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Hospitality in Focus
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SURVEYS REVEAL TOP TECHNOLOGY AND GREEN INITIATIVES

The American Hotel & Lodging Association (AH&LA) recently announced the findings of its *2008 Current and Future Technology Use in the Hospitality Industry* study which analyzes the top areas of information technology (IT) most frequently being implemented in American hotels. This information gives hoteliers on both sides of the Atlantic trends that help them to quantify increased customer demand and provide motivation to enhance their product with new amenities and services.

Among the major findings, the survey revealed that there is an overwhelming agreement that IT is important for increasing customer satisfaction (82.4 percent); increasing employee efficiency (79.9 percent); and generating revenue (71.3 percent). Wi-Fi services are, in particular the IT system that guests care about most, according to 82 percent of the 244 respondents. Eighty-six percent of responding hotels offered Wi-Fi services, and 20 percent of those not offering it plan to do so within the next five years. After Wi-Fi, in-room entertainment systems and airline check-in kiosks were cited as important to customers by 48 percent and 38 percent of respondents, respectively.

"Results of this study indicate hoteliers are critically monitoring and taking action to fulfil their guests' wants and needs as the average consumer gets more and more tech-savvy," said AH&LA President/CEO Joseph A. McInerney, CHA. "During the past decade, advances in IT have significantly shaped the way the lodging industry plans, controls, and manages operations in all segments of the hospitality community."

The IT research results complement the findings in the AH&LA's comprehensive *2008 Lodging Survey*, which noted that 91 percent of hotels offer wireless Internet access, which is an increase of 35 percent from just four years earlier.

In a separate *Green Assessment Survey* the AH&LA has identified the top 10 green initiatives that American hotels are enacting, the top 10 green policies hotels can improve upon, motivations and challenges for implementing green lodging practices, and quantifiable measurements of green action being taken. The Green Assessment Survey results provide real-world examples of various levels of green operations in different levels of properties.

Among the many findings, the survey revealed that eighty-eight percent of the 217 respondents' properties have a linen reuse policy for guests staying multiple nights with 83.5 percent offering a towel reuse program. Nearly half (43.4 percent) of responding properties had programmable on/off timers or sensors used for lighting in low traffic/occupancy areas, though only 16 percent used occupancy sensor control for guestroom thermostats. The

majority (82.3 percent) of properties surveyed train maintenance staff on conservation and energy procedures.

Environmental benefits and building guest loyalty tie for the biggest motivation responding properties cited for implementing green practices whilst respondents revealed that having enough capital to invest and achieving ROI are the top two biggest barriers to implementing eco-friendly initiatives.

Joseph A. McInerney said that, "Results of this survey show that the hospitality industry is serious about the environment and is addressing eco issues head on. Of particular interest is successful linen reuse programs at many of our member hotels across America. In addition to reducing the hotel's environmental impact, programs like these engage the guest, increasing their awareness of environmental concerns and offer an easy way for them to minimize their eco footprint while they travel."

"This survey spotlights the potential for eco-friendly practices in the many diverse aspects of hotel operations, at properties large and small," added AH&LA chairman Tom Corcoran. "As AH&LA does more in-depth research into successful initiatives and evaluates areas where improvement is still needed, we're extremely optimistic as we work to develop a baseline for industry sustainability initiatives."

REACHING THE FACEBOOK GENERATION

Are members of your family constantly accessing social networking websites such as Facebook? If so wouldn't it make good business sense to market to them and the millions of similar users of the latest technology phenomenon?

In America just such a concept is being addressed. Hotel Concepts, which is a leading property management system provider, has pioneered the integration of social networking into online hotel marketing strategies

Hotel Concepts has introduced its new Facebook Widget. This small tool, which Facebook users can place on their home page, allows hoteliers to 'push' special offers to users that have shown interest in that destination. Offers are pushed seamlessly from Hotel Concepts' IDCRS and can be converted into actual reservations with minimal user interaction. Facebook users can use the widget to invite their Facebook friends and family to the location of a special event. For example, couples organising a wedding could allow invitees to book hotel accommodation straight from their Facebook page.

"Social networking is the absolute buzz of the moment," says Bas Blommaart, CEO of Hotel Concepts. "We feel that this trend will continue to grow and that these sites will drive the travel industry in the near future. That is why we chose to be the first PMS provider to adapt to this new media and integrate it into our system."

The development of Hotel Concepts' Facebook Widget was in response to a direct challenge issued at a technology conference. "The speaker said that property management systems are quickly becoming a commodity," continued Blommaart. "Most offer the same features and interfaces, so we were challenged to set ourselves apart and create a unique tool that will benefit our hotel clients and set the stage for the future of online marketing. I believe we have tapped into to social consciousness of today's traveller with the Facebook Widget, and that we have laid the groundwork for expanding the potential of this exciting new media."

CHARGE GUESTS AND LOSE BUSINESS

Hotels that charge guests to use the Internet and which fail to provide access for iPods could lose out, said Dubai's Hotel Show Seven Star conference moderator. Hotels – including five star establishments – are failing to keep up with the available technologies and are charging their guests for using internet facilities industry experts have warned.

Hotels that make additional charges for guests to access the Internet or fail to provide easy audio and TV access for portable devices such as iPods and MP3 players could lose out, said Guy Roukaerts, moderator of The Hotel Show Seven Star conference at the Dubai International Exhibition Centre. The show is one of the most important dates in the international industry calendar and visitors include regional owner-operators, decision makers from international hotel chains, architects and interior designers

Visualising the future and preparing now for the needs of the more technology-demanding guests came under the spotlight at the conference which forms part of the premier supplies show for the Middle East hospitality sector.

"One of the greatest challenges facing the hotel industry in 2008 is to ensure that guests enjoy a guestroom experience which they have in their living room at home," said Ted Horner, one of Australia's leading hospitality technology consultants who is advising a new hotel chain in the United Arab Emirates.

"Now we are seeing the arrival of 'guest connectivity panels' where guests who bring their own personalised music or video content can easily connect to the new LCD TVs or surround sound systems in their rooms," he added.

"With the increasing number of devices that guests travel with – namely iPods or MP3 players, digital cameras, camcorders, cellphones, laptops, games consoles etc., these panels allow guests to access their own content quickly and easily."

Conference moderator Roukaerts, added: "I may be 64 years old but I carry a laptop and an iPod. Why should the hotel charge me over and above my room charge to access the Internet with my laptop and why can't I plug my iPod into a sound or TV system?

"Convergence and the need for hotels to 'wire up' to meet the technology of their guests was a theme of several presentations. Until now, hotel owners have been reluctant to invest in upgrading to a level comparable to that of a guest's own home but that has to change. Indeed, hotel owners and operators who adopt these technologies will have a competitive advantage."

Links:

American Hotel & Lodging Association: http://www.ahla.com
Hotel Concepts: http://www.hotelconcepts.com
The Hotel Show: http://www.thehotelshow.com