

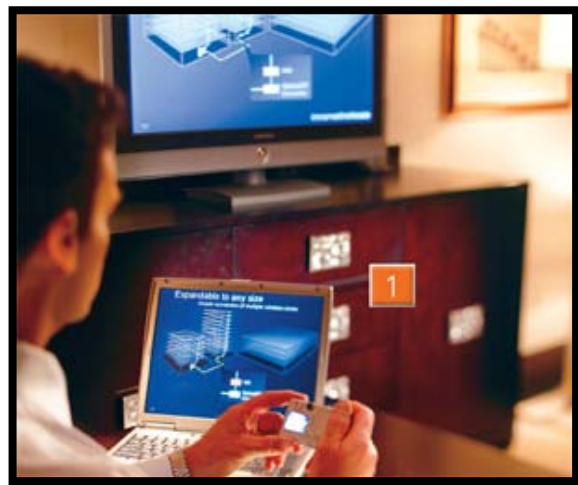
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Hotel Tech Trends that Meet Guest Expectations

While upgrades to interior finishes have been prominent in guestroom renovations, there's a new focus on technologically advanced features

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1There are great options for in-room entertainment systems, but these systems don't come without significant capital equipment investments and infrastructure challenges associated with distributing & deploying the technology. MANDARIN ORIENTAL HOTEL GROUP

Technology is changing quickly, and it's having an effect on the consumer. Electronics have been one of the biggest drivers of consumer spending; the result is that the average hotel guest is fairly technology savvy and used to sophisticated entertainment set-ups.

From a hotelier's perspective, a big driver has been to provide guests with a home away from home, featuring the creature comforts they would expect to find in their own house. While upgrades to designer furniture have been featured prominently in room renovations and new properties in the past few years, there's also been a focus on technologically advanced features, such as HD flat screens and audio systems. Given that technology comes at a price, most hotels are challenged to determine what systems they *truly* need to implement to meet or exceed guests' expectations and ensure that they remain close to their competitive set.

With close to 20 different types of technology being deployed in hotel guestrooms today, it can be tough to pick out key items to focus on. Aside from the obvious (telephones and high-speed Internet access), following are some important guestroom technology developments.

The Essentials

In-Room Entertainment Systems. In-room entertainment systems represent one of the biggest areas of confusion from a selection standpoint. Guests are used to large, flat-screen TVs that display HD content. They expect a similar – if not better – experience when they stay in a hotel. While there are some great

options for in-room entertainment systems, these systems don't come without significant capital investments for equipment and, in many cases, infrastructure challenges associated with distributing and deploying the technology.

With technology changing at a rapid pace, decisions should be made with the following in mind...

1. Future proof the room's design to ensure that you can accommodate future technologies and upgrades. This includes focusing on low-voltage cabling and power requirements for the room.
2. Avoid long-term contracts in which the useful life of the technology can be outdated prior to the term of the contract. Entertainment systems are a prime example of how quickly technology can change.
3. Avoid invasive and proprietary technologies that can prevent the upgrade or replacement of a system.
4. Do research to ensure that you know about proposed technology solutions and their providers before making your selection. Integration is key; you need to consider each solution provider as a partner vs. an independent vendor. Make sure the provider is financially stable and focused on supporting and enhancing their product line.

Right now, there's a big push toward Internet Protocol (IP) TV solutions, which leverage the Internet for an enhanced experience. IPTV differs from traditional TV in the way it delivers content or signal. Unlike traditional, coaxial-based distribution systems, which stream *all* channels or content at the same time, IP solutions are part of a network and stream only the content or channel that's requested by the viewer. The advantage, therefore, is that it can stream a larger variety of digital content to the TV at any point, as long as the network is designed to accommodate the request. In most cases, IPTV requires Cat-5/6 cabling to the TV, although there are solutions that facilitate this over traditional coax. IPTV often offers features that utilize content from the Internet, which offers greater access to content (but can be bandwidth intensive).

An additional enhancement has been the use of connectivity panels, which encourage guests to interact with in-room technology. Many hotels have deployed connectivity panels that allow guests to connect personal digital devices, such as iPods, camcorders, and laptops, to the room's audiovisual equipment. While most of the newer panels are "active" and offer automatic sensing features to allow automatic switching of inputs, many earlier panels don't, and can be cumbersome to operate. The key detractor from use of the panels is the requirement for a manual cable to connect the devices. Most guests don't travel with the required cables, and providers are looking to offer wireless connectivity technology, such as Bluetooth, to overcome this issue.

Electronic Door Locking Systems Newer electronic door locking systems focus on facilitating ease of use for the guest and the ability to provide one device/mechanism to access all property facilities in a controlled, effective manner. Many new deployments have focused on Near Field Communication (NFC) technology, such as Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) access, rather than traditional magnetic swipe cards. RFID systems are especially effective for large resorts and theme parks where the RFID tag can, for example, be placed in a waterproof wristband that guests can use around the resort in lieu of cash or charge cards.

Another focus for NFC technology is using NFC-compatible cell phones to gain entry into guestrooms. Most involve either downloading an application to the device or an encrypted text message that contains an encrypted room key access code to allow the phone to act as an enabler to access the electronic door lock. Guests don't have to carry separate room keys, and they can proceed directly to their rooms when checking into a hotel where their stay is prepaid. Another benefit: It's green because the hotel doesn't provide a PVC room key. While the concept of this technology is attractive, wide adoption is still in progress. The key factor is the proliferation of cell phones that aren't NFC enabled.

The Room Enhancers

Electronic Doorbell Systems. Not only do these systems offer a streamlined method of ensuring guest privacy by offering a Do Not Disturb (DND) feature, but they also offer additional features:

- Tray removal tracking identifies when a guest places a room service tray in the hall for pick-up.
- A request to have the room made up.
- Guest presence detection.
- Interaction with other room systems, such as energy management.

New doorbell systems can be integrated with room signage, and can combine two features and requirements into a single, attractive feature.

Mirror TVs. The bathroom is the most utilized area in the room (besides the bed). There's a renewed effort, especially in the luxury market, to enhance the guest experience in this area. Mirror TVs have come a long way since their initial introduction (when providers were placing a TV behind the mirror); they're becoming a standard feature in many upscale hotels. A number of providers are offering extremely thin, high-definition flat-screens integrated into the mirrors and frames. The result is an integrated solution that looks good and is extremely functional. Key factors to consider when deploying this technology include:

- Infrastructure requirements for deployment. Bathrooms tend to be placed back to back; in many cases, plumbing pipes prevent TVs from being recessed.
- How sound will be transmitted.
- The source of the signal and VOD provider slated for use. In many cases, there may be additional equipment required to enable the TV function with the VOD provider's signal.

Energy Management Systems (EMSs). Hoteliers had moved away from early EMSs due to the issues they had with systems turning off while guests were still in the rooms. These sensor-driven systems weren't sophisticated enough to detect sound sleepers. The newer systems are more intelligent and, in some cases, are integrated into systems that allow guest preferences to mandate preferred temperature requirements. They also feature setback controls that prevent systems from shutting off during the guest's stay. EMS solutions can reduce energy consumption by up to 45 percent.

The Nice-to-Have Features

Room Automation Systems. If you want a "wow" factor, one of the biggest features you can offer is an automation system. Basically, this allows the guest to control all guestroom technology and features from a centralized device. While it's been difficult to deploy these systems in the past due to the extensive infrastructure and wiring considerations, the newer wireless systems are noninvasive and not proprietary. The systems offer control of:

- Lights.
- Electronic drapes/shades.
- Doorbells.
- TV and audiovisual systems.
- Temperature and energy management systems.
- Alarms and other service features.

Generally, the systems are accepted favorably due to the design of the intuitive touch-screen interfaces and the fact that most systems still offer a manual option to control the key features, such as a traditional light switch or drape control.

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