How to Use Brain Science to Be Your Best Self In 2017

Neuroscience offers some handy hacks to learn faster, focus better, and make smarter decisions this year.

Resolutions are often an exercise in wishful thinking. People rarely keep them, mostly because they’re vague about their goals and don’t have a plan for following through. But that isn’t the only thing that may weaken resolve or slow progress toward a goal. Failing to understand some practical brain science can just as quickly do you in. Neuroscience has shown us this year that we may actually have everything we need to stay focused, be more creative, remember more, and make better decisions—just as long as we can work a bit more with our brains, not against them. Here are a few things that can take you closer toward being your best self in 2017.

HOW TO LEARN MORE
Authors Judah Pollack and Olivia Fox Cabane used a gardening metaphor to explain how certain brain cells act like a landscaping crew, pruning, weeding and nurturing synapses so they function better. They lay waste to unused synaptic connections to make room for more learning. So, the authors remind us, it’s important to choose your thoughts wisely: the more you think about something, the more you’ll reinforce certain connections, lessening the likelihood that they’ll be pruned.

“If you’re in a fight with someone at work and devote your time to thinking about how to get even with them, and not about that big project, you’re going to wind up a synaptic superstar at revenge plots, but a poor innovator.”

HOW TO SLEEP BETTER
All of that gardening happens surreptitiously while we snooze. Sleep, therefore, is one of the main keys to learning. The problem is that we’re likely not getting enough of it. A small but noteworthy recent study showed that getting six hours of sleep can be as bad as staying up all night.

Experts recommend making room for healthy habits at bedtime, such as making sure it’s at the same time each night, keeping the room cool, limiting alcohol before bed and putting away your devices at least 30 minutes before turning in. Oh, and try to drop excess weight. Obesity has been linked to sleep apnea.

HOW TO TRUST YOUR GUT
Recent studies suggest that trusting your instincts in combination with careful consideration of facts can improve your decision-making. Gut instincts can be really valuable, as long as you keep them in balance.

To better tap into your gut’s decision-making power, Hana Ayoub, a professional development coach, emphasizes the importance of buying yourself some time to reflect. “Start telling people, ‘I need to sleep on this, I’ll get back to you tomorrow.’ Start building that response into your conversations, especially with the people you work with most,” she advises. They’ll often respect that. “It’s telling people that’s how you work.”

HOW TO LEARN FASTER
Sometimes the simplest shift can make the most profound difference. So it is with learning. Mastering something that requires motor skills, for example, is easiest when we change up the way we’re moving through the exercise, rather than just repeating it exactly the same way over and over. Try “teaching” the thing you want to learn to another person. Ditto for shifting perspectives. The act of explaining it to someone else can actually solidify those concepts for you.

HOW TO FOCUS BETTER
You already know that learning and remembering takes focus. The problem is that your brain likes to wander. One key to better concentration is to quit multitasking. And while you’re at it, take the information you’re being fed and learn to distill and summarize it. It’s one thing to embrace “monotasking” and another to use the mental energy you save to sharpen those analytical skills in the process.

HOW TO MOVE FROM AUTOPILOT TO ACTION
A new calendar year comes with the fresh promise of moving beyond past pitfalls toward success. But January 1 is hardly the only day that can spur you on to action. Our brain likes so-called “pivot points,” like the first of the month or any old Monday, as evidenced by the regular surge of Google searches for “quit smoking” or “diet” on those days. Researchers speculate that it’s because such days force us out of our routines to think of the bigger picture.

Creative breakthroughs can happen just by daydreaming or spending time alone (or both). To tap this power any day of the week, Bob Nease, former chief scientist of Express Scripts, says to “pull back from the day-to-day flow altogether, as opposed to just marking its peaks and valleys in order to become more aware of the choices we can make, big and small—and then actually make them.”

HOW TO BE MORE CREATIVE
You’ve no doubt heard that eureka moments often come when we’re lathering up in the shower—72% of people claim that’s happened to them. However, science also shows that creative breakthroughs can happen just by daydreaming or spending time alone (or both). Solitude seems to be useful, but the circumstances that encourage creative thought during those periods may be more flexible than we think.

**Why Light Bulbs May Be the Next Hacker Target**

The Internet of Things, activated through apps, promises tremendous convenience to homeowners. But it may also prove irresistible to hackers. The so-called Internet of Things, its proponents argue, offers many benefits: energy efficiency, technology so convenient it can anticipate what you want, even reduced congestion on the roads.

Now here’s the bad news: Putting a bunch of wirelessly connected devices in one area could prove irresistible to hackers. And it could allow them to spread malicious code through the air, like a flu virus on an airplane.

Researchers report in a paper to be made public soon that they have uncovered a flaw in a wireless technology that is often included in smart home devices like lights, switches, locks, thermostats and many of the components of the much-ballyhooed “smart home” of the future. The researchers focused on the Philips Hue smart light bulb and found that the wireless flaw could allow hackers to take control of the light bulbs, according to researchers at the Weizmann Institute of Science near Tel Aviv and Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada. That may not sound like a big deal. But imagine thousands or even hundreds of thousands of Internet-connected devices in close proximity. Malware created by hackers could spread like a pathogen among the devices by compromising just one of them. And they wouldn’t have to have direct access to the devices to infect them: The researchers were able to spread infection in a network inside a building by driving a car 229 feet away.

Recently, hackers briefly denied access to whole chunks of the Internet by creating a flood of traffic that overwhelmed the servers of a New Hampshire company called Dyn, which helps manage key components of the Internet. Security experts say they believe the hackers found the horsepower necessary for their attack by taking control of a range of Internet-connected devices, but the hackers did not use the method detailed in the report being made public. One Chinese wireless camera manufacturer said weak passwords on some of its products were partly to blame for the attack.

Though it was not the first time hackers used the Internet of Things to power an attack, the scale of the effort against Dyn was a revelation to people who didn’t realize that having Internet-connected things knitted into daily life would come with new risks. “Even the best Internet defense technologies would not stop such an attack,” said Adi Shamir, a widely respected cryptographer who helped pioneer modern encryption methods and is one of the authors of the report. The new risk comes from a little-known radio protocol called ZigBee. Created in the 1990s, ZigBee is a wireless standard widely used in home consumer devices. While it is supposed to be secure, it hasn’t been held up to the scrutiny of other security methods used around the Internet.

A small drone wirelessly delivers a computer worm in Beer Sheva, Israel, causing lights to flicker. The researchers found that the ZigBee standard can be used to create a so-called computer worm to spread malicious software among Internet-connected devices.

**Are Smart Homes Open Houses for Hackers?**

The Wirecutter, a Times-owned product recommendation site, offers tips on how to secure your home’s Internet-connected devices.

Computer worms, which can keep replicating from one device to another, get less attention these days, but in the early years of the commercial Internet, they were a menace. In 1988, one worm by some estimates brought down a tenth of the computers connected to the Internet. Since then, the number of Internet-connected devices has spiraled into the billions and with it the risks of a cleverly created worm. So what could hackers do with the compromised devices? For one, they could create programs that help in attacks like the one that hit Dyn. Or they could be a springboard to steal information, or just send spam.

They could also set an LED light into a strobe pattern that could trigger epileptic seizures or just make people very uncomfortable. It may sound far-fetched, but that possibility has already been proved by the researchers.

The color and brightness of the Philips Hue smart light bulb can be controlled from a computer or a smartphone. The researchers showed that by compromising a single light bulb, it was possible to infect a large number of nearby lights within minutes. The worm program carried a malicious payload to each light—even if they were not part of the same private network.

In creating a model of the infection process, they simulated the distribution of the lights in Paris over an area of about 40 square miles and noted that the attack would potentially spread when as few as 15,000 devices were in place over that area.

The researcher said they had notified Philips of the potential vulnerability and the company had asked the researchers not to go public with the research paper until it had been corrected. Philips fixed the vulnerability in a patch issued on October 4, and recommended that customers install it through a smartphone application. Still, it played down the significance of the problem.

“We have assessed the security impact as low given that specialist hardware, unpublished software and close proximity to Philips Hue lights are required to perform a theoretical attack,” Beth Brenner, a Philips spokeswoman, said.

To perfect their attack, the researchers said they needed to overcome two separate technical challenges. They first found a “major bug” in the way the wireless communications system for the lights had been executed, which made it possible to “yank” already installed lamps from their existing networks.

The researchers then used what cryptographers describe as a “side channel” attack to purloin the key that Philips uses to authenticate new software. The term “side channel” refers to the clever use of information about how a particular encryption scheme is used.

“We used only readily available equipment costing a few hundred dollars, and managed to find this key without seeing any actual updates,” the researchers wrote. “This demonstrates once again how difficult it is to get security right even for a large company that uses standard cryptographic techniques to...
The Science of Better-Tasting Milk

A new study finds that fluorescent light can degrade the flavor of milk in supermarkets—and offers some solutions.

There’s no use crying over spilled milk, but you might well shed a tear or two over the taste of milk in the era of plastic cartons. Scientists at Virginia Tech report that, in blind tastings, the flavor of milk stored in a standard supermarket-style dairy cooler is significantly degraded by fluorescent light passing through translucent plastic containers. When LED bulbs were used instead, tasters rated the milk about the same as when it was packaged in a lightproof container—which is to say, a lot better.

The widespread adoption of translucent plastic containers almost certainly changed the flavor of milk for the worse. By now, says Dr. Duncan, the researchers at Virginia Tech, Americans drink less milk just about every year. According to data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, per-capita consumption is off by more than a third since 1975—which, says Susan Duncan, one of the Virginia Tech scientists, is around the time that plastic milk cartons went mainstream. Of course, health experts and public officials were also warning against animal fat. But cheese and yogurt consumption increased considerably over the same period, and even butter saw an uptick, suggesting that cholesterol warnings were not much of a deterrent.

On the other hand, says Dr. Duncan, the widespread adoption of translucent plastic containers almost certainly changed the flavor of milk for the worse. By now, she says, consumers mistakenly believe that this is how milk is supposed to taste.

In blind tastings, two panels of more than 150 volunteers each were given milk and asked to rate their experience of it using a nine-point scale (in which 1 means “dislike extremely” and 9 means “like extremely”). Milk that had been exposed to fluorescent light had far more ratings in the “dislike region” of four or lower. Volunteers described the fluorescent-exposed milk as tasting like “cardboard” or seeming “stale” or “painty.”

“Changes occurred in milk that affected flavor and quality after as little as four hours of light exposure, which were noticeable to untrained consumer panelists,” the scientists write.

Fluorescent lighting has been named as a culprit in milk degradation before. But Dr. Duncan says that her study is the first to use regular retail dairy coolers, thereby simulating real-world milk storage conditions, and that it bolsters the case for LEDs in milk-storage cases. (LED stands for light emitting diode. Bulbs made with this technology are rapidly gaining market share thanks to falling prices, long life, low energy consumption and the pleasing quality of their light.)

How does fluorescent lighting affect milk? Scientists say that its higher ultraviolet energy, among other characteristics, triggers a process of oxidation that damages essential nutrients, especially riboflavin, resulting in inferior flavor as well as a less healthful beverage. Over longer time periods, LEDs can degrade milk flavor as well, though not as much. Notably, neither kind of light makes milk go sour any sooner.

Dr. Duncan says that she is working with the dairy industry (which partly funds her work) to encourage costlier packaging that blocks light and to suggest that retailers switch away from fluorescent bulbs.

Meanwhile, you might want to buy milk in cardboard cartons. If you are buying by the gallon (which usually comes in plastic packaging), Dr. Duncan suggests looking for jugs stored on lower shelves or pushed way to the back, as far as possible from any fluorescent lighting source.

New wood technology may offer hope for Northwest timber industry

John Redfield watches with pride as his son moves a laser-guided precision saw the size of a semi-truck wheel into place over a massive panel of wood. Redfield’s fingers are scarred from a lifetime of cutting wood and now, after decades of decline in the logging business, he has new hope that his son, too, can make a career shaping the timber felled in southern Oregon’s forests. That’s because Redfield and his son work at D.R. Johnson Lumber Co., one of two US timber mills making a new wood product that’s the buzz of the construction industry. It’s called cross-laminated timber, or CLT, and it’s made like it sounds: rafts of 2-by-4 beams aligned in perpendicular layers, then glued—or laminated—together like a giant sandwich.

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The resulting panels are lighter and less energy-intensive than concrete and steel and much faster to assemble on-site than regular timber, proponents say. Because the grain in each layer is at a right angle to the one below and above it, there’s a counter-tension built into the panels that supporters say makes them strong enough to build even the tallest skyscrapers.

“We believe that two to five years out, we could be seeing this grow from just 20% of our business to potentially 60% of our business,” said Redfield, D.R. Johnson’s chief operating officer. “We’re seeing some major growth factors.”

From Maine to Arkansas to the Pacific Northwest, the material is sparking interest among architects, engineers and researchers. Many say it could infuse struggling forest communities like Riddle with new economic growth while reducing the carbon footprint of urban construction with a renewable building material. Visually blemished wood that currently goes to waste can be used in the middle layers of a CLT panel without sacrificing strength or look. Supporters say it could bring sawmills back online while improving forest health through thinning dense stands and making use of low-value wood and local tree...
species. Trees as small as 5 inches in diameter at the top and those damaged by pests and wildfire are prime candidates.

But challenges remain before CLT becomes as common in the United States as it is in Europe and Canada, and not all builders are sold. US building codes generally place height limits on all-wood buildings for safety reasons, though a special committee of the International Code Council is investigating potential changes to address the use of CLT in such structures. And research is still underway on critical questions of how these buildings withstand fire and earthquakes in high-seismic regions. Building codes in Oregon allow cutting-edge designs using new technology like CLT in some cases, but only after rigorous testing and an intensive approval process. That can make such projects cost-prohibitive, said Peter Dusicka, an engineering professor at Portland State University who’s been researching the strength of CLT panels. “The early adopters are looking at it and seeing it as a good opportunity,” but before CLT can take off, there will have to be more examples to get people excited and more mills producing it, said Thomas DeLuca, professor and director of University of Washington’s School of Environmental and Forest Sciences.

SmartLam in Montana is the other company producing CLT panels.

This spring, cross-laminated timber will get its ultimate test in the United States when a Portland architectural firm breaks ground on a 12-story wood building in the city’s trendy Pearl District. It would be the tallest all-wood building in the world constructed in a seismic zone and the tallest all-wood building in North America. An all-wood building in Norway is taller, but is not in a seismic zone. An 18-story wood building in British Columbia is also taller, but rests on a traditional concrete core. Lever Architecture is using $1.5 million it won in a tall wood building competition sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the softwood industry that’s intended to promote CLT as a domestic building material. A 10-story residential tower in New York City also got $1.5 million.

The Portland firm has been working with scientists at Portland State University and Oregon State University to test the panels’ strength by subjecting them to hundreds of thousands of pounds of pressure. They are also testing various methods for joining the massive panels together. “We’re looking at creating a resilient design, a design that could withstand a major earthquake—basically the earthquake that we all worry about—and be repaired,” said Thomas Robinson, founder of Lever Architecture. The results of the structural testing in Oregon will be made public for other US designers, bringing the material one step closer to the mainstream, Dusicka said.

Back in Riddle, a tiny town tucked in the mist-shrouded forests of Douglas County, Redfield is once more excited about timber. The 125-employee company has been inundated with visitors from around the country interested in touring their new CLT business expansion. Watching as layers of beams whirred through a glue machine, Redfield said, “We’re able to take wood that may be turned into chips or pulp and turn it into a product that’s pretty exciting.”

Tesla debuts sleek glass solar rooftop tiles

Tesla's proposed takeover of the solar installation company SolarCity makes more sense now. Tesla has taken a major step towards delivering on its vision of providing integrated solar, energy storage and electric vehicle technologies with the unveiling of its new solar glass roof tile and Powerwall energy storage system. At an event in Los Angeles, the company showcased its Tuscan solar roof tile for the first time.

The glass roof tiles include integrated solar cells and are designed to avoid the visual impact of conventional solar panels. The company has not provided pricing information for the new tiles, but Tesla chief executive Elon Musk said the system would prove cheaper than installing a new roof and adding a traditional solar array. In a series of Tweets, Musk said the technology also would prove more robust and energy efficient than a conventional roof.

The launch also saw Tesla unveil its new Powerwall 2 domestic energy storage system, which will be priced from $5,500 and will allow customers to store the solar power they generate onsite. The dual launch came a day after the company provided an update on the new version of its energy storage system for commercial clients, Powerpack 2.

"Powerpack 2 provides twice the energy density and a more seamless integration into multiple levels of the grid," the company said. "Powerpack 2 is also now matched with a new inverter, designed by Tesla and manufactured at the Gigafactory. It is the lowest cost, highest efficiency and highest power density utility-scale inverter on the market. It also significantly simplifies the installation process of the entire Powerpack system by integrating a number of previously independent components into the inverter itself."

Tesla is targeting the fast-expanding grid-scale energy storage market, as well as the domestic sector, and already has signed up a number of high-profile clients, such as Southern California Edison’s Mira Loma substation and the Kauai Island Utility Cooperative.

"The Powerpack systems for these two projects are being built now at our Gigafactory and, when deployed later this year, will be the two largest lithium-ion battery storage installations in the world," the company stated. It added the Powerpack product was "a cost-competitive alternative to other traditional utility infrastructure solutions such as building larger substations, bigger wires and more power plants." The flurry of announcements comes at a crucial time for Tesla, which earlier this week surprised analysts by posting a profit for the most recent quarter on the back of stronger than expected shipments of its electric vehicles.

The company is awaiting a decision from shareholders next month on its proposed takeover of US solar installer SolarCity, which has been criticized by some analysts, but which Musk has argued will provide a major boost to the company's vision of delivering integrated clean energy and transport solutions.

greenbiz.com/article/tesla-debuts-sleek-glass-solar-roof-top-tiles
6 Ways to Incorporate the Pantone Color of the Year Into Event Decor

Pantone announced Greenery as its Color of the Year 2017 recently. It’s safe to say the refreshing, revitalizing shade is the new black for event decor as planners think up creative ways to incorporate Greenery into their room setups. Take these six designs by event production pros as living proof.

This year’s Allie Awards in Atlanta incorporated turf-covered love seats, ottomans and rugs from AFR Event Furnishings’ Grass Collection.

Revelry Event Designers, along with design studio Mark’s Garden, embellished a bar with moss panels, natural lattice, succulents, orchids and a backdrop of hedges for an event at Monarch Beach Resort in Dana Point, California.

Rafanelli Events used grassy centerpieces as a natural complement to the unfinished wood tabletops at Goodwill’s The Good Party in Boston.

Forget chandeliers. Karla Events sourced tropical foliage to create an overhang above each table at a Miami event.

A hedge wall with a lot to say made for an eye-catching display at Central Park Conservancy’s Taste of Summer event by Rafanelli Events in New York City.

Event planner Marcy Blum put a witty spin on farm-to-table with hors d’oeuvres served on grass-filled trays. Small bites were cleverly styled to look like “pigs in two blankets.”

Panagakis, Hayley, 6 Ways to Incorporate the Pantone Color of the Year Into Event Decor, connectyourmeetings.com/feature/pantone-2017/

Want sharper workers? Try a green-certified office

Can a green building make your company smarter? That's what new research suggests, underscoring the ROI for green certifications—not just for optimizing the usual factors such as energy and water use, but for elevating workforce productivity.

It’s clear at Greenbuild 2016 that the health and wellness of workers indoors is becoming a high-level concern. No longer is human comfort something a corporation might consider from the kindness of its profit-seeking heart. Instead, evidence of a competitive advantage for fostering well-being speaks the language of the C-suite.

The early results of a new study dubbed COGFX are being buzzed about for finding 26% higher scores on cognitive tests for workers in LEED-certified buildings.

Green-building benefits extended beyond the office and waking hours, according to the researchers at Harvard University’s T.H. Chan School of Public Health and SUNY Upstate Medical University. They cited a 6.4% uptick in sleep quality scores with 25% higher cognitive results the next day among occupants of green-certified workplaces. "Buildings can now become human resource tools," said John Mandyck, sustainability chief at United Technologies Corporation, which backed the research. "It can be a competitive asset for companies, for building owners to say, I’m going to invest in my building not only from an environmental standpoint, but so my people can be the most productive and the healthiest they can be, and that will lead to bottom-line results."

Study participants in LEED buildings reported 30% fewer sick building symptoms, in addition to feeling happier with temperature, humidity levels and air flow. "Thermal comfort" alone accounted for 5.4% higher cognitive scores—a finding that UTC, which makes indoor climate controls and owns the HVAC brand Carrier, can warm to.

Researchers extended the work of a lab-based study by giving cognitive tests and surveys to 109 people in 10 real-world, "high-performing" buildings across five cities over the course of a week. Among those buildings is the workplace of Dave Pogue, global director of corporate responsibility at CBRE. "I’m really happy they’re smarter being in the building we’re in," he said. Pogue added that the findings validate a 2008 survey he worked on, which concluded green buildings "make dollars and sense" and can enhance productivity. Yet Pogue said those results were met with scorn when he presented them at Greenbuild 2009. "Intuitively we all know that is true, but we could not prove it scientifically," Pogue said, yet the double-blind, peer-reviewed COGFX study will be "foundational and move the industry."

There’s potentially a lot of movement ahead. In the past 20 years, roughly half of commercial construction today has become green.

"That’s chasing 1% of the cost," said Mandyck of UTC. "Think
of how much farther and faster this movement can go if we chase 90% of the cost, which is the salaries and benefits of the people. To do that, you need data like this. The ROI can’t be on energy alone. It has to be on productivity. We’re starting to get data and research and tools where we can now evaluate that productivity and monetize that productivity for the ROI calculations.”

“Buildings can now become human resource tools.”

The first round of COGFX research looked largely at ventilation, including levels of CO2 and volatile chemicals. “We found that the benefits of productivity far outweigh the costs, which are on the order of $40 a person,” said Harvard professor Joseph Allen. “The benefits of productivity are in the order of thousands of dollars. So the ROI can be pretty quick if you make these ventilation changes in buildings.”

This time COGFX researchers sought to explore what they dubbed “buildingomics,” the genomics or bigger picture of what’s happening indoors, not just as individual factors such as lighting, temperature or better air quality, but how all of that comes together to benefit productivity and wellness.

The vendors of products such as living green walls and low-toxic, soy-based insulation at Greenbuild said they could use this kind of research as a selling point. Among the exhibitors is startup Biome, which makes hydroponic living wall systems (and won a GreenBiz VERGE 16 Accelerate pitch competition).

What are the key lessons corporations should take away now? Researcher Piers MacNaughton, project manager of Harvard’s Healthy Buildings Program, urged companies to “go beyond the code. Start to characterize health performance indicators in real time.”

“I’m going to invest in my building . . . so my people can be the most productive and the healthiest they can be, and that will lead to bottom-line results.”

To that end, a new web-based tool called Autocase for Sustainable Buildings promises to simplify decision-making for architects and other leaders. Billed as “measuring the triple bottom line (financial, social and environmental) impacts of design alternatives,” it takes into account health, worker absenteeism rates and productivity among myriad other factors. Autocase features a real-time cost-benefit analysis for factors such as carbon emissions, air quality, energy and water efficiency. A TurboTax-like display adjusts expected LEED credits and net positive value to reflect your design choices.

Autodesk already provides design tools to architects, engineers and contractors, said Emma Stewart, head of sustainability solutions at Autodesk. “But ultimately the folks calling the shots are the project sponsors and ultimate owners and occupiers. You have to be talking in dollars and sense, not in square feet or cubic feet of water.” Autocase brings in publicly available data with social and environmental valuation research and “picks only the best of those studies to apply so they are bulletproof and defensible in the court of public opinion,” she added. Autocase, built by Impact Infrastructure and released in partnership with Autodesk, costs $175 a month.

Rick Fedrizzi, CEO of the U.S. Green Building Council, announced that he’ll step up as the next chairman and CEO of the IWBI in November. He was a driving force behind the 2013 launch of the USGBC Building Health Initiative, whose founding partners include Adobe, Genentech, Google, Kaiser Permanente, Webcor and XL Construction.


10 Hotel Trends That Will Shape Guest Experience in 2017

We make our predictions for some of the biggest trends that will impact the hospitality industry and the overall guest experience.

“What’s the biggest trend in ______ you’re seeing these days?” This is a question we at Skift field every day, 24/7, 365 days a year, and one that we attempt to answer each and every one of those days. But as we all know, no matter what sector of travel that you fill in the blank, the trends continue to evolve day in and day out, building upon trendlines that have persisted throughout the course of the industry’s history.

When it comes to the hospitality industry, trends can be both ephemeral and everlasting. Some are just a flash in the pan; others have a staying power that lasts for decades. Last year’s trends were, in many ways, shaped heavily by consolidation and the drama that accompanies mega mergers and acquisitions, as well as the direct booking wars waged among hotels and their eternal frenemies, the online travel agencies.

Whatever ends up ultimately happening in 2017, we know it promises to be a year of great change. In 2017, we’ll even have a hotelier in the White House, whatever that’s worth. And following last year’s multiple mergers and acquisitions, the lasting effects of those consolidations will finally begin to emerge, and become that much clearer.

So, what will this year’s trends in hotel guest experience bring?

1. CO-EVERYTHING: When we said co-living could become the next big trend in hospitality, we weren’t kidding. While it’s doubtful that we’ll suddenly see a surge of pod hotels, poshtels or co-living/co-working spaces flooding the hospitality scene in 2017, the tenets of “co-living”—that emphasis on collaboration and community—will permeate much of the hotel guest experience in 2017. In some ways, we’re already seeing it. In September, AccorHotels announced it was launching a new brand, Jo&Joe, largely inspired by co-living and hostels. And in December, Hilton Worldwide announced it too was considering launching an “urban Microtel” brand concept in the near future. In 2017, expect to see even more emphasis on investment on communal areas, as well as on spaces and experiences that bring people together.

Because if there’s one advantage hotels have over home-shares like Airbnb or HomeAway, it’s that role of being a real community fixture—a place where strangers can really gather together. Yes, an Airbnb might place you in the heart of a local neighborhood and you might be introduced to a local host but in many cases, the experience of a home stay can also be isolating. There’s no central hotel lobby where you can gather with other travelers or locals. So expect hotels to double down on this distinct advantage, and attempt in their own way, too, to make guests feel as though they really “lives there.”

2. GOOD DESIGN GOES MAINSTREAM: Thoughtful design isn’t something exclusive to boutique hotels anymore—it’s the basic price of admission these days. Skift Senior Editor
Greg Oates pointed out as much when he demonstrated how Marriott, Hyatt and Hilton are shedding their outdated design legacies.

Whether your hotel is ultra-luxury or bare-bones budget, your guests are going to expect it to look good, and feel good. And if current retail and interior design successes are any indication these days, they are proof that you don’t necessarily need deep pockets to have good design. Design has always played a crucial role in hospitality, especially in defining that hotel’s brand or persona, and today’s guests are intuitively attuned to interpret design to fit their conceptions of what a hotel is really like, and if it’s the right fit, or lifestyle, for them.

With the entry of home furnishing and fashion names like West Elm, Restoration Hardware and Karl Lagerfeld into the hotel space, expect the bar for good design in hotels to be raised even higher in 2017.

3. EXPERIENCES BEYOND THE HOTEL: Whether or not Airbnb’s gamble on Trips succeeds or fails, the mere fact that the company has launched tours and activities should be a clear signal to hotels that they too need to be paying more attention to guests’ experiences not just inside the hotel but outside of it. They need a much more holistic approach to overall guest experience than they’re used to delivering. We’ve already seen glimpses of this, especially in the luxury end of the spectrum, but we should expect more hotels in other categories doing the same, too. And if they aren’t, they need to start thinking about them soon.

4. CONCEPTS OF LOYALTY NEED TO EVOLVE: The loyalty program remains the backbone of so many different hotel companies’ master strategies, and that certainly won’t change at all in 2017. And while so many hotel companies are placing so much emphasis and scrutiny on their loyalty programs, we hope they won’t follow in the footsteps of the airlines.

In many ways, today’s overall travel loyalty landscape is one fraught with fragmentation. And in the case of the airlines, loyalty programs are increasingly rewarding gamesmanship and large spending over anything else. Perhaps that’s the strategy that makes most financial sense, but is it really the strategy that’ll win customers’ hearts and minds?

We’re not so sure, but if hotel brands want true loyalty from their guests, it’ll be hard to achieve that if they rework their programs to be more like the American Airlines, Delta Airlines and United Airlines of the world. They should also know better than to offer canned responses to loyalty members’ requests for more information when they decide to revamp their programs, too.

Hotel loyalty as it stands today is entering an age of awkward adolescence, the result of multiple consolidations and changing consumer behaviors and expectations. In 2017, hotels have a golden opportunity to redefine what real hotel loyalty is like, and we hope they seize that chance.

5. HOSPITALITY WILL REDESIGN ITS ROOTS: A lot of times it can be easy to forget that, at the heart of it all, the travel industry—especially the hospitality industry—is really about people. We don’t mean to, but sometimes, in the pursuit of efficiency and profit, we as an industry have forsaken our biggest and most important resource: humanity.

Two Roads Hospitality CEO Niki Leondakis reminded us of that at the Skift Global Forum. She said that the real disruption and innovation in hospitality doesn’t lie in technology or constructing great spaces. It’s about the service, and the people delivering it. “The basics of hospitality have been compromised to make room for innovation, but the best innovation comes from the inside out,” Leondakis said. “Creativity happens when our employees are empowered and they are not feeling any fear.” And in empowering those of us who work in hospitality to be better at delivering genuine hospitality, we’d also do well to heed restaurateur Danny Meyer’s advice, too: “The only way to motivate someone is to give them a higher purpose beyond a paycheck.”

6. “LOCAL” WILL REGAIN ITS MEANING: Hotels need to stop thinking of bringing “local” into the hotel through artisanal hand soaps or “locally sourced, free-range bacon.” In the same vein of bringing more humanity back to travel and hospitality overall, hotels need to start thinking more about their local community, too. In fact, we predict hotels will begin reclaiming the role they once had as community centers, only this time they’ll have evolved to solve challenges unique to modern times.

AccorHotels CEO Sebastien Bazin touched on this concept, fresh off Accor’s finalized $2.7 billion purchase of the Fairmont, Swissotel and Raffles hotel brands. “Ninety-nine percent of what we have done for 50 years has been based on the guy coming from outside of town,” Bazin said. “A traveler, from a different city, from a different country, which I think is interesting, but not too smart. Because we missed a population which is 100 times greater and better and easier: The guy living next door. The local inhabitants. They live around the hotel, or they go to an office around the hotel, and 90% of them never dared coming into the property, because they’re fearful that we’re going to be asking, ‘What’s your room number?’ They don’t need a room, but they may need a service.”

Bazin said there are “zillions of services we’re going to get into,” among them having hotels assist locals with simple tasks and solving everyday solutions like holding packages or keys or recommending the best services nearby. “[The hotel will be] a place that will make your life easier,” he said. “It’s giving a purpose to the Accor people, because they’re going to be feeling very proud, of bringing that additional service that people need, and are afraid of asking for.”

7. LUXURY THAT’S LEANER AND SMARTER: Today’s concepts of luxury aren’t limited to 1,000-count-thread sheets or the finest Russian caviar, and given what’s happening overall in terms of global shifts in consumer behavior, it’s clear that experience is winning out over the material when it comes to the kind of luxury that consumers prefer. This isn’t to say people don’t want opulence or extravagance anymore. For some travelers, that’s still an integral part of what defines luxury. We’re not saying luxury is transforming into something more Spartan, or more minimalistic, either.

What we’re saying is that lean luxury is doing away with the excess of what we used to think luxury used to have—those over-the-top messages, the logos, the in-your-face-kind of luxury we might have encountered 30 years ago. Instead, lean luxury is about the new luxury, about offering travelers a more authentic, genuine luxury experience unfettered by specific brand or quality standards like thread counts.

The cornerstones of what makes something luxury will still remain—they are the price of admission, still—but they’re not what travelers are paying attention to anymore. Luxury travelers already expect those services, those finishes, those exquisite products, those incredible designs, those little touches, to already be there. What will really set a luxury brand apart today—what defines lean luxury—is everything else. It’s personalized service. It’s having a clearer sense of community.
and place. It’s craftsmanship. It’s having a story to tell. The hotel or the first-class cabin don’t have to be gilded in gold to be deemed luxury. They just need to have a story behind their brands to communicate to travelers. And that story needs to fit in with the local environments and preferences of the communities they operate in. And we’re already beginning to see glimpses of that, especially in how hotel companies like Marriott and AccorHotels are choosing to further distinguish and position their luxury brands.

8. THE SMART HOTEL EMERGES: Not all hotels will become like the Wynn Las Vegas, equipping each and every hotel room with its own Amazon Echo smart speaker device, but we can expect more on-demand technologies to find their way into hotels in 2017. That’s simply a given, especially as hotels continue to make large investments in beacon technologies, messaging, streaming in-room entertainment and other smart hotel concepts.

9. EXPECT EVEN MORE BRANDS TO EMERGE, BOTH NEW AND FAMILIAR: Maybe Marriott won’t be adding any more brands to its portfolio of 30 anytime soon, but when it comes to its peers, Hilton included, there’s certainly room to grow. In 2017 we should also expect to see even more non-traditional hotel brands entering the hospitality space, as we did in 2016 with West Elm and Karl Lagerfeld, for instance. Zappos Hotels, anyone?

“I think brands are trying to leverage some of their market share with these brand extensions,” said Gray Shealy, executive director for Georgetown’s Hospitality Management master’s program and a former global design director for W Hotels. “This way, they’re able to attract more customers and get more people to try their products.” Bjorn Hanson, clinical professor with the NYU Preston Robert Tisch Center for Hospitality and Tourism, said he thinks this trend isn’t going away anytime soon, either, driven by the growth in new hotel projects and the fact that boutique has gone mainstream. “The number of new projects being launched is almost double what it was in 2014,” Hanson said. “We were at less than 1% supply growth and now 2% or slightly more. That explains part of it. A second issue is . . . well, lifestyle hotels are kind of the norm and no longer special. We need to find a new way to make them special with a new kind of affiliation. Instead of another hotel brand, it’s another kind of a brand.” The added “halo effect” of these established brands is also a benefit, Hanson said.

“Many of these brands have an identity that is understandably related to hotels,” he said. “Whether it’s a company involved in fashion or decorating or design, these are not alien to hotels. It’s easy for consumers to see why they think they might be appropriate as hotels, too.”

10. DATA INTERPRETATION IS THE ULTIMATE INTELLIGENCE: Now that we’ve advanced enough to know how to collect or mine data, it’s up to the industry to know what to do with that information. That was a message delivered by Airbnb Global Head of Hospitality and Joie de Vivre Hotels founder Chip Conley, as well as former Starwood CEO Frits van Paaschen at the Skift Global Forum. Conley spoke about the emergence, 25 years ago, of the revenue manager and how it was sort of curious to us old school hotel people.” Today, he said, the revenue manager of yesteryear is the data scientist.

“Where hotels are way behind is data science,” Conley said. “Data scientists represent what revenue managers represented 25 years ago. If you have a lot of data scientists, you’re both able to find the right customer for you. This is a huge differentiator in the long term: personalization and customization.” Later, he added, “We need to get really smart around data science. It helps us personalize choices.” “There’s an extraordinary amount of information available, but a real dearth of information that’s potentially relevant to any one individual,” van Paaschen said. “A lot can still happen in the hospitality business. It’s a breeding ground for ever more innovation.” Big data, he said, is the “interaction of people and technology” and the key is “how do you get that data into people’s hands who deliver service at the moment they do that?”

“Personalization is the next manifestation in the evolution of brands,” he added. “If you have this emergence of brands being reliable, then having a personality through media, and now you have personal access with mobile. Brands really can deliver personalization now. The expectation of people of brands is you should know me and know what I want.”

In 2017, it’s clear that the hospitality industry needs to be prepared for even more disruptions that lie ahead. And to be prepared, it’s clear hotels need to look beyond the boundaries of their own industry to take stock of what’s happening, not only in travel, but the greater world beyond it.


FINAL WORDS . . .

Far away there in the sunshine are my highest aspirations. I may not reach them, but I can look up and see their beauty, believe in them, and try to follow where they lead.

Louisa May Alcott, writer