

Chicago Tribune

Imagine a front desk without people



The lobby of CitizenM Hotel at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam. (www.citizenM.com / December 19, 2010)

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December 19, 2010

One of these years, you may well walk into a hotel lobby and find it devoid of a human at the front desk. Technology in the pipeline promises that and a slew of other changes for travelers.

Consider this: You go to the front desk to check in, your image is captured on computer, you're given your room number but no key card. You get to your room and a facial-recognition reader opens the door for you. Or maybe you just check in at a lobby kiosk and bypass the front desk altogether. Or you use your credit card to enter your room.

In your room, a motion detector senses your presence and turns on the air conditioning or heat. You leave your room, and sensors automatically turn it off to save energy.

These are just two of the innovations coming to hotels in the years ahead. For guests, it adds convenience. For hotels, it cuts costs.

The hotel industry sees it as a win-win. Traditional travelers, however, might find it a tad impersonal.

But technology and convenience are what guests want, said Joe McInerney, a 40-year hotel veteran and president and CEO of Washington-based American Hotel & Lodging Association. All the hotel chains, he added, are trying to accommodate them.

Among the other techy advances beyond flat-screen TVs and iPod docking stations:

Applications that give smart-phone users direct access to hotel reservations systems. The Sheraton Dallas, a Starwood property, has taken an app a step further, allowing the smart-phone users to order its most popular room service items via an e-dining Web site.

IPTV, or Internet protocol television, allows guests to connect with an almost unlimited number of stations through the Internet. If you were in Chicago and wanted to watch the news on your hometown station, you could do that. IPTV is appearing at some Wyndham hotels.

Wyndham also will deploy an innovative and interactive guest Web experience that allows them to find nearby restaurants, local maps and directions, airline information and discount coupons.

RFID (radio-frequency identification) technology on food trays or room service carts left in hallways will notify housekeeping that the tray or cart is ready to be picked up.

A tabletop digital assistant will control all the electrical devices and lighting in a guest room, including temperature, blinds, drapes, alarm clock, radio, television and telephones.

Of all the groups, the high-end Peninsula Hotels, based in Hong Kong, leads the pack in technology, employing a full-time team of more than 20 inventors. For proprietary reasons, Peninsula won't divulge what's in its pipeline, but its latest innovations wow guests in the recently opened Peninsula Shanghai.

Among the bells and whistles: international Internet radio (with more than 3,000 stations) tuned to the guest's home country; complimentary long-distance telephone service through VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol); automatic muting of the radio or TV when the phone rings; programmed digital filter for the bathroom phone to screen out any

telltale echoes; and a weather panel that provides real-time weather updates. This in addition to a bedside panel that guests use to control their room's environment, including lighting.

Also engaged in applying technology to hotel rooms are schools such as the University of Houston's Conrad N. Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management and the University of Delaware's Department of Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Management. Each has a hotel attached to the school and one room for experimentation.

John Bowen, dean of the Hilton college, said he is working with an architectural group to incorporate a prototype of a fabriclike video screen being developed by Sony for hotel rooms. Citing face recognition and energy-savings advancements, Bowen said, technology can help keep hotel costs down and provide a convenience for guests.

William Sullivan, general manager of a Courtyard by Marriott affiliated with the University of Delaware, maintains an X-Room, where guests can experience and comment on the latest room technology. "What we're seeing (besides the new technology) is real growth in self-service options — more kiosks in lobbies where people can check in, check out, get menus and print directions. Guests can bypass traditional lines," he said. "It keeps guests happy and reduces labor."

My wife experienced self-service to the nth degree when she checked into CitizenM, a supermodern hotel at Amsterdam Airport Schiphol.

She checked herself in at a bank of computers, then chose her dinner of salmon with pesto pasta from an array of options, heated it in a microwave, carried it to a long communal table and bused the used plate and utensils. It seemed futuristic at first, she said, but the style and convenience of the place won her over.

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