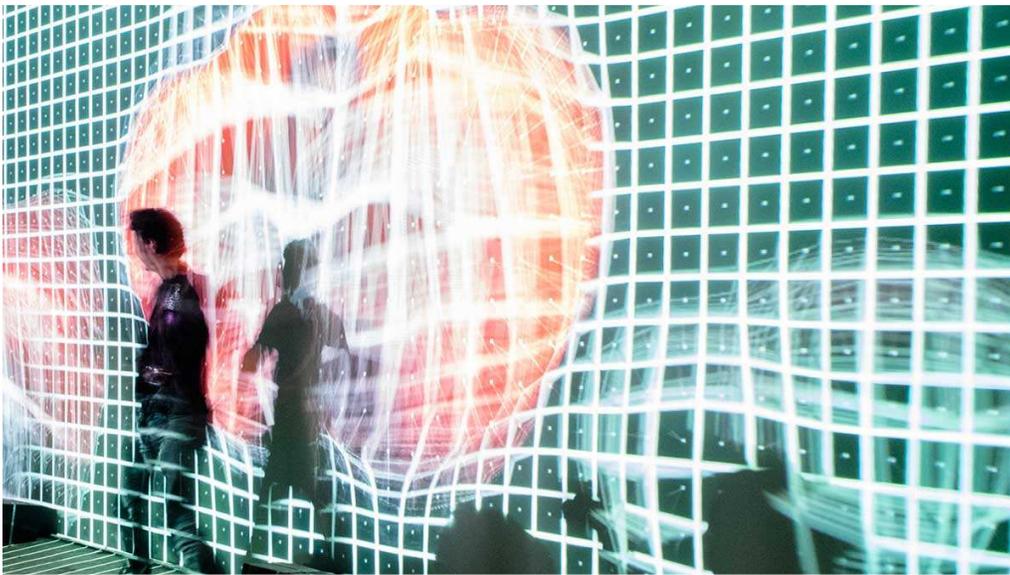# Using an algorithm to figure out what luxury guests really want

I met Metis's mother in Los Angeles in the summer of 2014. We were introduced by a mutual friend. At that time, Metis, named for the Greek goddess of wisdom, was brand new. She is a curated, big data analytics aide-de-camp — not quite at the level of artificial intelligence, but close — and she speaks in a British accent.

Her mother, Kyle Richey, and her co-founder, David Richey, are known for helping luxury service businesses — including hotel, retail, fashion, and professional sports — develop brand-defining service standards. As global director of guest experience and innovation for the Dorchester Collection's ultra-luxury hotels, I was intrigued because I had a problem I thought Metis could help me solve.

In a nutshell, the enormous volume of data collected from mystery shoppers, online reviews, social media, blogs, and ratings agencies about customer preferences and experiences has become too overwhelming for any business (including mine) to assess. And as the luxury segment depends upon anticipating, and then exceeding customer expectations, this is a problem. In the absence of a more nuanced understanding of customer feedback, the data we collect today

is driving the industry toward [standardized service, and standardization turns luxury into a commodity](#) – the very opposite of what luxury customers want.

Luxury customers, whether they're buying automobiles, or jewelry, or hotel suites, want to feel special. They do not want to share their experience with others. But when most suites come with a bottle of chilled champagne (as they do), and every hotel has a Michelin-starred restaurant (as do all 11 of the four-and-five-star hotels in Paris), how can a guest feel that he or she is experiencing something special, created just for them?

This is the conundrum I thought Metis could help answer by diving into the deeps of customer data to tell us what makes our hotels special. What are our strengths? Where could we improve? I offered to help the Richeys train Metis — who was then still learning to analyze text — by sharing with her my experience and operational insights. The Richeys invited me to join their product development advisory board. A bit less than two years later, on March 23, 2016, Metis, accompanied by a film, addressed 30 Dorchester Collection leaders in the Crystal Suite at the eponymous Dorchester, in London. She had digested and analyzed millions of words of online conversation.

And she began by talking about breakfast.

Finding Surprises in Big Data

Every hotel serves breakfast, but few give it much thought. After all, breakfast won't win you a Michelin star. Plus, the majority of our rooms come with breakfast included, which means it does not provide significant incremental revenue. Fine dining, however, both generates revenue and burnishes a hotel's reputation. So we invest a great deal of thought and resources in that experience — wrongly, it turns out. Metis set us straight.

She pointed out that one in every three reviews of The Dorchester hotel mentions breakfast, far more than cite dinner. Indeed, Metis told us that breakfast defines our guests' perception of our entire food and beverage division.

In our minds, there were three distinct breakfast offerings at The Dorchester. Guests could have breakfast in their rooms, at the Promenade, or in The Grill restaurant, and the menus — and experience — were different in each location.

Guests, Metis told us, don't make those distinctions. No matter where breakfast is served, they simply use the menu as a guide to ingredients. Each guest wants something particular; they want what they are accustomed to. Breakfast, it seems, is not a time for experimentation or discovery; its purpose is to comfort us and make us ready for the day.

The executives in the Crystal Room asked to pause the presentation so they could discuss this revelation. Ideas began to fly about how we could expand and promote our breakfasts, how we could differentiate and personalize them in every location.

Metis had another surprise for us in store. At our Hotel Bel-Air, in Los Angeles, Metis told us that the majority of guests spoke about the hotel's outdoor spaces — the patios and terraces – and our wood-burning fireplaces. People found them relaxing, using words such as "haven," "secluded," and "oasis." (Hotel Bel-Air is the only hotel in Los Angeles that offers wood-burning fireplaces; we didn't know that.) But Metis had gone to our website and discovered that we showed hardly any photos of a patio or terrace. We fixed that — now when potential guests go to the website, they immediately see photos of lush outdoor spaces.

Acting on Analytic Insights

A computer can remind you that it's a guest's birthday. It can't tell you what to do about it. Should you put a candle in a cupcake (or a Baked Alaska)? Should the staff sing "Happy Birthday" at the table?

Not in our hotels. Not for our guests, who treasure privacy, and don't want people hovering behind them, intruding on their evening.

It's not what the data tells you; it's what you *do* with what the data is telling you that makes the difference. Can you resist the temptation to standardize, and use the data to uncover what makes your business unique?

Big data is helping us move from what *we* think is important to what the *customer* thinks is important. Sometimes, as was the case with breakfast at The Dorchester, there's a large discrepancy. Sometimes, as with the Hotel Bel-Air, it's as simple as swapping out some photos.

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