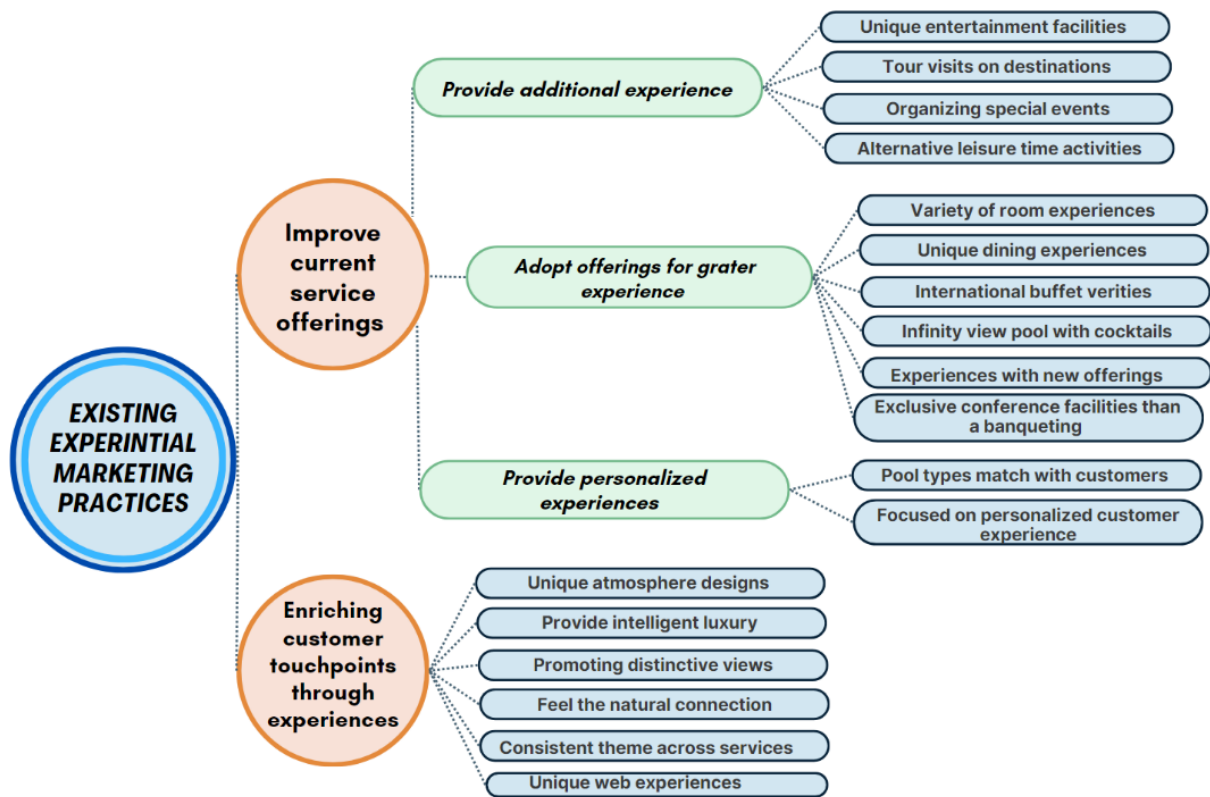
4. Findings

The findings are presented in this section based on the two objectives of the study. Accordingly, the findings relating to the first objective of identifying the existing EM strategies implemented by high-end hotels are presented below.

4.1 Existing EM Practices in High- End Hotels

As the results of analysis generated through coding and sorting the findings generated two themes as depicted in Figure 1 to uncover the existing EM practices in the selected hotels.

Figure 7 Thematic Map - The Existing Experiential Marketing Practices In Selected Hotels



The two themes generated as findings concerning the existing EM practices at high-end hotels are presented and interpreted below, which the first objective that address via research

4.1.1 Improve Current Service Offerings

Hotels focus on creating an amazing experience beyond simple accommodation, using EM to personalize services and incorporate alternative leisure activities. This approach enhances the overall experience and encourages interaction throughout the stay, resulting in high-end hotels continually refining and expanding their service offerings.

Following semi-structured interview transcript contended some of the unique experiences they have blended with a service offering of dining experiences (Refer Excerpt 1).

Excerpt 1:

"The hotel boasts a natural cave, offering a unique cave dining experience. Illuminated by wooden torches, a local villager plays the flute while guests dine, serving a seven-course menu at a rate of \$200 per person. This cave was also Jeffrey Bawa's dining experience with a table that he designed the hotel architecture for, providing a special and royal experience to guests, complete with a 'Perahara' and a dressed-up 'Nilame' suit to keep the unique culture in to experience."

This highlights the inclusion of unique experiences into core elements in service offerings such as dining. This not only covers the cooking but also the unique ambience, the way the food is presented, the background music, the attire of the staff and the variety of menu options. To create a unique and culturally rich experience, hotels deliberately enhance these basic characteristics. As hotels want to differentiate themselves by simply offering a meal, this strategy fits well with EM tactics. The hotel enhances the dining experience by attending to every little detail, including the setting, manner of service, music, and attire. This is an example of how hotels are progressively improving service offerings to provide a more upscale and culturally rich experience, especially in core areas such as dining. This approach is consistent with successful EM practices.

In excerpt 2, the respondent shared in interview, the unique dining experiences that they are offering to customers and how they have injected this experience into their core service offerings (refer Excerpt 2).

Excerpt 2:

“That is the only place we have. I mean, no other hotel doesn't. Have this type of fine dining experience. That was our railway carriage. It was originally functioning. We have brought it here, and we have not changed any main aspects of it. It's the original structure, the original seating style, and all. So it's a fine dining experience. So that is one of the unique features. The thing is, start the carriage with those sounds when customers dine in. It gives another level of experience, and the hotel has the highest railway carriage in Sri Lanka.”

The above respondent emphasized the hotel's unique approach to service delivery, transforming it into experiential marketing. They describe it as providing an authentic train carriage dining experience with real sounds and movements, enhancing the overall guest experience.

In addition to combining experiences with their main offerings, the hotels provide experiences through exclusive leisure activities, one-of-a-kind tour visits, special event management on behalf of the organizations, and distinctive entertainment facilities. As a result of their use of experience marketing, they also regularly receive client involvement for these items.

According to Excerpt 3 from a documentary video, their hotel offers a special extra experience that sets them apart from the competition. (Refer Excerpt 3)

Excerpt 03:

“Experience local attire and gather leaves in a basket at our 25-acre organic tea plantation. Learn to pluck specific leaves and practice to ensure they end up in your basket. Witness the factory's signature organic black and green teas and gain hands-on experience in the lush 25-acre plantation”.

Here, they perfectly celebrate a unique entertainment experience, an additional offering beyond their core services. Embracing Sri Lanka's tea culture, they offer visitors the opportunity to engage in the

entire tea-making process. This includes picking tea leaves dressed in traditional tea picker clothing, using a bucket to collect leaves and going through the operations of a small tea factory. Guests even get to taste the teas they have personally made. This represents a rare and special experience that goes beyond the usual hotel services. It demonstrates a commitment to offering guests something extraordinary, creating lasting memories during their stay.

Personalization plays a significant role in EM practices, under the theme of improving current service offerings for greater experiences. Hotels try to tailor experiences within their service offerings based on customer types.

4.1.2 Enriching Customer Touchpoints Through Experiences

The experience marketing campaign of a hotel relies on every interaction with clients, from information searches to check-outs. These interactions, including information searches and reservations, impact on overall mood and recurring theme of the customer experience. The use of EM can improve these touchpoints, ensuring a more positive and memorable experience for both current and prospective customers.

The field note from the respondent emphasizes how the hotel can provide exceptional experiences using these touchpoints. It demonstrates how the hotel constantly enthralls guests and makes each encounter unforgettable. This reflects the hotel's dedication to offering remarkable and unique experiences, underscoring the importance of strategically improving touchpoints in the customer journey and ultimately bolstering the effectiveness of their EM initiatives.

Excerpt 04:

“Upon entering from the reception to the main lobby, the architecture showcases the building's integration with the natural rock, preserving its original state. Inside the hotel, the rock is left untouched. Inside the rooms, some balconies are covered with trees and leaves, aligning strongly with Jeffrey Bawa's concept of harmonizing with the environment without causing harm. Following Bawa's idea, the entire hotel is covered by green leaves, creating a sense of a hidden place for guests, blending into the surrounding environment.”

According to Excerpt 04 the customers were able to sense the hotel's distinctive appearance and vibe as soon as they arrived, as the establishment was themed on natural culture. Draw attention to the fact that the natural rock is exactly as it is and that the first thing guests see when they enter the main lobby embodies the experience the hotel wants to emphasize and has already provided. It also says that natural leaves covering the balconies of the apartments provide a special sensation of being a part of the surroundings. It shows how the hotels merely pass on their executive marketing initiatives through even the customer touchpoints of the hotel.

The following excerpt 5 field note explains the theme-based experience that maintenance consists of across the service throughout all customer touchpoints to deliver the experience as EM practices.

Excerpt 05:

"The hotel's interior resembles a factory, with clam styles and accessories incorporating tea items. Employees' dress codes match tea farmers', and guests are welcomed with a tea tradition aligned with Tamil tea culture in Sri Lanka."

The hotel interprets its identity around the theme of Sri Lankan tea culture, maintaining a consistent tea experience across all customer touchpoints. Even small details, such as greetings by employees dressed as Tamil tea farmers even the smallest details, such as greetings, are orchestrated with employees appearing as Tamil tea farmers, welcoming guests akin to a kovil, align with the theme, creating a unique and immersive journey for customers.

Further, according to excerpt 6 from interview, the welcome drink was a flavored cup of tea.

Excerpt 06:

"After that, did you receive the welcome tea? Yes. So that is one of the uniqueness It's a specially brewed special recipe that we have made according to a special recipe, a welcome tea. So, everything is tea. We don't serve coffee in our rooms. Also, we give tea"

In particular, the welcome drink is a specially brewed tea, emphasizing the hotel's commitment to the tea theme. This comprehensive approach ensures that every touchpoint, from greetings to amenities, reflects the ambiance of a tea factory. The hotel's unique tea-centric strategy leverages customer touchpoints to create a memorable and cohesive brand experience, demonstrating the effectiveness of its EM initiatives.

The hotel's dedication to maintaining theme-based experiences throughout all touchpoints showcases the effectiveness of its EM initiatives in creating a memorable and cohesive brand experience.

Moving to another aspect, when discussing the enrichment of customer touchpoints through experiences, hotel customers focus on using touchpoints before consuming the hotel service. This means that they provide a unique experience to customers during the hotel search or booking stage. (Refer to excerpt 7)

Excerpt 07:

"Website improvements: in the process of enhancing website experiences, 5 new language options, implementation of a Chabot to assist with online direct bookings, etc."

It refers to the fact that the hotel has invested more in website development to deliver a unique online experience to customers via selecting language options, personal Chabot assistants to guide customers when referencing the hotel website smoothly, and more facilities for online booking and reservations.

It can be interpreted that the hotel is careful to address the customer's engagement point even before they consume their hotel services before visiting the property. They are trying to deliver the experience via their website by enriching customer's thought-provoking experiences. Also, with the Chabot option, they bring customers to the next level of personalization of their offerings, even before they get into the hotel premises.

On the other hand, excerpt 8 from the interview transcript highlights that

Excerpt 08:

“our website offers a unique and immersive 360-degree virtual tour, allowing potential guests to explore the hotel's opulent spaces from the comfort of their devices.”

As mentioned above, the hotel has gone beyond the focus of touchpoints in physical visits, taking another step in optimizing that experience for customers, allowing them to engage with a virtual 360-degree hotel tour that customers can experience before they visit the hotel physically. Here they have incorporated their experiences into their website with impressive web experience as an example of marketing initiatives.

Table 16 The Existing Experiential Marketing Practices In High-End Hotels

Theme	Meaning	Evidence
01 Improve current service offerings	To deliver experiential marketing practices hotels use service with adopting offerings additional experiences and personalization	<i>"The hotel boasts a natural cave, primarily priced for foreign customers, offering a unique cave dining experience"</i> <i>"No other hotel doesn't. Have this type of fine dining experience. That was our railway carriage. So it's a fine dining experience. The thing is, start the carriage with those sounds when customers dine in"</i> <i>"We will deck you out in local attire - saree for the ladies, sarong for the gentlemen - and provide you with a basket to collect your leaves. Then we will take you out to our organic tea fields and show you which leaves to pluck.</i>
02 Enriching customer touch points	Enhance blending consist experiences into customer touch points as experiential	<i>"Upon entering from the reception to the main lobby, the architecture showcases the building's integration with the natural rock, preserving its original state. Inside the hotel, the rock is left untouched."</i>

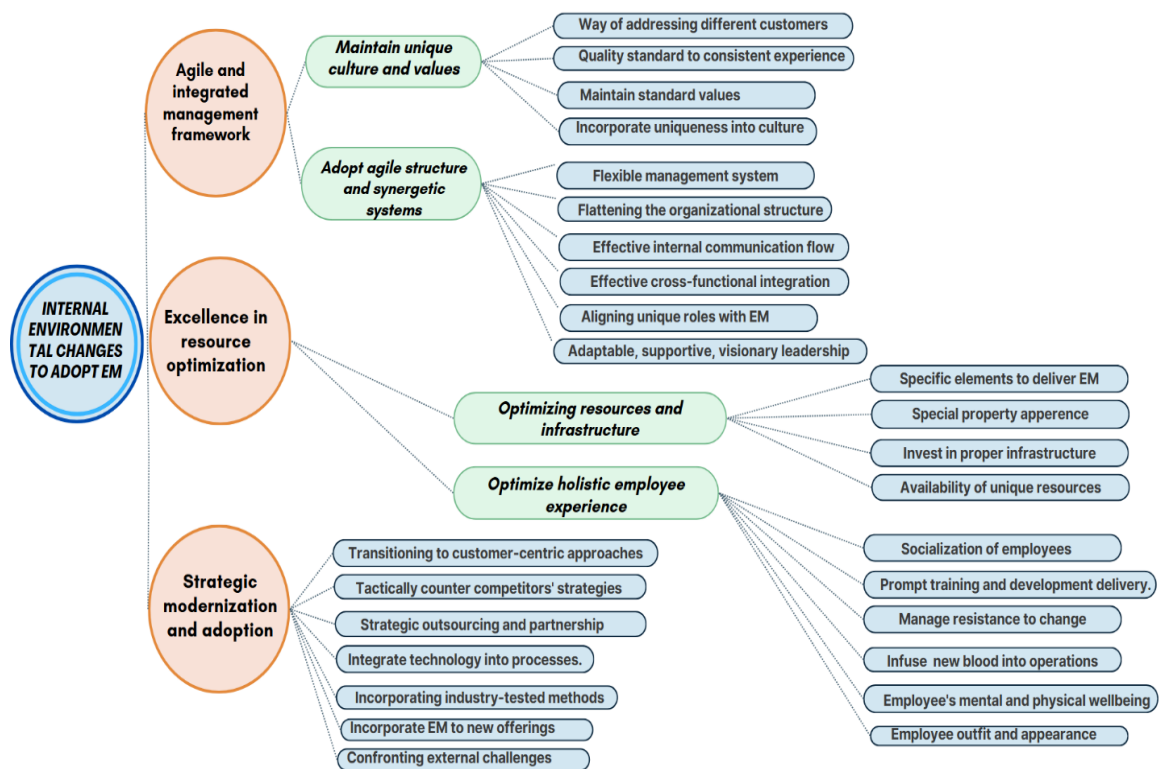
through	marketing	<i>“our website offers a unique and immersive 360-degree virtual</i>
experiences	initiatives	<i>tour, allowing potential guests to explore the hotel's opulent spaces</i>
		<i>from the comfort of their devices.”</i>

The findings relate to the second objective of the study which is examining the necessary changes and adaptations in the internal environment of high-end hotels that facilitate the successful implementation of EM strategies that are presented below.

4.2 The Internal Environmental Changes to Adopt EM

As the results of analysis generated through coding and sorting the findings generated three themes as follows to uncover the internal environmental changes to adopt EM. (Figure 2).

Figure 8 Thematic Map - The Internal Environmental Changes To Adopt EM



The three themes generated as findings concerning the existing EM practices at high-end hotels are presented and interpreted below, which is the second objective that address via research.

4.2.1 Excellence in Resource Optimization

To adopt EM practices, hotels make some changes and adaptations in their internal environment, reach a major consensus with the available resources, and effectively utilize them in an optimized way. Here, resources include both material resources and human resources optimization for excellence in the organization. Optimization of the existing company resources and hotel infrastructure, including unique proper appearances that they have and, focus on holistic employee experience optimization take place to deliver the experiences at an excellent level to exceed customer expectations.

Excerpt 09 Interview transcript.

“Our property, built on natural rock, embodies our commitment to providing a unique experience, integrating seamlessly with the environment and showcasing our chairman's vision.”

This statement underscores the importance of hoteliers maximizing their current assets. It highlights how a unique property design combined specifically with natural rock acts as a strategic choice. This not only enhances the aesthetic appeal but also aligns with the Chairman's vision of providing an unmatched experience. Essentially, it shows that investing in unique property features has a direct impact on EM results.

Similarly, **Excerpt 10** annual report showcases that

The ability to attract tourists depends on the infrastructure (manufactured capital), the ratings and certifications (intellectual capital), and recommendations by our business partners (social and relationship capital). We use our financial capital to purchase goods and services required to make their stay a pleasant experience.

Hotels adopt EM practices by adjusting their internal environment, optimizing resources, and focusing on human resources. This includes optimizing material and human resources, enhancing company infrastructure, and focusing on holistic employee experience. The goal is to deliver exceptional experience, exceed customer expectations, and enhance the overall experience. This approach ensures the organization's excellence in both material and human resources.

Moving to live resources, **Excerpt 11**,

“We send our employees through a specific socialization program, will tell you how to behave as a hotel citizen. That's where you learn how to dress, how to groom yourself, what to say, and what not to say. All of that will be discussed with whoever joins the organization. But. The thing they will do is that, through that, only we can deliver the service, a kind of common ID.”

Accordingly, the critical role of the socialization program in making employees effective contributors to the unique experience offered by the organization. The program serves as a guide on how to act as a "hotel citizen", instructing employees on various aspects such as dress, grooming, communication

norms, and act. The socialization process is crucial for developing a shared corporate identity and providing differentiated services. It involves employees being immersed in the culture, becoming ambassadors of the brand and embodying the values and practices that contribute to the EM strategy, ensuring a unique customer experience.

Along with **Excerpt 12** mentioned,

“Let’s say we recently allowed our staff to learn tea tasting, right? So we took them to an institute and we gave them proper training. And so now when the particular lady is absent, we have another set of staff to give that particular experience that we did where we advertised in-house if anyone likes to learn about the experience, which is we train. It is a win-win situation aligned with the superior experiences that we are providing. So that is our practice. We give cross-departmental training to anyone who needs it. So if we found that particular employee in some other skill. So definitely we allow them”.

It discussed the hotel’s commitment to staff development and training as a critical component of delivering exceptional experiences. Their proactive approach to skill building is illustrated by the example of tea-tasting training. By providing cross-functional training, they ensure a flexible workforce that can easily adapt to different roles. A win-win situation is created when learning opportunities are promoted internally and a culture of continuous development is fostered. Also, hotels should focus on the mental and physical well-being of employees, so they represent brands.

4.2.2 Strategic Modernization and Adoption

The hospitality industry must focus on strategic modernization and environmental adaptations in its internal environment to embrace EM practices. This includes transitioning to customer-centric approaches, outsourcing, and establishing partnerships to counter competitors. Technology integration is critical to improving efficiency and customer experience. Industry-tested methods add reliability to the conversion process.

Excerpt 13

“So basically everything is based on customers, right? Focusing on the fact that, apart from our tea experience and dining experience. Everything is based on customer-centric activities that we have planned”.

The statement emphasizes the importance of customer-centricity in hotels' EM practices. Aligning all aspects of the hotel's offerings with customer preferences and behaviors. This includes offering nature trails and other excursion activities and demonstrating a commitment to tailoring services based on customer interests. The core philosophy is to treat customers as the focal point of decision-making, ensuring their satisfaction is paramount. To yield tangible results, hotels must prioritize understanding

and meeting customer expectations, ensuring every planned activity and service resonates with their guests' preferences.

Excerpt 14

“In the global hospitality industry, catering to clients from varied regions, such as the UK, USA, Dubai, Maldives, and Malaysia, demands a nuanced understanding. Visitors accustomed to high standards from international hotel chains bring elevated expectations. Learning from the best practices of these industry giants, we continuously observe and analyze their operations. The goal is not only to stay informed about global trends but also to incorporate successful strategies into our operations, aligning with the ever-evolving demands of an international clientele”.

The hotel emphasizes the importance of adopting industry-tested methods and learning from successful practices in the global hospitality industry. It caters to guests from various regions and understands the high expectations of guests from big hotel names the hotel follows global trends and uses effective strategies from these big hotels in its services. The manager emphasizes that to impress customers, hotels must strategically obsess over industry trends and adapt to them to stay competitive. Strategic adaptation is crucial in an organization's internal environment, not imitating others.

Researchers have observed that strategic modernization and adoption in hotels involve focusing on the hotel's internal environment, enhancing EM practices to provide standard customer experiences through strategic outsourcing and partnerships.

Excerpt 15

“Collaborations with local artists, cultural experts, and event planners have been instrumental in curating authentic cultural events and performances within the hotel premises. Partnerships with renowned chefs and culinary experts contribute to the diverse and elevated dining experiences offered to our guests”.

This underlines the critical role of strategic outsourcing and partnerships in the internal environment of hotels, particularly with a focus on EM practices. The interviewee highlights how collaborations with local artists, cultural experts, event planners, celebrity chefs and culinary experts play a key role in shaping unique and authentic experiences for hotel guests. By establishing strategic partnerships, the hotel taps into the expertise of these professionals, ensuring a diverse range of cultural events, concerts, and high-end dining experiences. It refers the importance of the right partnerships in delivering exceptional and standard experiences to customers. On the other hand, outsourcing some services also makes for an exceptional standard experience on behalf of hotels without any areas lacking.

Excerpt 16

“Of course, we have outsourced parties, like the spa operation, which is a kind of partnership, but the spa operation and the shop operation are outsourced. To give the status level of experience in the spa, we have this collaboration”.

This statement emphasizes the outsourcing services like spa and shop operations in hotels improves the overall guest experience by partnering with specialized establishments. This strategic decision ensures high standards in areas like spa, contributing to a more comprehensive and refined guest experience. Incorporating outsourcing strategies into effective EM practices is beneficial.

Hotels are integrating technology to enhance their operations and provide a seamless customer experience, while they wait for new product developments to be infused with experience to maintain consistency over the long term. According to respondent 01 interview,

Excerpt 17

“Yeah, if you take new product development, the most recent development is a conference center, Now, if you go to the conference center, you will feel it because it has a 360-degree view.”

Accordingly, hotels' strategic focus is on integrating experiential elements into new product developments for sustainable consistency. Using a recently constructed conference center in the hotel as an example, the interviewer highlights its unique features, including a panoramic 360-degree view that enhances visitors' appreciation of the surrounding environment. This approach allows each addition, such as the conference center, to provide a unique and immersive experience beyond its functional purpose. By creating innovations with distinctive features, hotels aim not only to meet practical needs but also to create lasting memories for guests. Such experiential innovation ensures a long-term commitment.

4.2.3 Agile and Integrated Management Framework

The significance of an agile and integrated management framework in hotels for successful EM practices. This includes a flexible system for swift adjustments, a flat organizational structure, effective internal communication, cross-functional integration, and leadership. Maintaining a unique culture and values is crucial for addressing diverse customers and setting quality standards for consistent experiences. This theme advocates for a transformative internal environment.

Excerpt 18

“So to adapt these EM practices and all, yes, now the biggest challenge would be if you take a very toll structure; it's communication that is challenging in a toll structure. Now what we are doing is flattening the structure so that easy communication will take place. Management systems. If you take

food safety seriously, it's a management system. Food safety management system. There is an environmental management system. Of course. Now I'm looking after the Environment Management System”.

The challenges of a highly organized communication structure in marketing practices and emphasizes the importance of flattening the structure to facilitate easy communication within the hotel. They advocate for flexible management systems, particularly in areas like food safety and environmental management, and emphasize the hotel's commitment to a structured and efficient approach, highlighting a shift towards a flat organizational structure for smoother communication and effective marketing.

Excerpt 19

“The front office acts as a central hub, communicating with housekeeping to understand guest needs and preferences. Standard operating procedures ensure each room meets the required standards, ensuring a smooth and satisfactory guest experience. This interaction between departments, particularly the front office and housekeeping, ensures a seamless and efficient service.”

The importance of collaboration and cross-functional integration in hotels adopting EM practices. It highlights the role of the front office and housekeeping departments in ensuring seamless communication and meeting customer expectations. The front office acts as a central hub, sharing essential guest information and standard operating procedures. These interactions are crucial for a smooth and satisfying guest experience, and any misstep in cross-functional integration can negatively impact the overall guest experience.

Excerpt 20

“We have, Eco Animators we have in the hotel, and Eco Park we have Eco Park in charge. We have a place called Eco Park, which isn't a big thing, but still, Eco Park has so many components”.

“Consider the staff at our mini tea factory, we have already recruited them from our main procedures. So they are the ones who do the production. And so they are only solely responsible for the factory production and handling the tea experience”.

Another major finding was that the hotel's introduced specific job roles align with unique experiences offered by hotels to the organizational structure. Having “Eco Animators” and “Eco Park in charge” shows a deliberate effort to combine roles that suit eco-friendly and nature-centric experiences to provide a variety of ecological experiences. Similarly, key procedures for a small tea factory highlight the strategic placement of knowledgeable personnel dedicated solely to tea production and the handling of the tea experience. Both hotels show a conscious effort to align staff structures with the specific

experiences they aim to deliver by arranging these unique job roles, ensuring expertise and quality in delivering these exceptional services to customers.

Another major aspect that should be presented is the role of culture when focusing on the internal environment adaptation of EM practices done by hotels.

Excerpt 21

“Mostly, it’s a culture that we have created inside the company; we should call it the “Lengathukama” of the company for customers you can treat like Singapore Airlines hostesses now”

The importance of company culture, known as "Lengathukama", is aligned with the experience they provide to customers. More simply, it suggests that the established hotel culture plays a critical role in shaping customer interactions while aiming for a level of service equivalent to prestigious hospitality standards. Also, the mention of a hotel that is synonymous with Sri Lankan tea culture highlights how unique cultural elements are woven into the experience they offer as discussed in earlier. The hotel's values and standards can also be incorporated here as a part of the culture that discloses maintaining their values throughout the EM initiatives to ensure consistency.

Excerpt 22

“The company prioritizes quality and has dedicated teams in various departments, including the kitchen and F&B operations, under the supervision of experienced professionals like the Executive Chef, Sous Chef, and Junior Sous Chef. The Executive Chef oversees all aspects, ensuring the highest standards are maintained for different client groups”.

Maintaining quality across hotel departments is crucial. Dedicated teams, led by experienced professionals like the Executive Chef, ensure high standards in areas such as kitchen and F&B operations. The Executive Chef plays a key role in overseeing services for diverse clients, reflecting the hotel's commitment to quality. This ensures consistent delivery of EM initiatives and a memorable customer experience.

Table 17 Internal Environmental Changes To Adopt EM

Theme	Meaning	Evidence
Theme 01 Excellence in resource optimization	In order to adopt experiential making practices, organizations have to optimize their existing resources,	<i>“The property is strategically built on natural rock, showcasing a harmonious integration with the environment. This architectural decision aligns with our chairman's vision to offer a one-of-a-kind experience to our guests.”</i> <i>“It begins with acknowledging the importance of an employee's mental and physical well-being. A healthy</i>

including human resources as well. *mindset ensures that when employees are serving food or drinks, their overall disposition positively impacts the customer's experience.*

Theme 02 Strategic modernization and adoption	To adopt experiential marketing initiatives, hotels need to focus on strategic management and adaptation in their internal environment, reacting to the external environment.	<i>“We have nature trails and all other excursion activities. Also. Everything is based on customer-centric activities that we have planned”.</i>
		<i>“Visitors accustomed to high standards from international hotel chains. Learning from the best practices of these industry giants, we continuously observe and analyze their operations”</i>
Theme 03 Agile and integrated management framework	The hotel should have a flexible and integrated organizational structure and systems and unique cultural values and standards.	<i>“The biggest challenge would be if you take a very toll structure; it's communication that is challenging in a toll structure. Now what we are doing is flattening the structure so that easy communication will take place”</i>
		<i>“Mostly, it's a culture that we have created inside the company; we should call it the “Lengathukama””</i>

5. Discussion

High-end hotels utilize personalized service offerings and consistent experiential initiatives to enhance customer touchpoints, creating memorable experiences and emotional connections to boost awareness.

The study emphasizes the significance of incorporating experiences into service offerings, personalizing them, and engaging customers through these experiences, as well as enriching customer touchpoints. Overall, high-end hotels aim to create memorable experiences and foster emotional connections to enhance customer experiences.

Every interaction a consumer has with a hotel is vital to improving the experience marketing campaign. Every touchpoint that occurs before, during, and following the use of hotel services has a big impact on the clients.

EM is mostly used in the service industry, rejecting traditional marketing with "features and benefits" and approaching marketing through experience creation (Maghnati, et al., 2012). The service industry is shifting towards experience generation, with hotels incorporating unique experiences into their offerings and integrating them into new product developments. This shift aligns with marketing strategies aligned with EM practices, focusing not only on additional benefits and facilities but also on generating experience.

EM can be defined as the process of distributing and promoting a product by allowing customers to observe and participate in various events related to the concept of the product (Sehani & Hettiarachchy, 2022). EM is primarily delivered through customer engagement with events related to offerings, but it can extend beyond events to include unique entertainment facilities, alternative leisure activities, and tour visits. It's essential to blend unique experiences into main offerings and ensure every customer touchpoint is utilized to enhance the experience through EM practices.

On the other hand, it ensures the idea of Klepek & Martin (2014) that the EM approach is a holistic concept that consists of other marketing aspects that give opportunities for differentiation and be a topic for customers.

With EM strategies, hotels try to become more unique than their competitors in the market. According to Datta EM builds enduring customer relationships by developing worthwhile customer perceptions, generating memories, and encouraging engagement and product and service trials (Datta & Veto, 2017).

The study emphasizes the importance of customer engagement in EM and suggests that hoteliers should be cautious when targeting their target market. They should identify the nature of the target market that aligns with the uniqueness of their hotel, as this directly affects customer engagement. Excerpts emphasize that unique experience is tailored to specific customers, resulting in intelligent luxury. Therefore, when implementing EM strategies, hotels should have a clear understanding of their target customer segment to ensure customer engagement throughout their journey.

It has been identified that technology plays a major role in EM practices at high- end hotels, as well as the literature highlighted. It goes beyond traditional marketing strategies that incorporate new technological applications like artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and virtual reality to become key drivers in incorporating tracking EM with technology like wearables, NCF technology, RFID technology, QR codes mobile event apps, facial recognition, handheld scanners, etc (Rust & Roland, 2020).

Some hotels offer personalized experiences through Web Experiences, but some respondents argue against allowing more technology implementation in their hotels to align with sustainability concepts. This could negatively affect the hotel's theme and brand image. Additionally, implementing technological applications in hotel experiences may confuse customers due to limited urbanization and

unique customer culture. The research question should focus on existing EM practices by high-end hotels to better understand their strategies and address potential confusion and ineffectiveness.

Focusing on the hotel's interior environment adopted in EM efforts: excellence in resource optimization, strategic innovation, and adoption of agile and integrated management frameworks, respectively. Moving to more elaboration, the first thing will notice is that these top hotels use some unusual strategies.

The fact is that to go with the EM initiatives, hotels need to shift from the traditional management practices that were implemented to internal organization management. Also, some of the strategies had to change with the dynamic world. Talking about the literature emphasizes that Organizations need to continuously improve their strategies, operational processes, and structures. (Andrews & Richard, 2008). The study confirms that traditional marketing approaches are outdated and should be replaced with strategic innovation and adaptation to environmental changes. It emphasizes the importance of EM, a new concept in marketing, which seeks uniqueness and novelty. Generational changes also influence service, product, and experience expectations, which must align with technologies, even when planning travel (Giberson & Juleigh, 2017). In the contemporary landscape, technology is not the only driver of new experiences. Current criteria indicate that a variety of factors shape unique encounters. Moving forward, research should uncover proven methods from the industry, emphasize strategic outsourcing and partnerships, and highlight new product developments.

This holistic approach recognizes that innovation arises not only from technological advances but also from a nuanced interplay of tested methods, collaborations, and product evolution. The research findings were in line with Gupta's opinion that - Linking EM with business strategy is a new viewpoint, and it was discovered that these two fields are interconnected across six dimensions of business strategy: customer orientation, distinctive company capabilities, and barriers to imitation, internal marketing, employee empowerment, and visionary leadership. (Gupta & Seema, 2012) Shifting from a service-centric to a customer-centric approach is critical to the internal adoption of EM strategies.

Hotels have unique resources such as distinctive property appearance that play a significant role. It is essential to consider these unique resources when delivering exceptional experiences. Focusing on customer needs and leveraging unique assets ensures a more effective and tailored approach to EM in the hospitality industry. Expanding on Gupta's concept, ensuring that employee empowerment is essential to optimizing the holistic employee experience is critical to implementing customer-centric practices. These findings highlight the adoption of unique employee socialization practices, distinguishing individual hotels within chains. Maintaining this uniqueness is critical to maintaining a distinctive identity, allowing hotels to preserve their uniqueness. This approach ensures that employees are well-equipped to deliver exceptional customer experiences, contributing to the overall success and

individuality of each hotel. During the observation, the researcher found that although employee socialization is taken seriously in the hotel culture, even some hotels maintain small villages to optimize employee socialization, and they tend to hire people from the same village where the hotel is located. To keep the weirdness alive with experience.

In addition, the overall strategy driven by leadership must be supportive, flexible, and visionary to streamline operations. Another critical aspect that is often overlooked in literature is the inclusion of fresh talent in operations that involve youth with new ideas. Bringing in new blood has a positive impact not only on creativity but also on organizational structures, improving the effective execution of EM initiatives. This dynamic approach ensures adaptability and innovation, contributing to the overall success of the organization.

A complex hierarchical structure frequently impedes communication and slows down decision-making. (Wells & Spinks, 2015). It is ensured that the hotels are closer to leveling and highlighting the organizational structure and they are trained to handle situations without any supervision. Beyond that, they provide cross-sectional training to employees to strengthen operational and multi-tasking skills. Moreover, the findings speak to flexible management systems, cross-functional integration, and effective internal communication flow.

Another key finding, not much discussed in the literature, is that hotels have unique job roles, with unique experiences they share with customers who have greater expertise with the offering. Culture plays a major role in the internal environment of an organization. However, the literature often fails to adequately highlight the relationship between culture and EM initiatives. The relationship between hotel culture and customer experience necessitates a thorough understanding, highlighting the need for initiatives to align with cultural values and standards, and the importance of integrating culture into marketing strategies.

6. Conclusion

This research covers the adoption of internal organizational changes required for aligning with experiential marketing strategies, following an exploration of the existing experiential marketing approaches employed by high-end hotels. The study focuses on the high-high-end hotel sector in Sri Lanka, aiming to address how these changes can enhance the implementation of experiential marketing within the local hospitality context.

The research examines experiential marketing practices in high-end hotels, revealing two key themes that guide the strategic enhancement of offerings for unique and immersive experiences. High-end hotels focus on curating extraordinary guest experiences beyond accommodation, leveraging existing services for experiential marketing. Personalization and incorporating alternative leisure activities enhance the guest experience. By continually refining and expanding service offerings, they effectively

implement experiential marketing strategies. The hotel's touchpoints, from information search to check-out, are crucial for engaging guests and shaping their perception of the brand, aiming to create memorable experiences throughout the customer journey.

The study reveals three key themes for hotels to adapt to experiential marketing practices: Excellence in Resource Optimization, Strategic Modernization and Adoption, and Agile and Integrated Management Framework. Hotels must optimize both material and human resources to deliver exceptional experiences, focusing on employee experience optimization and adapting to change. Strategic modernization and adoption of customer-centric approaches, strategic partnerships, and technology integration are crucial for successful experiential marketing. Aligning with customer needs, embracing technological advancements, and leveraging strategic partnerships are essential. An agile and integrated management framework is essential, maintaining a flat organizational structure, effective communication, and cross-functional integration. Leadership plays a pivotal role in driving these changes while upholding a unique culture and values is crucial for setting quality standards and addressing diverse customers.

Limitations of the study include difficulty in generalizing findings due to the small sample size and qualitative nature of the multiple case study (4 high-end hotels), though focusing on hotels within the same geographical area offers some level of generalizability. Additionally, there was potential for subjectivity and bias, which was addressed by documenting data transparently and using multiple sources to enhance validity and reliability.

Future research is critical to examine the role of technology in aligning with hotel culture and standards in the field of EM. Understanding how technology helps to shape these experiences is essential to keeping up with industry trends. Furthermore, there is a need to investigate how high-end hotels can effectively target and engage specific customer segments that align with their unique offerings. These explorations will shed light on the strategies high-end hotels use to resonate with the right audiences, ensure their unique offerings align seamlessly with customer preferences and expectations, and ultimately contribute to the success of their EM initiatives.

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