Front Office

By Ashok Sharma, FHCIMA

Hotel guest safety is the "luxury" in service excellence

With occupancy rates on the decline due to the global financial meltdown and the recent hotel attacks that occurred in Mumbai, hoteliers are introspecting. Visible initiatives and efforts are necessary to strengthen confidence of the hotel guests.

Today, guest safety is a "luxury." The meltdown, along with terrorist attacks, has further created a psychological and emotional panic amongst frequent travelers and hotel guests. Many hotel companies are reviewing their budgets every few weeks under a microscope to ensure that the finger stays on the pulse.

Recent terrorist attacks in Mumbai have caused increased concern about hotel security and the well-being of its guests. Globally, many hotels recognized as being owned, franchised or operated by companies based in Western countries have been targets of recent attacks by terrorists. Increased levels of security, without undermining guest privacy and guest safety, should therefore be a primary concern for companies operating and developing hotels.

As a point if information, on average, luxury hotels in India spend close to 3% of their project budget on building management systems (BMS), which includes the overall security of the hotel. Hotels in the United States earmark about 7%, while hotels in Europe and the Far East invest more than 5% on BMS, including security measures. The question that each hotel must determine is whether this investment is adequate? Undoubtedly, as news of every new attack surfaces, each hotel management team must ask itself, have we done enough? Are our guests, employees and assets safe?

Enhanced hotel security

Recent incidents have made many veteran travelers realize the need for beefed up security systems including intensive baggage checking, arms/metal/explosive detectors, in-depth guest check-in identification protocol, and security cameras. Does this add up to an unpleasant guest experience? Many guests and frequent travelers do not feel so. And most are appreciative of the enhanced security measures.

Much like air travelers arriving at an airport, lodging guests need to be reassured of safety and security in a hotel. The hotels have to plan and design convenient security and surety processes which will make its guests feel secure and comfortable. More and more hotel guests are slowly welcoming information technology interventions in the hotels which make a guest's stay a pleasant and comfortable experience. The guests have tasted service excellence when their expectations have been exceeded many times during their hotel stays. Similarly, as threats of potential terrorism become more unpredictable, guests will welcome and appreciate innovative safety and security initiatives.

To handle crisis management, hotels must share its building information, including blue prints, with the police and fire departments. Management must train and test hotel staff constantly to ensure high vigilance and rapid responsiveness.

Public Address systems should be installed in all guest and staff areas. This system should be tested at accepted decibel levels during peaceful times. Guest evacuation procedures and the implementation of surveillance systems to monitor access points must be a priority. Smart cards, metal and explosive detectors, and video feeds are already in use in many hotels; however, the future of the security systems in hotels will need to be researched and upgraded on many levels. Emergency and crisis procedures may need to be upgraded.

Employee participation

Employees should be thoroughly screened by Human Resources completing comprehensive background checks prior to hiring. Criminal background, previous employment, educational qualifications and screening for drug use are all paramount. Credit checks for those employees who will handle cash or monetary instruments or who will be responsible for financial data is appropriate. These background checks apply to permanent, temporary and outsourced employees. New employee orientation must clearly and adequately explain security and safety policies, procedures and goals initiated by the hotel, as well as what is expected from all staff to support these initiatives.

> ## Hot tip
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> Copies of a hotel's updated blue prints and schematics of electrical, plumbing, HVAC and elevator equipment should be placed on file with the local police and fire agencies. Additional copies should be placed at an "off-site" location where hotel management may quickly retrieve them if needed in case the hotel is partially destroyed.

Dealing with arrivals

Guests will notice enhanced security procedures the minute they arrive at the hotel. This will serve as a warning and as a reassurance to them.

Guests with confirmed bookings and with adequate reference of companies, business houses and previous stay records should be allowed to check in. Hence, the hotel's reservations and reception desks must obtain enough information from the guest at the time of booking to determine, before the guest arrives, that they pose no threat to the hotel. Some systems might require new standard operating procedures, keeping in mind the priority of security levels. Depending on the geographic location and prominence of the hotel, accommodating "walk-in" guests will require close scrutiny and should be handled very responsibly.

Unless a hotel guest is being driven in a hotel automobile, all other vehicles such as taxis and private cars must be halted at a reasonable distance from the hotel and not allowed to roll into the hotel porte-cochere or stand in close proximity to the hotel. Some guests will unfortunately have to walk a longer distance, or the hotel should provide its shuttle service to bring in guests. Alternatively, hotels can position vehicle check-points outside auto port entrances, but this will likely cause significant traffic congestion and still compromises security against car bombs or suicide bombers.

Education is essential

Besides other public relation efforts and advertising, hotels also must inform guests about the various security measures put in place for everyone's safety. This can be accomplished by placing literature prominently in the guestroom or including it in the key packet and distributing to each guest during check-in. Additionally, bell persons should be trained to proactively discuss these measures with guests during the rooming process.

Training on alertness should be an ongoing measure which should be watched by general managers and the Management of the hotel company. Not only the hotel's Security staff but also the Front Office, Uniformed Services, Food & Beverage, Housekeeping, Sales and ancillary staffs should be educated about their role in creating a safer living and working environment. This will be beneficial for the hotel, its guests, and its employees.

Remember, providing a safe and comfortable stay for a hotel guest is one of the most luxurious services any hotel can offer. ✧

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