

Is South Africa's hospitality sector facing a PR crisis?

South African travellers are becoming increasingly diverse, with a rise in black luxury travellers. However, do these travellers see an industry that mirrors their aspirations, dreams, and identity?



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The reality is that the hospitality sector is facing a persisting PR crisis. This crisis is rooted in perceptions formed way before our nation embraced freedom. Those times, marked by exclusion and inequality, painted the hotel business as "White-owned, White-managed, and White-dominated".

Years have passed, and while partnership structures like BEE have been legislated, the deep-seated perceptions haven't. Frankly, our industry has been too slow to change, lagging behind other industries.

We're now beginning to see black general managers emerging, but they're like gold dust. Those available are so highly prized that their cost becomes prohibitive for many hotel establishments. This isn't to point fingers but to highlight the scale of the challenge.

Back in 1997, I remember hunting for trainees for the President Hotel, one of Cape Town's largest hotels. Out of 20 potential trainees, only five or six would likely persevere in an industry known for its demanding nature and long hours. When reaching out to high schools for talent in Cape Town's southern suburbs, the lack of interest in the hotel business at a student level as well as for school career guidance counsellors was profound, the response hugely underwhelming. Our industry's image problem was, and still is, clear.

The lack of enthusiasm for the industry, especially among our youth, isn't just because it's challenging. The PR problem runs deeper. There's a social stigma attached. While a chef in Paris is revered and in certain cases in cities in Africa too, our local service industry grapples with associations to apartheid-era connotations of servitude. This needs to change.

It's important to clarify: our industry isn't all glamour. It's a calling, akin to nursing or teaching. The long hours? The complaints. Difficult guests. They're part of the deal. But so is the deep satisfaction you get at the end of the day, knowing you've played a part in someone's memorable stay. I still vividly recall the joy I felt when a guest had experienced a

phenomenal stay at the hotels I worked at, coming up through the ranks.



Guy Stehlik, CEO of BON Hotels

So, how do we move on from here?

1. **Intensive screening:** Getting into a hotel school in my time was no walk in the park. After multiple interviews, and a year's industry experience - only the truly committed made it through. Today, hotel schools will tell you that youngsters often opt for a hospitality career as a last resort because they couldn't get into any other course. Reinstating more rigorous screening could be our starting point.

2. **Education and exposure:** Many young individuals, especially from rural backgrounds, haven't even set foot in a hotel. How can we then expect them to be excited about hospitality? Let's change that. Let's invite them, show them the ropes, and give them a taste of the possibilities.

3. **Cultivating Influencers:** We urgently need more black influencers in hospitality. Currently, they're few and far between. It's not just about numbers;

it's about having role models that budding professionals can look up to and aspire to be.

4. **Rebranding service:** The perception of service in our country needs an overhaul. It's time we showcased the service industry for what it truly is: a noble profession where one derives immense satisfaction from enhancing a guest's experience.

Here's a message for our government: Your role here is invaluable. Funds need to be strategically directed. Instead of mass recruitment initiatives that bring in young people without equipping them with essential skills, let's channel resources towards programmes that genuinely uplift the industry's image. Dedicate campaigns to train influencers and boost our sector's reputation.

The PR challenge in our industry is monumental, but not insurmountable. SA Tourism, the Minister of Tourism, Fedhasa and us industry role players, with clear strategies and collective effort, can reshape perceptions and mould a truly representative and inclusive hospitality sector. As I've often said, hospitality is about a willingness and desire to serve.

Either you have it, or you don't.

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