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Hotel Chains Try Training With Improv and iPods

Before two luxury hotels, the Andaz 5th Avenue in Manhattan and the Elysian Hotel in Chicago, opened their doors in recent months, both added something extra to their usual employee training practices: they hired improvisational comedy experts.

The Benjamin, an upscale business travel hotel also in New York, took a similar tack to help its staff better serve guests, offering them a series of life-coaching sessions this summer.

Other hotel brands — including Hilton Garden Inn, Aloft, Homewood Suites and SpringHill Suites — are using devices like iPods and the Sony PlayStation Portable to help with staff training.

The courses, which are offered in addition to more traditional classroom and online training, are part of an effort by hotels to distinguish their brand, said Bjorn Hanson, divisional dean of the Preston Robert Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism and Sports Management at New York University.

The needs of the Andaz 5th Avenue, which opened in July, were different from the Elysian's: Andaz hotels (part of [Hyatt](#)) do not have registration desks or traditional employees like porters, front desk workers or concierges. Rather, they employ "hosts," who greet guests as

they arrive, check them in and cater to their needs.

"Guests come from all angles, and training needs to be unconventional," said Jonathan Frolich, general manager of the Andaz 5th Avenue.

Thus, the hotel hired Chicago City Limits, an improvisational group in New York that also does corporate training, to develop a course to improve hosts' communications skills, help them read guests' body language and establish an immediate rapport with guests, said Linda Gelman, the group's producer.

"There are 228 hotel brands in the United States, and the two ways to be distinctive are design and service," she said. "Service can be a great differentiator." Hotels, she added, "are in a period of experimentation. Some brands are employing skills unrelated to the lodging industry to transform service styles and delivery."

Hotels are looking to the new forms of training to "make their learning stick," said Ron Doney, a former Marriott executive who now is president of Think Up Consulting in Greenville, S.C., which specializes in corporate training and advises SpringHill Suites and other hotel brands. "The more engaging and fun training is for adults, the easier it is to recall memorable concepts when they need to on the job," he said.