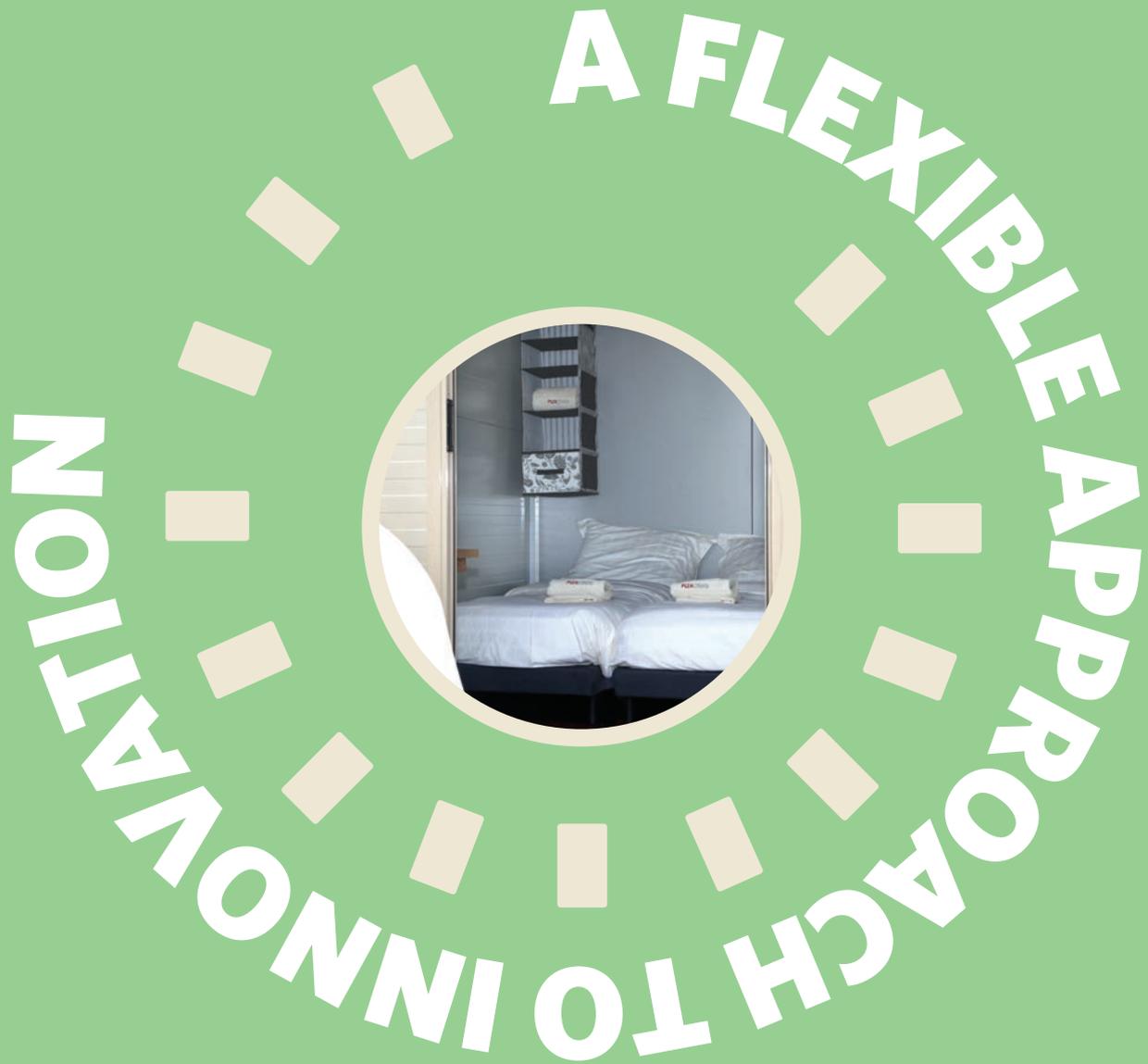


INNOVATION TO INNOVATION A FLEXIBLE APPROACH



Innovation changes the established rules by which an industry is used to operating and in the hospitality sector it is essential that foodservice consultants and hoteliers respond to new ideas as they emerge. We spoke to the man behind the radical new concept of Flexotels to find out what it means to innovate and how an original idea impacts on complementary services

The hospitality sector thrives on new ideas, but rarely does an innovation radically depart from the familiar concepts that define how hotels operate. Foodservice consultants, for instance, may well focus on devising new ways to design and build catering facilities, or on creating the dining experiences that suit customers' changing needs, but such innovations usually sit within an established framework. Occasionally, however, a completely new concept comes along that changes some of the rules.

One such concept underlies the company Flexotels, which shows how an entrepreneur can come up with an imaginative idea from an in-depth understanding of the hospitality sector, creating in the process not only a vibrant new experience for guests, but also posing new challenges for other players in the industry.

Hubert Von Heijden, the owner of Flexotels, came up with the idea of a collapsible hotel room that he could use to offer travellers a better standard of accommodation at sports events or music festivals, while still offering the convenience of staying close to the action.

"I was working in the real estate business developing hotels and leisure centres and I saw a market for temporary hotel rooms at sports and music events. I did two feasibility studies for clients and

put the idea under my pillow. I eventually got it out and looked at how to finance it. The most important factor was transport, which is 20% of the production costs," says Von Heijden.

His belief is that whether a guest stays in a hotel or at a campsite, the experience of an event is the most important factor. With Flexotels guests can soak up the atmosphere of an event and stay longer, knowing that they do not have a lengthy journey to their hotel at the end of the day, or night, and that they will have a much better experience because they are not staying in a tent.

A Flexotel room can accommodate two people and has the familiar trappings of an ordinary hotel room: electricity and light, a bed, storage space, linen and towels. These rooms are collapsible, so can be quickly put up or taken down. They can be arranged in different formations and can be supplied in different quantities to suit each individual event. In essence, they are temporary structures that offer most, if not all, of the advantages of a hotel room.

These rooms have become a familiar sight at many of Europe's top music and sports events. During the Olympic Games, for example, they were deployed at a site in North London. They have also been used at UK festivals in locations such as the Isle of Wight and Glastonbury and for motor racing at Silverstone.

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"People picked up on the idea quite quickly," says Von Heijden, "but it took a year for the business to come together. At the first event, which was a music festival, we put up 40 rooms. At the next event we expanded much further. It is important to be at the major events so that people can see the rooms. We have 150 rooms and for some events, such as the UK's Lowlands music festival and the 24-hour race at Le Mans, we put up all of them. The market is potentially quite big and no one else offers the kind of temporary rooms that we do."

There are, of course, alternatives to staying in a Flexotel room. Guests could stay in tents, or they could use Portakabins. But Portakabins, for example, are more expensive to transport as only four can be loaded on a single truck. With Flexotels, up to 20 rooms can be put onto one truck.

"The challenge was to make it profitable to put up the rooms for just a weekend," says Von Heijden. "We offer a normal hotel rate for three-to-five days. I'm not a financial guy, but I like to puzzle >



CREATIVE CONCEPTS

out the figures on paper and I saw that I needed to be able to get at least 14 rooms on a truck, so that was the first challenge.

“We worked together with people at the University of Eindhoven to look at different products, and collapsible containers were among the ideas we considered. We looked at using a large container to hold seven rooms and we looked at putting bathrooms into each room. But it is better to put 20 rooms on a truck with no bathrooms than 10 rooms with bathrooms.”

Birth of the new

Collapsible containers are not a new concept. They have been used in the maritime sector for years to transport empty containers more efficiently. There are also collapsible houses used by organisations such as the Red Cross for refugee camps, but they involve a lengthy process that is heavy on manpower.

Von Heijden used similar underlying concepts, but with very different specifications. “The collapsibility was obviously an important element, but more important was the need to have a container with the right internal features such as beds and storage space that stay inside when it is collapsed. So the real innovation was to increase the amount of material that stays inside it when you collapse the structure,” he explains. “We

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needed to be able to put up a room in 10 minutes with just two people to make a business out of it. Two people can set up 100 of our rooms in one day.”

In addition to commercial considerations, Von Heijden also put considerable emphasis on issues such as sustainability. “I know that in the leisure sector the three golden rules are location, location and location,” he says. “The people who use our rooms like being at the location of the event they are attending. They don’t need to use their cars or the train to get there from their hotels. At Le Mans, for instance, the rooms are near the circuit so people are right in the middle of the experience they have paid for,” he says.

“With our rooms, event organisers can get 300 people right in the heart of the event who don’t have to travel to hotels that might be miles away.”

Accommodating innovation

The hospitality sector needs innovation and Von Heijden gives an interesting glimpse into the process that lies behind a new idea. “For innovation you need to have a character that is open to new possibilities. Also, you have to be ready to look at five ideas that fail before you reach the sixth one, which might be a success. There is also a risk if the idea is owned by the market because you move too fast. We built up steadily and now we are in the position where we can expand to 400 or 500 rooms in Europe,” says Von Heijden.

“With innovation the expectations end up being not normally what you have planned for. You don’t have a benchmark with a new idea. You can’t research the market because the market doesn’t exist. It is like being a rugby player – you have to fight for every metre. I am proud that we made a profit in the third year but it is still hard to raise money for expansion.”

Von Heijden is eager to stress that his business is not in competition with the hotel industry. “We exist because hotels are fully booked or too far away from an event. We’ve actually worked with hotel companies putting up rooms next to their hotels to expand their capacity. In that instance, the hotel can provide the food for guests staying in our rooms,” he says.

For foodservice consultants there is an opportunity to work with events that use Flexotels, as the company is focused on providing rooms rather than food or beverages. Often the event organisers prepare a reception and lounge area where they offer breakfast and drinks. Understanding guests’ experience in Flexotel rooms could give birth to new ideas to meet their needs, so foodservice consultants should keep a close eye on such innovations. ■



CIRCLE THE WAGONS The innovative concept of Flexotels

We want to hear your views
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