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CAVE HOTELS CHIEF EXECUTIVE ATTENDS CCCU TO DISCUSS 'THRIVING IN THE VISITOR ECONOMY'.

THE Chief Executive of Kent's newest luxury hotel has told how the key to success in the hospitality industry is 'listen to what your customer wants'.

Johnathan Callister, the CEO of the Cave Hotel and Golf Resort near Canterbury, said businesses that are slow to meet customer expectations risk what he calls a 'Nokia Moment'.

Speaking at the Tourism Management Conference at Canterbury Christchurch University on Monday (March 3, 2020), the businessman likened the failure of many pubs and restaurants to the decline of phone giant Nokia.

Mr Callister asked the audience of tourism and leisure students: "Where are Nokia telephones today? Not to be seen. Who invented touch screen telephones? Nokia. They were the first company.

"Why are they not here? Because they lost sight of their customer, they lost sight of what was happening behind them. All these people came along behind Nokia and offered something that Nokia were not fast enough to react to, despite them for years and years being the leader. The Nokia example was reiterated to me at recent presentation and one that is a prime example of how not to become complacent

"One of the reasons we decided to build an affordable luxury hotel is because in my view the hotel accommodation in and around Kent isn't good enough.

"If you look in Canterbury in particular, it's very limited and what people have done for many, many years is talk about budget.

"Budget hotels, budget hotels, budget hotels. If any of you go for a coffee in Canterbury, or to a pub, your expectation level today is much greater than it was 10-15 years ago.

"Now when people open a coffee shop they open it bigger and better. If you go to a pub, pubs are closing weekly, but the reason that is starting to slow down is because the pubs that are around have invested. They give people what they want and they offer a great experience.

Mr Callister oversaw the design, build and opening of the Cave Hotel and Golf Resort in Boughton, near Canterbury in November last year.

Since then the hotel has proved a huge hit and its Firepit Restaurant now has more than a month's waiting list for weekend reservations.

He added: "We want to offer a hotel that is priced affordably. So if a Premier Inn in Canterbury is £115 on a Saturday night, our hotel starts from £125. But you have free transportation in and out of the city, you have free parking and our hotel comes with a pool as well as a world class experience"

"And what I wanted to make sure we didn't ever lose, is to lose sight of what the customer wanted. The expectation is much higher now"

"So for us as a business we do not want to get caught like that. We want to understand what our customers want, we want to make sure that we deliver it, and we want to offer something that is a higher standard.

"Everywhere you stay is automated. Everywhere you have to press buttons. But we're in the hospitality business – it's ridiculous when you think about it" Technology has a place, our hotel is at the forefront of it and for some guests we can accommodate virtual check in but for others we want a personal experience"

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"We want to do something that is completely different to that. We must be bonkers for what we did. We designed the whole hotel from scratch. We said 'we're going to take this three-star golf club and build a five-star boutique hotel'.

Mr Callister also revealed long term plans to extend the Cave concept to open a 250-room hotel in London as well as a similar venue in the USA.

Mr Callister was among several guest speakers at the Tourism Management Conference hosted by CCCU.

Deirdre Wells, OBE, who heads Visit Kent, opened the conference and congratulated students for choosing the hospitality industry for future careers.

She revealed that the county welcomed 65 million visitors each year, boosting the Kent economy by £3.8bn and creating 77,000 jobs.

