

Topic: A review of Marriott International Inc.'s marketing activities with considerations for future developments

Date: 8th July 2022

Module: Marketing Management

Module code: BMMB7005

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Executive Summary

Marriott International Inc. (MII) is a global travel lodging company and after acquiring Starwood Hotels & Resorts in 2016 it became the largest global hotel chain with 30 Brands (figure), 8326 properties spanning 139 territories. Consumer interest for lodgings is dynamic and necessitates that entities like MII must market with an aim to maximize profits by building consumer loyalty. As such differentiation is especially critical for MII's operation.

This report evaluates MII's marketing strategies by looking at its environmental factors to determine what influences they exerted on marketing; its brand positioning; consumer segmentation; differentiation from competitors; marketing mix; and suitability of the main communication channels. It also gives a determined conclusion and share recommendations to inform future strategies.

Both the internal and external environments are highly sensitive to various influences. MII's macro environment is currently affected by: the global vaccination campaign, Russo-Ukrainian war sanctions, global high levels of inflation, hybrid work influencing increase bleisure travel fuelled by next-generation travellers; strong spending power of wellness travellers; rise of automation and contactless technology, cyber security and changes in privacy laws; and the need for sustainable practices. While the Micro environment is mainly influenced by: increase and targeted online customer engagements; keeping abreast and above competitors; and maintaining positive supplier relationships.

MII employs a broad differentiation strategy targeting a wide category of customers from lodging with affordable amenities to aspirational luxury. Its dynamic pricing strategy is reflected through the diversity of offerings and varies within the different styles, tiers, brands and

locations. Two campaigns are featured, Bonvoy- Rewards Reimagined, on a global scale and Moxy's Great British Road Trip, targeting a niche.

The conclusion pinpoints critical issues like the noise around Bonvoy and the lofty expectations of the campaign. Five recommendations are provided: utilising sentiment analysis to identify major pain points; instituting feedback surveys to run concurrent with campaigns; using pointed and unambiguous communication to address identified issues; leveraging M-live; and deepening long term influencer partnerships.

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1. Introduction



Figure 1, MII's 30 brands and categories, Source- (Marriott, 2022a)

Marriott International Inc. (MII) is a global travel lodging company. MII began in food and beverage when John Willard and Alice sheets Marriott opened a nine-seat A&W root beer stand in 1927. After acquiring Starwood Hotels & Resorts in 2016 it became the largest global hotel chain and by 2022 it comprised 30 Brands (figure1) with 8326 properties spanning 139 territories (Marriott International, 2019).

Consumer interest for lodgings is dynamic and necessitates lodgings market with an aim to maximize profits by building consumer loyalty (Samatovich, 2021). Arguable, it is more cost effective to communicate with a dedicated base than attract new customers. However, changes over time like digital technology have empowered consumers to openly communicate preferences and dislikes prompting businesses to seek unique engagements (Samatovich, 2021). Differentiation is especially critical for MII's operation within the highly competitive sector where there are similar offerings across all categories from strong brands like Hilton, IHG Hotels & Resorts, Hyatt, Wyndham Hotels & Resorts (Marriott, 2022a)

Subsequently, this report will evaluate MII's marketing strategies: environmental factors will be examine to determine what influences they exerted on marketing; consideration will be given to

brand positioning; consumer segmentation; differentiation from competitors; marketing mix; and suitability of the main communication channels. Furthermore, the report will include a determined conclusion and share recommendations to inform MII'S future strategies.

2. Environmental factors



Figure 2, MII's environmental factors

The environment (figure 2) in which MII operates sway business decisions because the sector is highly sensitive to both external and internal influences. These evolving forces can stimulate or stem consumer demand thus it is integral to keep abreast and adjust marketing strategy accordingly.

2.1 Macro Environment:

2.1.1 Political:

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the largest vaccination campaign ever, more than 12 billion shots across 184 countries (Bloomberg, 2021). These numbers are promising for 2022 travel, however as the situation progresses MII must provide customers with trustworthy guidance on travel rules, testing protocols and required documents. Additionally, on February 24th Russo-Ukrainian war escalated resulting in more sanctions from countries like the US, Canada and UK. In early June MII followed suit announcing its departure from Russia (BBC News, 2022).

2.1.2 Economic:

Agarwal and Kimball (2022) propose that global high levels of inflation are the cumulative results of supply chain bottlenecks; upturn demand for durable goods; reverberating effects of stimulus packages; sustained labour shortages; and Russo-Ukrainian conflict triggered energy and food shortages. It is anticipated to persist and affect consumers' discretionary pursuits. Likewise, Bram Gallagher, CBRE senior hotel economist explained that most hotels responded with price increases, but only luxury hotels successfully achieve real gains (Hertzfeld, 2022).

2.1.3 Social:

Hybrid work prevail as businesses adapt, the model allows employees to work where they are most productive (Webex, 2022) and for some that includes 'bleisure' (Revfine, 2019). SAP Concur research (cited in Revfine, 2019) identified Millennials (38%) to be most likely to partake in bleisure travel while Generation X and Baby Boomers accounted for 31% each thus pinpointing that marketing should encompass all. The Global Wellness Institute (2021) defines

wellness as an “active pursuit” associated with intentions and actions linked to an individual’s holistic health. It explained that the wellness economy experienced tremendous growth in 2017-19 and declined in 2020. However, the same period reignited consumers’ passion for wellness, in 2020 it accounted for 6.5% of all tourism trips and 16.2% of all expenditures (Global Wellness Institute, 2021), signalling a worthwhile target group for MII.

2.1.4 Technology:

Automation and contactless technology have enabled industry operatives to reduce cost, generate more revenue, improve processes, and offer enhanced guest experiences. Competitive companies have integrated mobile technology to better engage consumers. Within the last two years companies like Hilton have upgraded their app to allow customers to book, instantly confirm and choose room preference whilst others like Hyatt use it as a digital front desk enabling room access via Bluetooth technology (French, 2022).

2.1.5 Legal:

In September of 2018 MII confirmed a cyber breach affecting 500 million global customers. Following the disclosure MII’s stocks dropped by 5% and it endured approximately \$1 billion in lost revenue from diminished customer loyalty, numerous recovery and legal expenses plus reputational damage (Young, 2021). In the second quarter of 2021 ransomware, malware and phishing increased by 155.9 % thus businesses need to limit exposure by safeguards like firewalls, employee training and adequate cyber insurance coverage (Gore and Kuperman, 2022). Likewise, changes in laws like the ePrivacy Regulation in the EU and the Bill C-11 for the Digital Charter Implementation Act 2020 in Canada can adversely affect MII’s ability to effectively use email, online advertising and postal mailing strategies (Marriott, 2022a).

2.1.6 Environmental:

Hospitality entities contribute to environmental degradation, so to prevent the industry from ‘killing the goose that lays the golden egg’, businesses must mitigate adverse impacts (Mensah, 2019). Consumers are also becoming more environmentally savvy and willing to pay more to companies that safeguard the environment. As a consequence many hotels like MII have implemented environmental management systems and actively market their activities to curb negative impact.

2.2 Micro Environment:

2.2.1 Customers:

MII’s customers engage the brand through the website, in app, in person, or a combination of touchpoints and to better understand their needs it needed to use and interpret data in a more dynamic way (Adobe, 2022). Susan Bloomberg, MII’s Vice President of Personalization and Product Performance, explained that MII utilises technology in real-time to build profiles of logged in customers to personalise site experience (Adobe, 2022).

In 2015 MII set-up its M-Live platform to target ‘next-generation’ travellers, identify trends, monitor social media reputation and detect opportunities specific to individual properties in real-time (Power, 2016). M-Live use geofencing technology to uncover untagged conversations about the brand (Eversham, 2022). MII’s European vice president of marketing and E-commerce, Osama Hizralla, (cited in Eversham, 2022) explained that M-Live has transformed customer engagement in a more meaningful way. According to Mobile Marketing Association

(2022) there are numerous successful instances of M-Live in action like when an influential NFL sportswriter tweeted positively about loyalty points and accommodation whilst on honeymoon in Greece. The team reached out to the staff and enabled a ‘surprise-and-delight’ moment to stimulate further social sharing with the influencer.

2.2.2 Competitors:

MII prides itself on an innovative culture, allowing it to anticipate and surpass customer expectations by providing numerous brands, diverse global locations and distinctive experiences. Its ability to remain competitive depends on its capacity to differentiate quality and value while driving preference for the lodgings and loyalty program. Additionally, Chekitan Dev, professor of marketing at Cornell’s School of Hotel Administration, (in Gigante, 2019) believes that “Hotel brand loyalty programs have become the competitive weapon to counter the power of online travel agents and home sharing platforms like Airbnb.”

2.2.3 Suppliers:

MII’s suppliers can affect profit and reputation so maintaining good relationships with them is vital. After acquiring Starwood Hotels & Resorts MII’s volume leverage allowed renegotiation for several contracts with common vendors like LG and Samsung resulting in better terms for both parties (Supply Chain World, 2017). Stephane Masson, MII Senior VP of Global Procurement, admits that it was challenging to do procurement for the international brand as prior to 2002 the process was centralize in the US but now use a hybrid system pivoting on technology (Supply Chain Digital, 2020).

3. Target markets:

MII's global reach allows it to employ a broad differentiation strategy targeting a wide category of customers from lodging with affordable amenities to aspirational luxury. Classifying its 30 brands was a herculean task so solicited customer feedback was included. Its brands are currently divided into two styles: classic- those reflecting a traditional hotel experience and distinctive- those that are contemporary. These two styles are further segmented by quality or price tiers: luxury, premium, and select (figure 1).

Ritz Carlton is an examples of classic luxury and targets customers with discerning taste willing to pay more for upscale amenities; Westin falls into the distinctive premium grouping and is skewed towards the less price sensitive health and wellness travellers; Courtyard by Marriott and Residence Inn are both in the select classic tier however the former targets business travellers and the latter is geared towards longer stays customers; and a select distinct is Moxy “designed to capture the rapidly emerging millennial traveller” (Caswell, 2013).

Boyce (2021) purports that the future of travel lies with the more adventurous next-generation: Millennials and Gen Z generations. In the USA they are 151 million strong with an USD\$350B spending power. They are less likely to make travel decisions based on loyalty; value authentic experiences; and consider comfort, amenities and a brand's good reputation as important (Boyce, 2021). A global survey (cited in Klein, 2022) highlighted that 44% of British Gen Z plan to spend more on travel in 2022. It also showed that 39% of Gen Z considered social media to be most influential in travel recommendations. As such it is unsurprising that next-generation are expected to account for a significant portion (90%) of the working-age population within a

decade and will account for more than 60% of Marriott International's business within the next four years (Globetrender, 2018).

MII partnered with Ikea to launch its economy brand, Moxy. Ramesh Jackson, global brand manager for Moxy Hotels, (quoted in Cunningham, 2014) attested that Moxy was specifically designed for the price conscious and discerning millennials. Globetrender (2018) points out that Moxy' "fun hunters" are the young and young at heart. Moxy's streamlined features are backed by research (Jackson cited in Cunningham, 2014) and are experiential beginning with a complimentary cocktail at the check in bar. There are active and calm communal areas, small rooms with open wall closets and many USB outlets. Technology is a key feature enabling consumers to do mobile check-in and stream content directly from personal devices. In fact, Moxy is the first MII brand to feature smartphone enabled Keyless entry specific for loyalty members.

4. Marketing Mix:

4.1 Products:

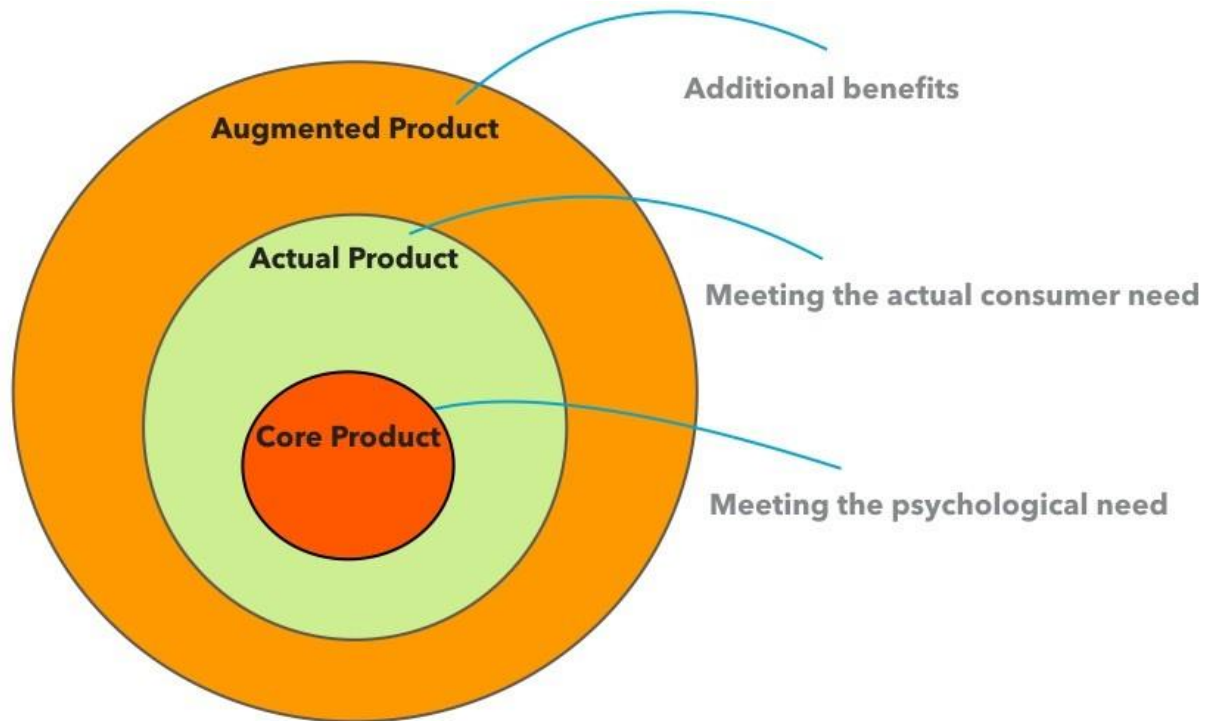


Figure 3, Product levels, Source- (Khan, 2021)

MII's core product (figure3) is the lodging that the consumer is purchasing which is the same for all accommodations. The actual includes differentiating features like globally recognised brand, luxurious associations, quality service and exceptional guest experiences. Arne Sorenson, MII CEO, (cited in Sampson, 2018) explain that the actual product must be strong at each individual hotel and continually improved. Additional services and benefits or the augmented includes access to loyalty program perks. Sorenson, further stated that the Loyalty program is a major part of MII's strategy (Sampson, 2018).

4.2 Pricing:

MII's pricing strategy is reflected through the diversity of its offerings and varies within the different styles, tiers, brands and locations. Maintenance, customer demand, promotions and competitor pricing also influence its prices. The Luxury tier is the high-end section and offers "bespoke and superb amenities and services", Premium is a mid-range section and offers "sophisticated and thoughtful amenities and services" and Select is the more economic selection offering "smart and easy amenities and services".

4.3 Place and Distribution:



Figure 4, MII's global lodgings locations, Source- (D'Amours, 2019)

MII is the world's largest hotel chain with a presence on the main continents, properties are located near major towns and cities (figure 4). It has a mixed distribution channel including website, mobile app, call centres, travel agents, internet travel websites and global distribution

systems like Amadeus. It relies heavily on technology to enhance efficiency in maintaining inventory across the different channels. MII also has a detailed affiliate program which it uses to push direct booking to maximize revenue.

4.4 Promotions:



Figure 5, MII's Bonvoy 2019 logo Ad, source- (Marriott, 2019)

In February 2019 MII launched a global campaign to bring awareness to its newly launched loyalty program, Bonvoy- Rewards Reimagined (figure 5). Its launch was labelled as the “biggest travel and hospitality story of 2019” (Gigante, 2019). Karin Timpone, Global Marketing Officer, outlined that the campaign aimed to build awareness for Bonvoy and inspire more people to travel (Marriott, 2019). Bonvoy replaced Marriott Rewards, The Ritz-Carlton Rewards and Starwood Preferred Guest thus encompassing rewards for all 30 brands under a single moniker. This was a vast undertaking that included 120 million existing loyalty members plus potential enrollees grasping the new name as well as learning the new system.

MII's president (in Baratti, 2022) pointed out that the select-service brands are important growth driver especially in the international arena. To grow its reach Moxy embraces working with

target market influencers. In 2021 Bonvoy launched the “Power of Travel” campaign to capitalise on the ‘revenge travel’ that appeared looming as restrictions lifted in some regions. Moxy piggy-back on the momentum and launched the “Great British Road Trip” campaign to provide ‘fun-hunters’ with an experiential staycation whilst driving bookings for hotel packages. The brand did digital videos (<https://vimeo.com/597128926>) and utilised influencers to capture content and usher followers to the campaign’s microsite (BMF, 2021).

5. Media:

The Bonvoy- Rewards Reimagined was widespread and incorporated traditional: television spots, print and out of home; and digital media: digital video, mobile and social media plus special member access events (Marriott, 2019). MII further indicated that the initial television spot premiered in the U.S. during the 91st Oscars (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0qOPZxRhhY>). The campaign also included marketing partnerships that enabled activation with iconic brands and events like Manchester United, FIA Formula One, Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival and Emirates Airline Dubai Jazz Festival.

Additionally next-generation travellers like sharing social experience so Moxy capitalises on this in their marketing strategy. It created a digital guestbook on Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/moxyhotels/?hl=en>) to showcase “the real, unfiltered guest experiences” (Likefriends, 2022). Its quirky designs and fresh artwork makes for a memorable environment that guest enjoy sharing. Large screens in communal spaces display recently

uploaded Instagram images and videos taken by guests from various properties. Thus enticing others to create and post their very own #atthemoxy moments. In effect motivating guests to generating user content for marketing its properties. Likewise, the “Great British Road Trip” benefitted from ‘fun hunters’ sharing their route experiences on the digital guestbook.

6. Measuring success:

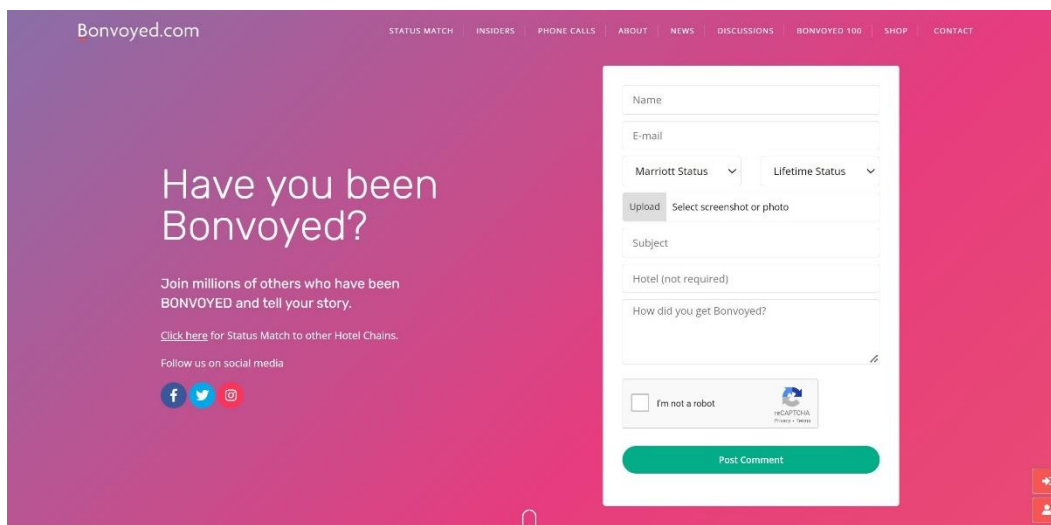
The image is a screenshot of the Bonvoyed.com website. The background is a gradient of purple and pink. On the left, the text "Have you been Bonvoyed?" is prominently displayed in white. Below it, smaller text encourages users to join millions of others and share their stories. There are links for "Status Match" and "Follow us on social media" with icons for Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. On the right, there is a white registration form with fields for Name, E-mail, Marriott Status (dropdown), Lifetime Status (dropdown), a photo upload button, Subject, Hotel (not required), and How did you get Bonvoyed? (text area). At the bottom of the form is a checkbox for "I'm not a robot" and a green "Post Comment" button. The website's navigation bar at the top includes links for STATUS MATCH, INSIDERS, PHONE CALLS, ABOUT, NEWS, DISCUSSIONS, BONVOYED 100, SHOP, and CONTACT.

Figure 6, Activist website Bonvoyed, source- (Bonvoyed, 2022)

Measuring the success of a huge rebrand and marketing campaign is a complicated task. Using a combination of traditional and digital media was a suitable strategy as traditional encourage consumer to keep brand top of mind while the digital is best for amplifying and repeating messages to specific targets (Insights, 2017). MII did not disclose the cost of the campaign however it was apparent that a lot of effort and financial resources went into it as Ting (2019) highlighted that ABC’ Oscar spots range from \$2 to \$3 million each. One hurdle was mixed reactions to the name, a play on the word bon voyage, with no inherent meaning of its own. Even

the hyped initial commercial received mixed reactions, presently it is noticeable absent from the official YouTube account fuelling numerous speculations. Critics argued that it was confusing and uninspiring. Another was tech issues with the new platform which gave rise to negative outpouring on social media and the creation of activist website ‘Bonvoyed’ (figure 6). Some critic opined that the reality of the rewards program fell short of its tagline since it did not appear to offer an innovative spin on rewards.

Even though awareness was a major objective of the campaign its success cannot be judge solely on positive reception of the name, consideration must be given to the number of loyalty customers that remained and the new growth during the period. Retaining and growing its loyalty customers is a key strategy for MII and its major competitors. Loyalty programs generate substantial repeat business, more than half of MII’s 2019 room nights were booked by such members. When the campaign was launched there was approximately 120 million loyalty members and MII’s president (cited in Baratti, 2022) boasts that there are now 160 million members.

Other measures would have been special QR codes or vanity URL unique to each activation event. This would allow MII to gauge how many persons signed up for Bonvoy via these events.

Contrastingly the “Great British Road Trip” was a much smaller scale campaign with its own microsite that facilitate an easy way of gathering metrics on which to assess the campaigns effectiveness. It garnered 251K reach; 331K impressions; 19K engagements and 500 unique web visits (BMF, 2021).

7. Conclusion:

Timpone (cited in Ting, 2019) outlined that the campaign was about people enjoying travel and describing it in one word- ‘Bonvoy.’ She explained that the more people heard it, the more they will associate the idea of good travel with MII and the loyalty program. The initials splash of the commercial spots overshadowed public efforts to communicate the logic behind the name giving the appearance that top priority was coercing quick acceptance of the new name. Moreover, great expectations loomed over the campaigns success because then CEO Sorenson hailed Bonvoy as the most important Marriott brand (Gigante, 2019) and Timpone explained MII wanted Bonvoy to become the connecting link for travellers to identify the 30 brands as a single portfolio (Ting, 2019).

A major shortcoming of the Bonvoy-rewards imagined campaign was the distracting debate surrounding the name. Allen Adamson, co-founder of the Metaforce consulting firm and an adjunct associate professor at the NYU Stern School of Business, said that the abstract name was a challenge, will require a hefty marketing budget and time for people to understand and accept the name (Jelski, 2019). The tagline ‘rewards reimagined’ alluded to some revolutionary way of doing a loyalty program and some critics were disillusioned by the reality of the programme. Members transitioning from SPG lost perks and were faced with a substantial annual spend before obtaining top tier status (Clark, 2018). Moreover, Bonvoy’s top tier membership is more difficult to obtain than competing brands like Hilton Honors and World of Hyatt (US News Travel, 2019). Of important note were technical issues that frustrated customers during the transition prompting John Wolf, vice president of loyalty, digital, and marketing innovation PR, to admit that “during this unprecedented integration, technology issues have arisen that impacted

some members...we have worked quickly to fix them and appreciate our members' patience”
(Martin, 2019).

8. Recommendations:

1. Utilising sentiment analysis to monitor the global online chatter surrounding the campaign may have helped to decipher what aspects of the campaign were causing the most pain points. Once identified specific strategies should have been deployed to clarify misinterpretations and mitigate top reoccurring issues.
2. Institute feedback surveys to run concurrent with the marketing campaign. The focus should be to improve areas on current and similar future campaigns. Rebranding was at the heart of the campaign so it was instrumental to keep multiple open channels to address consumers' fears and concerns. Change can be difficult for all (Gigante, 2019) and consumers require clear explanations and reassurance to understand, support, and buy into a new concept.
3. Pointed and unambiguous communication is needed to address highlighted issues especially when for global brand with diverse customers and vast resources. The Activist website, Bonvoyed, commenced approximately one month after the launch of Bonvoy's campaign and cited a major reason for its formation was the suggestion of MII's then CEO Sorenson that IT issues and associated negative feedback were noise around the edge of the platform (Martin, 2019).
4. Glick, indicated that M-live afforded the company a speedier and more targeted method of engaging consumers (Eversham, 2022) thus the platform should have been an

instrumental part of the marketing campaign to leverage single moments as opportunity to positively amplify the Bonvoy campaign.

5. Deepen partnerships with the most loyal and influential consumers by enabling them with the training and tools to create content for Bonvoy in relevant niches. Hirzalla, mentioned that next-generation travellers were anticipating more personalised one to one relationship with the brands portfolio (Eversham, 2022) so utilising relevant influencers from their niche would have been an opportune moment to commence new relationships. Danielle Wiley, Sway Group (cited in Expert Panel®, 2022) believe that “brands build more authentic connections with their audiences through longer-running programs that leverage influencer expertise and credibility over time”.

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