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Hip-brand hotels make push into suburbs

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Some Boston-area hotels have traded time-tested names for newer — and fans say, hipper — brands.

Among brands certain area hotels have shed: The Holiday Inn, Sheraton and Best Western.

The new arrivals: Hotel Indigo, Aloft and Element.

Replacing decades-old hotels with new, hip brands is a trend that is gaining traction in the hotel industry — especially in the suburbs.

Locally, familiar old-standby hotels are slowly being refurbished and, in some cases, ripped down. They are being replaced with boutique-style hotels that feature amenities that you'd find in most urban hotels, including fine dining, modern decor, spa treatments and state-of-the-art workout facilities, according to industry experts.

While gaining market share, these types of new boutique chains represent less than 5 percent of the hotels in Massachusetts.

"In this economy, you'll see that happening quite a bit where hotel operators will say, 'OK, we're currently doing X sales under this brand, but let's look at what other brands are out there.' I think you're going to see a lot of lodging establishments taking advantage of any rebranding opportunity that will either reduce their costs or increase their reservations," said Paul Sacco, president of the **Massachusetts Lodging Association**. "These newer, hip brands are very popular amongst corporate executives."

Hotels that have rebranded recently in Massachusetts include the Hotel Indigo in Newton, which opened over the summer after the hotel that was there previously — a Holiday Inn — closed. Out in Lexington, two new hotels — Aloft and Element — opened in July and replaced the Sheraton Lexington Inn, which had been there since 1955. And a Best Western in Cambridge was rebranded as the Hotel Tria about two years ago.

In 2007, Boston-based **Normandy Real Estate Partners** redeveloped the Holiday Inn in Newton into the 191-room Hotel Indigo, with a boutique-feel meant to emulate urban hotels. Both the Holiday Inn and Hotel Indigo brands are operated by the **InterContinental Hotels Group** (NYSE: IHG).

The Holiday Inn in Newton had experienced slumping reservations before it closed, said Mark Shouger, general manager at Hotel Indigo, who says business is good at the new hotel. "But when Normandy Real Estate Partners took over the property, they identified that we had to change the brand."

The Hotel Indigo has urban features, including hardwood floors in each of the guest rooms, trendy, spa-inspired showers instead of bathtubs, and the upscale BOKX 109 modern American steakhouse.

Shouger predicts that more suburban hotels in the state will make the switch to new brands.

"So many of the hotels are dated and aged," Shouger said.

Indeed, as the "hip standard" for suburban hotels is raised, there will likely be more pressure for rebranding to take place among older hotels, said Jeffrey Glew, director of the real estate development consulting firm The Concord Group in Boston.

"More hotels will start doing this to keep up with the Joneses," Glew said. "The cool and hip no longer live solely in the city, and younger employees travel for business and they want more choices for lodging."

In 2006, the Sheraton Lexington Inn was torn down and replaced by two newfangled hotels — the Aloft and the Element. Both brands are operated by Starwood Hotels, which also operates the Westin, W, Sheraton and the Meridien, among other brands. With 123 rooms, the Element is a green hotel complete with LEED certification and also features an organic grocery store. Aloft, which has 136 lofts, has a gym, flat screen televisions, a library and a funky bar called WXYZ.

"This property was ready for a change. Aloft is a vision of W hotels — it has a more sassy, savvy space. Element is a first class extended stay brand," said Christopher Hartzell, the complex general manager of the Aloft and the Element.



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