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# Sustainability in the Global Hotel Industry

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose-** The aim of this paper is to offer a review of how the global hotel industry publicly communicates its approach to sustainability.

**Design/Methodology/Approach-** The paper provides an outline of the emerging importance of sustainability within the hospitality industry. The empirical material on which the paper is based is drawn from the information on sustainability and sustainable development posted on the Internet by world's top ten hotel chains.

**Findings-** The top ten hotel chains provide information on a variety of environmental, social and economic commitments to sustainability but there are marked variations in the volume and detail of this information. At the same time the authors suggest that these commitments are driven as much by a search for business efficiency as by a genuine commitment to sustainability. As such the top ten hotel chains can be seen to be pursuing a 'weak' rather than a 'strong' model of sustainability.

**Practical Implications-** The paper suggests that although the top ten global hotel companies could play an important role in promoting sustainability they may need to enhance their approach to reporting and external assurance.

**Originality/Value-** The paper provides an accessible review of the sustainability commitments currently being pursued within the global hotel industry and it will interest academic members of staff and students in business and management studies and hospitality departments and practitioners working in and with the hospitality industry.

**Keywords-** Sustainability; hospitality; global hotel industry.

## **Introduction**

Since the early 1900's the concept of sustainability has attracted increasing attention in political, media and investment circles. In Ernst and Young and the GreenBiz Group's (2012), recent review of trends in corporate sustainability strategy, for example, it was argued that '*over the past two decades corporate sustainability efforts have evolved into a complex*

*and disciplined business imperative focused on customer and stakeholder requirements.'* Many business leaders have been developing sustainability plans and programmes as an increasingly important element of their corporate strategies. A number of factors help to explain this trend. These include the growth amount of legislation and regulation on environmental and social issues; concerns about increasing shortages of vital natural resources; increased shareholder awareness of the importance of ethically sound corporate investments; and prominent press and television coverage of the activities of anti-corporate and anti-capitalist organisations and pressure groups. An ever growing number of large companies now look to publicly emphasize and demonstrate their commitment to sustainability and sustainable development to enhance their competitive advantage, to build their brand and to differentiate themselves from competitors within the marketplace.

At the same time a number of critics view corporate commitments to sustainability and sustainable development as a cynical ploy, often described as 'green wash', designed to appeal to consumers, who are increasingly concerned about the environmental and social impact of business activities, while effectively ignoring fundamental environmental and social concerns. As such many corporate commitments to sustainability might be described as 'green consumerism' which *'has failed to induce significant inroads into the unsustainable nature of consumption and production'* (Hamilton 2009). In a similar vein Kahn (2010) argued that 'green consumerism' is *'an opportunity for corporations to turn the very crisis that they generate through their accumulation of capital via the exploitation of nature into myriad streams of emergent profit and investment revenue.'*

While the size of the world's hotel industry is not easy to quantify (Hotel Analyst 2012) it has grown rapidly in during the last quarter of a century and it is now widely recognised as a global industry (Papiryan 2008). Goldstein and Primlani (2012) have traced the origins of hotel sustainability back to the 1960's suggesting that *'the past several decades have seen a growing awareness amongst hoteliers and investors regarding the environmental and social impacts of hotel development and operations.'* However over a decade ago Pryce (2001) argued that *'the hotel industry could benefit from addressing their environmental and social impacts in a more systematic way and thus make the first steps toward corporate sustainability.'* Some years later Chen, Sloan and Legrand (2009), for example, suggested that *'for many hospitality managers the daily agenda still focuses on priorities seen to be more important than sustainable business management including cost control, profit maximisation and shareholder value.'* However Chen, Sloan and Legrand (2009) argue that in *'the context of globalization, emerging sustainable development concerns and priorities increasingly cut across all areas of management interest and responsibility'* and that *'owners, general managers and line managers cannot ignore these developments.'* More recently Prarie (2012) has suggested that *'the hotel industry is in the midst of a sustainability awakening.'* With this in mind the aim of this paper is to offer a review of the how the global hotel industry publicly communicates its approach to sustainability via a simple exploration of the extent to which world's top ten hotel brands report on their sustainability commitments and achievements and to offer some reflections on these commitments and achievements.

## ***Sustainability and Theoretical Frameworks***

The ideas underpinning sustainability are not new but the concept has attracted increasing attention in recent years. According to Diesendorf (2000), for example, sustainability is *'the goal or endpoint of a process called sustainable development.'* The

definition of sustainable development in most common use is '*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*' (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). In reality, however, there is little genuine consensus in providing an operational definition. Firstly there is a family of definitions essentially based in and around ecological principles and secondly there are definitions which look to embrace social and economic development, as well as environmental goals, and which look to embrace equity in meeting human needs. At the same time a distinction is often made between 'weak' and strong' sustainability, with the former being used to describe sustainability initiatives and programmes developed within existing economic and social systems while the latter is associated with much more radical changes in both economy and society (Roper 2012).

As interest in sustainability has gathered momentum so a number of attempts have been made to conceptualise sustainability and three approaches merit attention. Firstly a number of authors (eg. Barter 2011; Zink 2005; Garvare and Johansson 2010) have employed stakeholder theory to conceptualise sustainability. In simple terms stakeholder theory is developed around the belief that companies should be sensitive to the interests not just of their shareholders but also those of a wider variety of stakeholders, including suppliers, customers and society at large, and that in so doing they will ultimately be more successful. Wheeler et. al. (2003), for example, suggested that '*sustainability is a construct whose foundational ideas are consonant with those of stakeholder theory*' and that '*stakeholder concepts are highly relevant and useful to thinking about sustainability.*' In developing a model of stakeholder management for sustainability Garvare and Johansson (2010) argued that '*contemporary organisations must satisfy a variety of stakeholders*' and Steurer et. al. (2005) explored the relationship between sustainability and stakeholder theory and examined how '*corporations are confronted with economic, social and environmental stakeholder claims.*' Secondly Todorov and Marinova (2009) argued that a simple model centred on the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainability and presented in a simple Venn diagram as three overlapping circles, provides an accessible picture of the concept. Thirdly Amsler (2009) has looked to develop a more critical theory which embraces the different and competing perspectives outlined earlier. Within this paper the authors drew on all three approaches to provide both a theoretical frame of reference and to underpin the detailed process of data collection and collation for the paper as outlined below.

### ***Method of Enquiry***

In order to obtain a preliminary overview of the extent to which the global hotel industry is addressing the challenge of sustainability the top ten global hotel brands, as identified by Heardable (2012), namely Marriot; Best Western; Hyatt; Iberostar; Hilton; Relais & Chateaux; Ramada, part of Wyndham Worldwide; Holiday Inn, part of the (Intercontinental Hotels Group (IHG); Ritz Charlton; and Jumeirah were selected for study. The selected chains might be seen to reflect contemporary approaches to sustainability within the industry and to be keen to publicise their sustainability initiatives to a wide audience. Businesses employ a variety of methods to report on sustainability including '*product labels, packaging, press/media relations, newsletters, issue related events, reports, posters, flyers, leaflets, brochures, websites, advertisements, information packs and word-of-mouth*' (European Commission Directorate-General for Enterprise undated). A decade ago Bowen (2003) reported that a growing number of large organisations were employing the Internet to report their sustainable development and sustainability commitments and achievements. This led the authors to conduct a digital Internet search using the key words 'sustainability annual

report', and if that failed to produce any information, then the word 'sustainability', on the website of each of the top ten hotel chains. The information through this search provided the empirical information for this paper. This information is already in the public domain and consequently the authors took the considered view that they did not need to contact the hotel chains to obtain formal permission prior to conducting the particular study.

All ten hotel chains presented the information on sustainability on their corporate websites in a variety of ways but the simple threefold classification of environment, society and economy, outlined earlier, was employed to guide data collection. In recognising that the hotel chains have important business relationships with customers, employees, suppliers and local communities the authors have adopted a loose stakeholder approach as a simple template for the data collection and analysis. Holcomb et. al. (2010) employed content analysis to interrogate web sites but in this paper the authors chose to tease out the key themes and narratives by a close interrogation of the sustainability reports and information using the general themes of environment, society and economy. More specific issues were then identified using these three themes. Thus climate change and carbon emissions; water and energy conservation, waste management and recycling initiatives, and environmentally responsible sourcing, for example, were amongst the issues identified under the environmental theme. More critically in discussing the hotel chains' approach to sustainability within a wider economic and political context the authors have looked to reflect current theoretical thinking emerging within the social sciences.

The authors recognise that their approach has its limitations. It is narrowly focused, but the authors would argue that it is appropriate as the focus is on how the leading hotel chains currently project their approach to sustainability. At the same time there may be questions about whether the material posted on the Internet realistically reflects detailed corporate strategy on sustainability and whether or not such statements are, in reality, little more than carefully constructed public relations exercises. However given the need to attempt to understand the role the global hotel industry is playing in sustainability, the approach adopted in the current research draws on information that is publicly available and readily accessible and as such it is not only fit for purpose but it also provides a platform from which future research agendas might be constructed.

### ***Findings***

The navigation of the top ten hotel chain's websites revealed market variations in the information the leading hotel chains publicly provided on sustainability. Four of the selected companies, namely Marriott, Ramada (Wyndham Worldwide), Holiday Inn (IHG) and Jumeirah published formal sustainability reports, while the other six companies provided varied but more limited information concerning their approach to sustainability. A number of the hotel groups stress their corporate commitment to sustainability. Marriott, for example, reports *'investing in sustainable development and innovative conservation initiatives..... that will provide long term solutions to critical social and environmental issues'* while Hilton defines its *'sustainability mission'* as being *'to benefit this and future generations by actively managing our business through the lens of sustainability'* and stresses that *'sustainability is now a critical performance measure for our business.'* In a similar vein Wyndham Worldwide reports its *'commitment to sustainability, which by definition means meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'* and the company outlines how it is *'delivering Triple Bottom Line benefits'* by focusing on *'people', 'profits'* and the *'planet.'* Iberostar emphasises its *'concern for the economic, human and social development of the communities where the company has a*

*presence' and its 'firm commitment to the preservation of the environment and respect for wildlife in all the destinations in which we operate.'*

These corporate commitments are evidenced across a wide range of environmental, social and economic agendas. The environmental issues addressed include climate change and greenhouse gas emissions; water and energy conservation; waste management and recycling; environmentally responsible sourcing; the protection and preservation of natural resources; minimising environmental impacts; and the creation of green construction standards to guide new hotel construction. In outlining its environmental sustainability strategy, Wyndham Worldwide, for example, itemises the risks it perceives including *'increased natural areas where we operate'*; *'rising costs of fuel, energy and water'*; and *'increased regulatory legislation which may inhibit growth and negatively impact on operational profitability.'* Hyatt reports having established specific targets to reduce energy consumption by 25%, water consumption by 20%, greenhouse gas emissions by 25% and waste sent to landfill by 25% by 2015. The company also reports being able to track progress against these targets with a web based tracking system which enables it to *'benchmark our performance and to drive improvement.'* Wyndham Worldwide argued that *'the first step in reducing our environmental footprint is to measure impact'* and this led it to identify *'energy consumption and the resulting greenhouse gas emissions'* as the *'most material environmental aspects'* and the company reports its long term goal as being the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions by 20% by 2020. Some of the top ten hotel chains also report on the importance of water to their businesses. The IHG, for example, suggest that *'many parts of the world are already experiencing freshwater stress and that climate change is expected to exacerbate these problems.'* The company suggests that hotels in temperate zones could conserve between 10% and 20% of their water usage and it reports on a variety of water conservation initiatives including water efficient fixtures and appliances, water collection, treatment and reuse and irrigation.

Marriott reports on its *'integrated global environmental strategy that improves energy efficiency, conserves water, builds more sustainable hotels and supports high level projects that reduce greenhouse gas emissions'* and provides *'environmental performance indicators'* at both global and continental levels. More generally Marriott outlines its work in developing industry standards for carbon measurement, establishing criteria for the greening of furniture, fixtures and fittings for the Hospitality Sustainable Purchasing Consortium, and working in partnership with governments, non-governmental organisations, interest groups and communities on a variety of conservation initiatives. Best Western, on the other hand, reports more general commitments, suggesting that its hotels *'do everything from having in- room recycle bins and linen re-use programs to geothermal and solar powered hotels that actually sell power back to the grid'* and that *'every hotel in North America is required to have a green program in place'* which could include *'anything from using recycled paper and installing low-flow shower heads to full participation with national or international eco-labelling programs.'*

A number of the selected companies stress their commitment to sustainable sourcing. Hyatt, for example, reports that its responsible purchasing practices include packaging shampoo and lotions in bottles made of 100% recycled plastic, using 100% recycled carpets, offering sustainably sourced menu options and the installation of some 74,000 LED light bulbs during 2011. Marriot reports on working with suppliers to *'advance the sustainability of their products to conserve energy, reduce water use, increase waste diversion and to include more sustainable materials'* and lists its achievements which include *'recycled*

*content key cards, Eco-Smart pillows, room ready towels, recycled material pens, low VOW paint, biodegradable laundry bags, low energy light bulbs and coreless toilet paper.* Under the banner *'Sustainability in Our Kitchens'*, Marriott stresses that it has sought to encourage sustainability by purchasing organic and responsibly sourced food and by establishing relationships with local farmers. In a similar vein Relais and Chateaux affirmed its commitment to the sustainable sourcing of seafood products.

In addressing social issues a range of themes can be identified including diversity and equality of opportunity; employees' work/life balance; training and development; human rights; customer health, safety and security; links with local communities; and donations to charity. Jumeirah, for example, reports that it *'promotes a working environment which is free from discrimination and where all colleagues are treated with dignity, courtesy and respect'* and that it *'does not tolerate discrimination on any basis, including discrimination based on race, color, nationality, age, disability or religion.'* Hilton stresses that *'great guest experiences begin with our team members'* and claims to *'strive to create a culture where team members feel appreciated and empowered to build rewarding careers in hospitality within an inspiring and stimulating work environment.'* To this end members of staff have *'access to Hilton Worldwide University, our internal education program, which includes courses ranging from management skills and personal development to training in systems and processes.'* Hyatt emphasises its commitment to helping its employees to *'reach their highest potential throughout their careers'* and reports on the *'Hyatt Leadership Network'*, a virtual learning management system that *'provides tools and resources for career development and personal growth.'* Wyndham Worldwide reports on its *'Be Well Program'* for its employees which includes health fairs and biometric screening; free advice from registered dietitians; a tobacco dependency program; lifestyle management programs; and health and fitness facilities.

A fundamental commitment to hotel guests and a concern for their health, safety and security loom large in the selected companies' sustainability agendas. Jumeirah, for example, reports *'we develop products and services based on guest needs and preferences which we gather and store in secure guest profiles'* and that it *'designs and delivers repeat guest amenity programmes.'* The company also stresses that its staff are *'trained in fire, high level security threat scenarios and emergency evacuations.'* Marriott claims that its *'brands remain strong as a result of superior customer service'* and reports that its guest loyalty program has 38 million members. Customer feedback is seen to be critical to successful customer service and to customer loyalty and the company reports on the high *'guest satisfaction scores'* emanating from this process.

The top ten hotel chains generally report on their links with the local communities and on their donations to charity as important elements in their sustainability commitments. Marriott, for example, reports on its *'Spirit To Serve Our Communities'* strategy which in 2011 delivered some \$23 million in cash and kind donations to organisations worldwide. The company's employees raised a further \$4.9 million for their local communities through company sponsored events and volunteered some 400,000 hours valued at \$9.4 million. The company also reports on its work in *'addressing housing and hunger needs'* particularly *'in times of disaster'*, on *'aiding sick and impoverished children'* and it emphasises its long term relationship with a number of international aid agencies. Best Western describes itself as *'a company that cares'* and it outlines its work in helping poorer communities by providing access to food, clean water supplies, health care and education. Hilton claims that

*‘celebrating cultures is at our core’ and that it looks to ‘celebrate and preserve the unique cultural heritage of the communities where we operate.’*

Commitments to the economic dimensions of sustainability receive much less coverage but capital development; employment creation; and building shareholder value are seen as important tissues. Marriott, for example, suggests that in the future a significant share of its hotel growth will be in developing markets in Brazil, China, India and in a number of African countries and that this will contribute to economic growth and development within these emerging economies. As a specific illustrative example the company reports on the development of a series of new hotels designed specifically for the growing Indian business market which it estimates will create some 80,000 new jobs. Jumeirah asserts its belief that it *‘can positively contribute to the socio-economic welfare of our host communities by creating unique employment opportunities’* More generally the IHG argues that throughout the world their hotels *‘provide opportunities for economic development, new business, much needed jobs and technology transfer.’* IHG also reports on commissioning Oxford Economics, a major economic forecasting consultancy, to examine the impact of its operations in three of its major markets namely the US, UK and Brazil. This study revealed, inter alia, that the group was directly responsible for 90,000 jobs in the US hotel industry, that the economic activity generated by the group’s employees income supports over 179,000 jobs within the US economy and that the corresponding figures for the UK and Brazil are 20,000 jobs and 46,000 jobs and 3,600 jobs and 6,700 jobs respectively. Wyndham Worldwide emphasises that its stakeholders *‘are significant drivers of our sustainability program’* and that its *‘shareholders keep us focused to make a difference and to drive for results.’* In a similar vein Marriot, argues that its stakeholders play an important role in *‘helping to shape our sustainability strategy.’*

## **Discussion**

Sustainability is attracting increasing attention within the global hotel industry but there is marked variations in the volume and the detail of the data and information posted by the top ten hotel chains. Although the majority of the leading hotel chains claim strong commitments to sustainability several of them also recognise, either explicitly or implicitly, that they are at the beginning of what may be a lengthy and arduous journey and as such a range of issues merit discussion.

Firstly the way in which the world’s leading hotel chains construct their definitions of sustainability merits attention. These definitions can be interpreted as being developed around efficiency and a commitment to securing competitive advantage within the marketplace and they reflect business demands rather than fundamental concerns for sustainability or for the maintenance and enhancement of natural ecosystems. While a number of the top ten hotel chain’s environmental commitments are designed to reduce natural resource consumption, for example, they also produce cost savings. At the same time commitments to staff development programmes and to diversity in the workplace encourage stability and loyalty amongst the workforce. More generally Deloitte (2012) has suggested that most companies select which environmental and social data to report on, and as such effectively determine their definitions of sustainability, *‘based on their own intuition and experience’* and on *‘one-to-one consultations with stakeholders or stakeholder panels.’* Deloitte (2012) has further argued that such methods do not help managers establish a relative ranking of sustainability issues *‘based upon what matters most to the business’* and would seem to privilege commercial imperative in the construction and development of sustainability agendas. That said the



leading hotel chains' construction of sustainability which emphasises business efficiency, could certainly be seen to be broadly consistent with some governments' commitments to sustainability. The UK Government's vision for sustainability, for example, looks to *'encouraging economic growth while protecting the environment and improving our quality of life'* (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 2013).

Secondly given the range of sustainability commitments being pursued by the leading hotel chains it can be difficult to align various targets and goals. At the corporate level, for example, Marriott's commitment to *'reducing costs whenever possible'*, for example, may threaten its commitment to *'guest satisfaction'* and to *'purchasing organic and responsibly sourced food.... and establishing relationships with local farmers.'* At the level of the individual hotel, managers who are looking to deliver on business deadlines and targets may, if facing problems with scheduling staff, demand that employees work hours and days that are not consistent with their work/life balance or refuse to allow employees to attend staff development programmes. While these tensions are common to many large companies looking to publicly pursue wide ranging sustainability agendas they are at least partly exacerbated, in the hotel industry in that a number of the leading hotel chains operate, in part at least, a business model based on managing and franchising hotels rather than on direct ownership. Within this model, the hotel company does not manage employees, operations and maintenance and at Marriot, for example, the focus is on working *'with owners and franchisees to ensure that brand standards are met'* and to *'encourage sustainable operational practices.'* Wyndham Worldwide reports that the majority of its hotels are independently owned and operated by franchise owners and hotel development companies and while they argue these owners and developers have a vital *'role in driving the direction of our global sustainability efforts'*, in reality they are, at least, one step removed from direct corporate control.

Thirdly there are issues concerning the way the world's leading hotel chains report on and provide information on sustainability. Generally the accent is on providing a simple narrative of sustainability commitments and achievements. Sometimes such narratives are illustrated with simple statistics and case studies and photographs and simple diagrams are widely used to illustrate general themes. While the Wyndham Worldwide, IHG, Jumeirah and Marriott sustainability/corporate social responsibility reports all claim to reflect, be in line with, or comply with, global reporting guidelines the other six of the top ten hotel chains provide information on sustainability in their own idiosyncratic house styles. Overall the lack of common reporting protocols and in some reports the use of case studies makes it difficult to make any meaningful comparison between one hotel chain and another or to attempt assess the contributions that the leading hotel chains are making towards the achievement of global sustainability targets.

There is also little evidence of independent external assurance of the information posted by the selected hotel chains. Only one hotel chain, for example, reported any element of external assurance. Wyndham Worldwide commissioned Deloitte & Touche to review its reporting of just one component of its wide ranging sustainability agenda, namely greenhouse gas emissions. Deloitte and Touche qualified its review by noting that *'environmental and energy use data are subject to inherent limitations , given the nature and the methods used for determining such data'* and concluded that *'nothing came to our attention that caused us to believe that the Statement of Greenhouse Gas Emissions by Wyndham Worldwide is not presented.....in conformity with the Greenhouse Gas Protocol published by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development and the World Resources Institute.'* The

widespread lack of independent external assurance certainly seems to undermine the credibility of the information on sustainability made publicly available by the leading hotel chains. However these large hotel chains are large, complex and dynamic organisations. The work involved in the accurate capture, processing and storage of information and the provision of access to this data to facilitate independent external assurance is undoubtedly a time consuming and an expensive venture and it is one which the world's top ten hotel chains are currently not pursuing.

Finally there are arguably more fundamental tensions between sustainability and economic growth. On the one hand the leading hotels' position on sustainability and growth might be seen to be epitomised by Marriott, for example, in that it reports that its *'sustainability goals support business growth'* and by Wyndham Worldwide which claims that its *'commitment to global sustainability comes at a time of exciting growth.'* IHG recognises the tension between the continuing growth of tourism and the environment but argues that this *'creates a space for innovation'* and suggests that this tension provides *'an opportunity to find innovative solutions to the environmental, social and economic effects of our business.'* On the other hand there are arguments that economic growth, dependent as it currently is, on the depletion of the earth's finite natural resources, is incompatible with sustainability. This is epitomised by Jackson's (2006) argument that *'the consumption patterns that characterise modern Western society are unsustainable. They rely too heavily on finite resources and they generate unacceptable environmental costs.'*

## **Conclusion**

This exploratory review of the global hotel industry reveals that there are marked variations in both the volume and the detailed content of the information the top ten hotel chains post on the Internet about their commitments to sustainability. While these commitments cover a variety of environmental, social and economic issues, they can be interpreted as being driven as much by a search for business efficiency gains as by a genuine concern for sustainability and the maintenance and enhancement of natural ecosystems. As such the global hotel industry would seem to be following a 'weak' rather than a 'strong' approach of sustainability and the lack of independent external assurance, mentioned earlier, certainly calls into question the transparency and credibility of the reporting process. More fundamentally the authors would argue that the global hotel industry's commitments to sustainability have been developed within existing capitalist business models which are focused on continuing economic growth. This, in turn, echoes Roper's (2012) belief that weak sustainability represents *'a compromise that essentially requires very little change from dominant economic driven practices but effectively works to defuse opposition, increase legitimacy and allow business as usual.'*

However the industry would surely want to stress that *'business leaders must also run their companies successfully under present framework conditions while helping to lead society towards the new framework conditions of sustainability'* (World Business Council for Sustainable Development 2010). The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2010), further argues, for example, such a transformation *'represents vast opportunities'* as *'the global challenges of growth, urbanization, scarcity and environmental change become the key strategic drivers for business'* and that in rising to meet these challenges *'smarter systems, smarter people, smarter designs and smarter businesses will prevail.'* The leading hotel chains have a global reach, with footprints in both developed and developing countries, and as such they are well placed to take a leading role in tackling a number of the challenges

outlined above and, in some ways equally importantly, to be promoting and publicising their endeavours and achievements to customers and within the communities in which they operate.

While the exploratory nature and tightly defined focus of this paper does not provide a basis for policy development it does offer a mirror in which the leading hotel chains and the hotel industry at large might reflect on their current approaches to sustainability and on public perceptions of those approaches. If the leading hotel chains are looking to strengthen and extend their approach to sustainability then they will need to undertake, or commission, research to investigate the most effective ways that they can utilise marketing communications to make more determined efforts to keep customers informed of progress in meeting sustainability goals. At the same time the hotel chains may wish to explore how they might more effectively develop their approach to sustainability and enhance the transparency of their commitments and achievements throughout their supply chains.

A number of future academic research agendas can also be identified across the canons of hospitality management. In marketing, for example, interest might include market research designed to explore what sustainability means to customers, holiday companies, travel agents and consultants, if and why such stakeholders think it is important, on the characteristics of consumers that care about sustainability and on the extent to which such consumers are willing to change their patterns of hotel patronage. Research might also focus on how sustainability issues are managed with hotelier/supplier relationships and on the locus of and impact of power within such relationships. Research into stakeholder perceptions of the relative importance of external factors, for example, statutory regulation, global economic change and reputation, and internal factors, for example, efficiencies in operating costs and the desire to recruit and retain creative and talented employees, would be valuable in helping to more fully understand the development of the leading hotel chains' commitments to sustainability. Such research might be profitably complemented by investigations into the factors influencing, and the challenges facing, those hotel chains which have, to date, made limited commitments to sustainability. Research into the development of information systems designed to facilitate continuous improvements in sustainability are in their infancy (Melville 2010). That said such work would seem to offer fertile ground designed to enhance the role of information systems in promoting sustainability within the hotel industry. Finally there is a need to investigate how more open and transparent commitments to sustainability are reflected in profit margins and stock market performance.

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