

## Stop, look and listen before investing in hotel tech

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By Terence Ronson  
HotelNewsNow.com columnist

### Story Highlights

Hoteliers have increasingly and unnecessarily relied on complex and expensive guestroom technology to keep pace with competitors.

The more important things for guests is to be clean, comfortable and connected.

Going forward, guests will start to question why they should pay for this tech when they don't need it, don't want it and, most importantly, don't use it.

STOP. LOOK. LISTEN. Three simple, potentially life-saving actions drilled into us by our parents and teachers when we are about to cross the road. This sound advice is relevant to all manner of junctions into which we encounter. But for the purpose of this column, none is more relevant than understanding where we are and where we are headed with hotel technology.

During the preceding 30 or so years, the hotel industry has been hooked on placing more and more technology into guestrooms believing the guest wants it, needs it. It's become a way to stay competitive. In a few cases, some rooms have filled up with so many gadgets that they have almost reached a bursting point.

Reflecting back, one of the first pieces of tech to go into hotel rooms was the telephone. We had a simple rationale for doing this. We put them there because travellers needed to be contactable and make calls while on the road, and the only fixed point was the hotel. We later supplemented the phone with the telex and fax.

*Read "Guestroom technology trends."*

Around the same time came the TV. Guests wanted to be entertained in their rooms and have the ability to keep up with current affairs by watching news. Hoteliers thought guests wanted movies, so they attached a VOD system to the TV and later added a DVD player with (questionably legal) on-demand libraries either from the concierge or business centers. Statistics show that apart from news, guests really only wanted to watch pornography.

Then came the fridge, a place where the hotel could put a couple bottles of (comp) water and where the guests could keep their stuff cool. But that wasn't the case for long. Hoteliers morphed them into the mini-bar, offering all manner of overpriced goodies within the impulsive reach of the guest that became a nightmare to control. The electronic door lock quickly followed these innovations.

Room control systems soon appeared in guestrooms, with the kind of functionality one might experience at home: mood lighting settings, opening and closing of curtains from the comfort of one's bed. Some of these employed motion-sensing controls to raise/lower the temperature or cut some of the power when the guest exited the room.

### Guestroom tech and ROI

Then suddenly, as if by the flick of Harry Potter's magic wand, all of the above became more and more sophisticated, more and more complex to install and manage, and more and more expensive to purchase and maintain. Am I right?

Hotel owners started to question the cost and ROI. As operators, you became increasingly concerned over recurring support expenses. And then there is the guest, heard on a frequent basis complaining that the technology is just too difficult to use. Oh, and one must not lose sight of the fact that there is the obsolescence factor with many of the items being superseded by new models at an ever-quicken pace.

So what do we need to do?



## **STOP, LOOK and LISTEN**

In all this while, we've moved on generationally more than at any other time in our evolutionary cycle. However, for most of the hotel industry—and from an in-room tech perspective—it has not.

Just look around and see what hotels are doing. They dispatch scouts on reconnaissance missions to see what their competitive set is up to—examining each of their marketing bullets one by one. They take hundreds of photos and measurements and then write up copious notes to include a SWOT analysis. Out of perceived fear or the FUD factor, many copy what they believe to be the most important and end up with a mashup product. Only a handful seems to innovate—most replicate in this cut-and-paste industry.

In the "i-this" and "i-that" app-centric era we now (thankfully) live, you can no longer cut and paste. You have to innovate to survive. So please, STOP, LOOK and LISTEN!

OK. So maybe now I've gotten your attention and you've stopped and are asking yourself the question: "What am I supposed to be looking at and listening to?"

People, of course—your peers, your siblings, your kids and other people's kids, fellow travellers on your bus, the train and on your plane. The people next to you in the coffee shop or those across the way in the airport lounge, in the doctor's waiting room or beside you in the elevator. The people in the queue at the supermarket, shoppers in the mall, fellow partygoer, and those with whom you interact at the bar.

What do they all have in common?

They are all interacting with daily life, in their own unique way or so they believe. Observe them. See what they do. It will give you some insight about the kind of tech you should, or more importantly, should not be putting into your hotel rooms. Remember the old saying: "Less is more."

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### **Less is more**

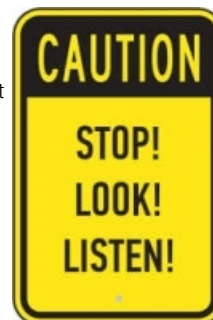
There isn't a snowball's chance in hell you can ever compete with the media library the average person owns and carries on a device that neatly fits into a pocket, purse or small case. So why are you adding Blu-ray players or IP-TV systems with video-on-demand functions?

Why are you adding connectivity panels so the guest can tether their device to the TV, when most are very comfortable at either holding it in their hand (like a book) or prefer to connect it wirelessly?

What justification do you have for putting an expensive dedicated shaver socket into the bathroom when the guest really needs a universal power socket?

Then, unless you offer really cheap or free phone calls, will you ever be able to entice guests to use all three of the in-room phones you install to make revenue-generating calls. Most will simply collect dust and be a pain for the housekeeping department to clean. Hotel rating agencies need to wake-up to this new world phenomenon and relax the requirements in this area. It's time to change the rules of the game.

And when it comes to adding bedside control panels that resemble Boeing 777 flight-deck controls, all the guest really wants to know is "how can I turn off the damn bathroom light?"



To understand what the guest really wants and needs: STOP, LOOK and LISTEN!

### **What travellers want in hotel technology**

Let's be very clear about this: I don't profess to be a rocket scientist, a psychiatrist or a fortune teller. But what I am is a fairly good judge of what people are looking for, especially when it concerns hotel tech. Let me give you a simple and short list:

1. **Super-fast**, reliable and suitably priced Internet access (wired and/or wireless). Wireless is the first choice for most people, with the ability to connect multiple devices—and for free.
2. **A well-lit room** with simple controls.

3. Power sockets, power sockets and more power sockets. And please, don't kill the power to all of them when I leave the room. Guests also like USB power sockets so an adaptor is not required.

4. Temperatures that can be easily controlled, both up and down.

5. A place to work—as in a desk. But note: People work anywhere and everywhere today, so understand that, be sympathetic and flexible, and provision for it with power sockets and Wi-Fi.

6. And as for the TV, include 24-hour news channels, sports channels and some entertaining TV channels. Most guests don't want or like all the marketing stuff you put on the TV, even if you think they do.

That's a small list, isn't it?

Actually, you can summarize what guests want from a hotel room with three Cs:

1. Clean
2. Comfortable
3. Connected

A fourth might be "cheap," but what hotelier likes to have his product labeled as cheap?

Just consider how long the average guest stays with you: one-and-a-half or maybe two nights. And during that ever-decreasing period, how long will they stay in the room and be awake to use all these services? Maybe four hours? One or maybe two hours in the morning, an hour after office in the evening before dinner, and perhaps one or two hours before sleeping. How much of that time can they devote to learning how to use your tech versus recovering from jet lag, catching up on emails or meeting approaching deadlines? They just need the tech to work.

The population in general is prepared to spend time learning how to use personal tech. Why? Because the cost has come out of our pockets It's hard-earned currency. It will be with them as a tool or amusement for some time. And they need to experience a ROI. Contrast that with the tech found in a hotel room, and most people don't have the patience or same kind of inclination It's merely a transient acquaintance.

#### **What does this mean to YOU, the hotelier?**

In my opinion, going forward, guests will start to question why they should pay for this tech when they don't need it, don't want it and, most importantly, don't use it. Their desire will be to somehow integrate their tech into your systems and do what they want—with their devices—and customize their experience. They've become comfortable with their own devices, they know them intimately and, most significantly, they've paid for them, so why are you duplicating the expense? Maybe it's time to re-think, re-imagine and downsize.

How many times have you looked around and seen people walking down the street, standing in a queue, drinking a latte or just talking with friends? What's in their hand? Their mobile device of course. These GEN-i folks are so attached to their devices that you'd have to take a crowbar to pry it out of their palms. Believing they'll pick up yours and learn it is highly speculative—unless you are so blessed to only have geeks for guests.

Consider very carefully the kind of tech you are deploying. Is it because you feel threatened by what your competitors are doing? Remember they may be on the wrong track. Is it because of the findings from the focus group you so carefully put together and solicited candid feedback from?

A trendy piece of tech is no longer an enticement to make a guest change allegiance from one hotel to another. A B&O stereo or an iPod dock is not a deal breaker, but free Wi-Fi and a free mini-bar can be.

And besides, the lifespan of these toys is very short—12 to 18 months tops—before they become relegated to the old-version league. Can you really afford to swap out gizmos that fast?

When will you STOP, LOOK and LISTEN?

Terence Ronson launched his diversified hospitality career as a chef more than 30 years ago, and since then, has held various general management positions with prominent hotels in the U.K. and Asia. In the mid '80s he developed his penchant for technology, and in 2000 he started Pertlink—a high-profile consulting firm headquartered in Hong Kong. Terence can be reached at: [Terence@pertlink.net](mailto:Terence@pertlink.net), [www.facebook.com/Terence.Ronson.pertlink](http://www.facebook.com/Terence.Ronson.pertlink) or [pertlinkblog.blogspot.com](http://pertlinkblog.blogspot.com).

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