

More Than Just Video Is On Demand

Technology shifts guest services from phones to screens.

By Adam Kirby, Associate Editor -- Hotels, 6/1/2008

As perhaps further evidence that the guestroom phone will become a dinosaur sooner or later, hoteliers are excitedly implementing various systems to allow guests to request services at the click of a button in lieu of dialing 0 and speaking to a person.

The systems, which can range from simple Web sites to complex IPTV solutions, appeal to younger travelers used to doing everything from ordering pizza to buying car insurance without having to interact with a human.



Among the innovators is Irving, Texas-based Omni Hotels, which is piloting the Orion system from GBCblue, a Micros-integrated program allowing guests to order up a slate of online systems from a dedicated Web site. Once fully live, the site—customized for each individual Omni and only accessible on property—will let guests request valet service, baggage retrieval, housekeeping and pretty much any other hotel service that could be requested via phone. Orion is currently being beta tested at Omni Mandalay Hotel in Las Colinas, Texas, and is set to be expanded to other Omni properties later this year.

When a guest logs on to OmniRoomService.com via laptop computer or other mobile device, he or she may peruse a menu of hotel services, including F&B roomservice, and place an order via the site. The site is tied into the hotel property management system, so any request is tracked and automatically placed into the guest's folio.

“It's more fun for our guests, who are accustomed to multitasking online,” says Kerry Kennedy, corporate director of e-commerce. “It's click-click-click, and your order is placed. Guests find it to be a very easy interaction.” The site also includes standard concierge fare, like local weather and information on the surrounding area.

In the initial Orion deployment at the Texas property, Omni has seen increased F&B sales—rather than guests putting down the phone, it seems the online ordering option actually has attracted an entirely new set of roomservice customers, says Lesli Reynolds, Omni's vice president of operations. The increased sales may also be attributable to the ability of hotel F&B staff to update and promote daily specials, along with the presence of photos of every item on the menu—things that simply are not feasible with the traditional printed in-room menu.

Additionally, some guests say they prefer placing an order online because they can review the order to ensure its accuracy, rather than hoping the worker on the other end heard everything correctly, Reynolds says.

Twelve's GHOSTs

Atlanta-based Twelve Hotels & Residences places a computer equipped with hotel-interaction software in every suite. The proprietary Guest Hotel Operating System Terminal, known as GHOST, allows guests to make service requests or view the hotel's digital compendium of services. Housekeeping inquiries, valet service requests, requests for wake-up calls and F&B orders all can be made via GHOST, which also offers complimentary regular Internet access. Additionally, Twelve has done away with the traditional sundries shop and instead allows guests to pick through a virtual shop, with selected items delivered to the room.

Guests at Twelve properties make about 60% of their service requests via GHOST, says Chief Information Officer Daniel Bassett. "Your typical travelers these days are booking their travel online, so why not let them do that at the hotel online?" Bassett asks rhetorically. "They don't have to talk to a human if they don't want to. People like being served that way. Of course, there is a phone sitting there, and they can use that to make a request if they choose."

Bassett echoes Reynolds' theory that guests take greater comfort with inputting their orders digitally—besides knowing they are correct, guests receive automated status updates as the requests are processed. Guest satisfaction with the technology ranks at 98%, and Twelve President Jim Veil believes GHOST generates a significant amount of incremental F&B sales. Twelve properties average about US\$20,000 per month from in-room dining revenue as a direct result of GHOST, Veil says.

Technology On TV



Boston's Seaport Hotel last year unveiled a proprietary in-room computer system—called Seaportal—that provides direct calling capabilities to hotel staff via voice-over-Internet Protocol technology. The complimentary touch-screen module also features free long-distance calling, along with standard Web access and local information. Seaportal, deployed in 100 rooms at the hotel, eventually will be transferred to the TV monitor, says John Burke, Seaport's vice president of technology.

The concept of skipping computers altogether and porting guest service interactivity and concierge services to the TV may be the trend going forward. Vendors are reporting an up-tick in hoteliers inquiring about interactive television that goes further than simply video-on-demand (VOD) and video games. At the forefront of this converged

technology is Broomfield, Colorado-based Roomlinx Inc.

Roomlinx's new interactive Media and Entertainment System runs through guestroom television, using a wireless keyboard and a specialized remote. The Roomlinx system is equipped with a host of hotel guest service offerings like F&B ordering, valet service and spa reservations, all of which can interface with a hotel's property management system.

The platform offers a fully customizable slate of in-room concierge services, high-definition video-on-demand and programmable multimedia channels, like local radio stations or popular newspaper Web sites. Roomlinx allows for regular Flash-capable Web browsing as well (guests can take advantage of TV network sites that stream popular shows as a sort of bonus selection of VOD) and it has customizable marketing and advertising functionality for added revenue.

The boutique Jet Hotel in Denver is one of the first to install the Roomlinx system, just in time for its role as host hotel of The Associated Press during this summer's Democratic National Convention. Jet will leverage Roomlinx's embedded marketing functionality to drive revenue from local businesses eager to reach those high-profile media members.

"We will work with some of our surrounding business to help promote them, and they will likewise help promote us," says Anna Miaskiewicz, Jet's director of sales and marketing.

In addition, at least one major international hotel chain is poised to announce a global rollout of the Roomlinx system in the near future.

Acentic Offers Panoramic View

Another interesting system is Cologne, Germany-based Acentic's Panorama platform, installed in the newly opening Sofitel London Heathrow Airport, which features high definition-ready entertainment offerings and a fully customizable Flash interface that can support myriad Internet applications.

Panorama's DVD-over-cable setup can convert video from just about any feed, be it Internet or cable, in full digital quality, and Acentic's open-architecture interface allows for easy marketing opportunities for hoteliers. Every hotel deploying Panorama has a designated Acentic graphic designer who can remotely create bespoke content and templates. Hoteliers may even select certain VOD selections based on anticipated clientele.

The ability for hotels to brand their programming is a main selling point for Woburn, Massachusetts-based KoolConnect, one of the veterans in the interactive TV space. KoolConnect has about 25,000 guestrooms using either its content-rich Intrigue HD system or the more streamlined Imagine platform. The software-based Intrigue product digitizes hotel in-room concierge content and provides a substantive library of HD entertainment, while also allowing for the integration of guests' personal electronics into the system, controllable by a single remote.

Additionally, Intrigue has customer relationship management functionality to map a guest's preferred lighting and temperature settings. "Entertainment no longer only means VOD. It's just not there any longer," says Dave Tahan, CEO of KoolConnect. "We need to provide more to capture the hotels' interest. Movies are movies, and people will have movie systems forever—but that is not enough anymore."

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