



The kindness advantage in hospitality: How Ovolo Hotels redefined hospitality during a crisis

When Girish Jhunjhnuwala reimagined hospitality, he proved that genuine kindness could transform crises into unforgettable brand loyalty.

When I stepped into the office of Girish Jhunjhnuwala, the hospitality maestro behind Ovolo Hotels and a Hong Kong-grown entrepreneur with a rockstar heart, I felt like I had wandered into a museum curated by my teenage self. The walls were alive with artwork from my favourite era, and his library was packed with books about musicians who once blasted from my Vinyl LP player.

KINDNESS STARTS WITH GRACE

Normally, travelling from the Four Seasons Hotel in Hong Kong to Ovolo's headquarters takes 10 minutes, unless fate has other plans. My 30-minute buffer vanished when the first Uber cancelled, and the second arrived at the IFC Mall, the adjacent shopping centre, instead of the hotel lobby. With only 10 minutes left before my meeting with an important CEO, I dashed out, entered the wrong building, and took the wrong lift in the right building.

I felt embarrassed and frustrated by my unacceptable delay. But Girish immediately eased my discomfort with genuine understanding and reassurance. He warmly accepted my apology and calmly rescheduled his next meeting, ensuring we had the full hour together.

BE OPEN TO CONNECTING WITH STRANGERS

Although it was our first time meeting in person, Girish and I had been connected on LinkedIn for years. Naturally, I asked him why he connected with me in the first place. His answer reflected the approach to life that he actively encourages his children to live by. He said, "Always be open to learning from others. You never know where the next best ideas will come from."

That spirit of openness was something I had already felt during my stay at an Ovolo Hotel in Sydney. What stood out was not just the design or the service but the human touch. I still remember the hospitality and kindness I received from Amanda Cottom, Chief Culture Officer, Ovolo. She generously shared their recognition and appreciation programme with me, which became a valuable part of my research for my upcoming book about the power of meaningful appreciation.



BORN TO BECOME AN ENTREPRENEUR

Born in bustling Hong Kong in 1963 to a family of entrepreneurs, Girish soaked up the entrepreneurial spirit at home. His childhood weekends were filled with lessons at his father's watch workshop on Hollywood Road, where he learned business skills and developed business acumen alongside his siblings.

In his mid-20s, after graduating from the University of Southern California (USC) in

1984, Girish jumped straight into the family watch-making business, scaling it impressively into China. However, when the watch world shifted towards quartz in the late 1990s, he cleverly decided it was time to sell and embark on a new adventure.

STUMBLING UPON HOSPITALITY

Girish switched gears into property development, almost by accident, after stumbling upon a building on Arbuthnot Road while hunting for a spot for his wife's restaurant. That accidental find became his first serviced apartment, launching Girish into a joyful journey in hospitality.

Girish decided to establish a refreshing brand that creates a great experience 360 degrees for his customers and employees alike. He felt frustrated with rigid check-in policies, minibar sensors that punished guests' wallets, and a transactional vibe that left travellers feeling un-special.

Girish's lack of formal hospitality training freed him from conventional constraints, enabling innovation. He envisioned a welcoming and generous environment where guests feel genuinely valued. A hotel where happy hour becomes a celebration and personalised guest care is filled with warmth and empathy.

That led to the birth of Ovolo Hotels as a disruptive boutique hotel chain. Girish grew the group to charm guests across Hong Kong, Australia, and Bali with their playful vibe and innovative hospitality. However, a series of crises soon followed one after another. First was the social unrest in Hong Kong, which significantly impacted the hospitality industry there, and then came the disaster that no one was prepared for—Covid-19.

TURNING CRISIS INTO OPPORTUNITIES

In the midst of a global pandemic, as many hotel operators reduced services and laid off employees, Girish guided Ovolo with steady care and bold kindness. He chose a different route and steered the brand towards Ovolo's standard of extreme hospitality.

With some hotels hesitating to be labelled as quarantine venues, Girish saw an opening. He recognised the chance to keep the hotels active, protect jobs, and offer real value in a time of fear and uncertainty.

"We were lucky that the government selected us," Girish shared with quiet humility. "What we did next was our choice to live by our values and make a difference for our guests and the community."

What followed was a masterclass in purpose-driven hospitality.

BUILDING A DELIGHTFUL BRAND THROUGH GENUINE CARE

When the room rates were modest, the survival instinct of many hotels was to scale back. But in the culture Girish nurtured at Ovolo, delivering only the basics was never considered.

Girish and his team embraced the challenge. They saw the 21-day quarantine as a chance to delight people who were isolated and anxious. They elevated the entire experience, turning it into something memorable and deeply human.

As Girish puts it, “Usually, travellers stay just a few nights in city hotels. The crisis gave us a golden opportunity to show, through action, what our brand truly stands for.” By focusing on wellbeing and creative services, Ovolo creates unforgettable experiences for its guests.

QUARANTINE CONCIERGE: ELEVATING ISOLATION

One shining example was Ovolo’s Quarantine Concierge. It transformed mandatory isolation into an enjoyable retreat. Guests received mindfulness kits, personalised meals, fitness gear, and even enjoyed virtual happy hours, fostering a sense of community amid physical separation. Emotional well-being became as vital as physical comfort, creating lasting emotional connections.

The guests responded with deep gratitude. They shared their stories, feelings, and appreciation online, giving the brand free, positive publicity. Many spoke of finding comfort when they expected only confinement. Proof that sincere kindness resonates deeply.

DOING GOOD AND DOING WELL FOR THE BRAND

The Ovolo team went even further. Understanding that some returning residents could not afford standard quarantine stays, they launched The Ovolo Homecoming Project.

Partnering with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Hong Kong like The Zubin Foundation and Tung Wah Group of Hospitals, Ovolo provide rooms at just HK\$1 (US\$0.12) per night to financially distressed residents returning to quarantine.

However, with the Ovolo culture of hospitality, regardless of the price, you are a valued guest. Everyone got to experience their heartfelt hospitality, complete with daily amenities, thoughtful gestures, and empathetic touches that made isolation feel like care.

THE TRUE ROI OF KINDNESS

Girish’s leadership demonstrates that kindness is not an optional extra. It is a great investment strategy. A brand multiplier.

Kindness, especially in the hospitality business, is strategic, scalable, and essential. It transforms guests into loyal advocates, enriches employee morale, and strengthens community bonds.

Girish and his team at Ovolo Hotels’ Covid story exemplifies how heartfelt actions during crises yield lasting loyalty and resilience.

In redefining hospitality through kindness, Girish and Ovolo Hotels have set a powerful precedent: In times of crisis, compassion is more than good ethics to walk the talk of your culture; it is an exceptional opportunity to fortify the brand’s genuine differentiation by getting thousands of guests praising your name and being loyal for life.

About the Author:



Avi Liran is an economist, author, humourist, writer, C-level mentor, and one of Asia’s top motivational and inspirational keynote speakers. Avi is a thought leader and expert in creating delightful customer and employee experiences, positive cultures, fostering appreciation, and building authentic resilience.
