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Annual Edition

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The AI Shift: Rethinking Digital Ads in Hospitality's F&B Sector

Data-driven storytelling

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Kalani Bandaranayake, Ex-Cluster Assistant Director Digital & E-Commerce at Raffles Doha and Fairmont Doha, explains how AI is turning F&B marketing from guesswork into a living, adaptive system that listens, learns, and reacts in real time. She shows how unified data, weather and event-based personalization, and smarter, more responsive campaigns can lift performance, but insists that the real advantage will belong to teams who pair algorithmic precision with human empathy so ads do not just reach guests, they genuinely resonate with them.

Hospitality, at its heart, has always been about being one step ahead reading a guest before they even say a word. That used to come down to instinct and experience. These days, it's something more. We're surrounded by data, and with AI coming into the picture, that "sixth sense" is getting smarter and faster. In food and beverage especially, the way we market and connect is starting to change and it's only going to accelerate over the next few years.

Historically, marketing in hospitality leaned more on creativity than analysis. Campaigns were shaped by intuition, timing, and experience a kind of culinary instinct for what might resonate. Today, every click, search, and review leaves a trail of data that reveals what guests want. The next wave of marketing belongs to those who can turn that signal into strategy.

With AI, brands can now anticipate intent, generate tailored content in real time, and optimize performance even before a campaign fully rolls out. What once took days of analysis now happens in seconds and that changes everything.

In my work with F&B and hospitality teams, I've found the real transformation isn't just in the tech it's in the mindset. The most forward-thinking brands aren't just using better tools; they're asking better questions. What made this campaign resonate? What emotion did we overlook? What moment did we miss?

According to McKinsey, AI could unlock hundreds of millions in value for the F&B sector by 2030 specially through smarter marketing, deeper analytics, and more personal guest experiences. We're already seeing a shift from static campaigns to adaptive systems that tweak visuals, messaging, and timing based on live performance. It's not about creating more content. It's about making content smarter.

Here's where things get interesting: advertising isn't just reacting anymore it's adapting. Fast. Soon, we'll see ad campaigns that shift on the fly based on the weather, the time of day, or even the vibe of a local event. That's not a sci-fi scenario it's where things are heading, especially in food and beverage.

Unified data platforms will allow brands to see the full picture connecting online orders, loyalty programs, table bookings, and guest reviews. This will create a far more complete understanding of the customer journey. Picture a brunch café increasing smoothie bowl ads when the forecast calls for sunshine. Or a fine-dining restaurant boosting seasonal menu promotions ahead of a local holiday.

Weather-based personalization is gaining traction. Studies show that tailoring ads to local weather and timing can lift engagement and sales. One study found that apps using weather-triggered offers saw an 8.2% increase in user engagement compared to standard promotions, Tonkova, E. (2023). Marketing Apps in Small Businesses in the Context of Digitization

And it's not just big hotel groups that are innovating. Smaller restaurants and local operators are tapping into AI through affordable tools built into social platforms. The kind of precision marketing once limited to global brands is now within reach for small teams and it's changing the game.

Of course, not every market will move at the same pace. Regional regulations, brand maturity, and budgets will all play a role. Some businesses will embrace automation rapidly, while others will double down on trust and transparency. The winners will strike a balance between automation and authenticity, data and design, intelligence and emotion.

It's worth repeating: AI isn't here to replace creativity. It's here to elevate it. The true power of AI lies in helping us understand not just what guests do, but why they do it. The best F&B marketers won't be the ones posting the most they'll be the ones listening the best. Those who combine algorithmic precision with human empathy will stand out.

This shift also calls for breaking down silos. Marketing teams must understand data. Analysts must appreciate storytelling. And leadership must guide ethical AI adoption that protects privacy while encouraging innovation.

This transformation isn't just about the tools we use it's about the culture we create. In a digital-first world, hospitality still needs a human heartbeat. Sure, advertising is becoming more predictive, more personalized, and more performance-driven. But it's our job to make sure it doesn't lose its soul.

In the end, it's not just about getting in front of people it's about getting them. **The best campaigns won't just show up in someone's feed. They'll feel like they were meant to be there, in the moment.** That's where AI has real power not in replacing creativity, but in helping us be more in tune with the people we're trying to reach.