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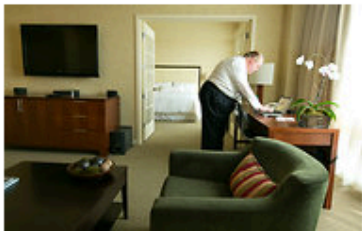
Hotels Seek an Edge in Offering the Right Digital Perks

By HARRIET EDLESON

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One hotel has a customized application that allows guests to request an early check-in, or order valet service. Another is offering exercise videos with virtual instructors in its fitness room.

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Peter Wynn Thompson for The New York Times

David Stahl, president of CrowdMagnet, gets free Internet at the Westin O'Hare in Rosemont, Ill.

Hotels may have come late to technology, but recently they have been jumping in as travelers, especially those on business trips, demand to be constantly connected and expect hotels to make that possible. Hotels now see technology as a way to stand out in the crowd of brands.

“The hotels are looking at a total strategy,” said Lorraine Sileo, vice president of research for the travel market research firm PhoCusWright. “It’s all about interacting with the customer at the right time, at the right place.”

As their homes have become more technologically advanced, travelers want at least as much on the road, if not more. And different age groups and types of travelers expect different types of service from hotels.

“We’re in a period of transition,” said Bjorn Hanson, divisional dean of the Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism and Sports Management at New York University. “Hotels are discovering not only how to be different, hotels are trying to figure out what people really want. They seem to want productivity — and the ‘wow factor.’ They ask themselves, ‘Is what I get at the hotel at least as good as what I have at home?’ ”

Business travelers vary. “The younger traveler wants to know why they need to plug in,” Mr. Hanson said. “Why not have Wi-Fi everywhere?’ Their expectations are higher. Their work is affected more when current technology is not available. They want technology wherever they are, whenever they need it.” For baby boomers, he added, a hotel can be a place to try technology that they have not yet purchased.

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“My first thought was somebody forgot it,” Mr. Stahl said. But a staff member told him it was for concierge service. “It was pretty neat,” Mr. Stahl said.

Almost two years ago, the Chancellor Hotel on Union Square in San Francisco collaborated with Amaratech, a Bay Area hotel technology company, to create its own app that guests can use before and during their stay to request an early check-in, a late checkout, search for a nearby restaurant or order valet service. “With technology, guests are doing everything by themselves,” said Nathaniel Ramos, the hotel’s director of sales and marketing.



At the Ocean House in Watch Hill, R.I., guests can use free iPads as well a “virtual fitness” machine in the OH! [Spa](#). On a touch-screen machine the size of a bank’s A.T.M., they can select fitness classes like spinning and Zumba at any hour of the day. Once they have made their choice, a large screen descends from the ceiling, and a virtual instructor appears.

Guests do not see technology as just one thing. It is a combination of services and gadgets. “They’re used to being connected and linked in wherever they are,” said Lindsey Ueberroth, president of the Preferred Hotel Group, a collection of more than 650 independent luxury hotels.

The No. 1 thing travelers want, she said, is high-speed Internet access and enough bandwidth to download videos, social media and [music](#). According to a 2011 Concur/Global Business Travel Association study, 91 percent of business travelers use a laptop computer, 81 percent use wireless broadband, 73 percent a personal smartphone and 67 percent use mobile travel apps on their phone.

For hotels, one of the largest investments can be adequate bandwidth. “It’s the idea of having services at your fingertips, literally,” said Phil Schwartz, chief marketing officer of the Intelity Corporation, a software company in Orlando, Fla., that focuses on the hospitality industry. Intelity employs software called ICE, Interactive Customer Experience, that is customized for hotel apps. It has reached almost 500 hotels internationally, he said.

The software allows hotel guests to interact digitally with the hotel through their phone, tablet or laptop on 35 different services, ranging from setting the time for a wake-up call to requesting a toothbrush from housekeeping.

To obtain adequate bandwidth, hotels have sometimes had to invest in rewiring. The cost per room can range from \$250 to \$900, depending on the hotel, said Craig Ziegler, the president and co-founder of SuiteLinq, a hotel technology company. If a hotel is new, the wiring can be part of initial construction. Some hotels charge as much as \$10 a day for high-speed wireless Internet access and streaming, but include standard Internet access in the room rate.

Some hotels have phased in technology. “We installed high-speed Internet first, then Wi-Fi, and extended bandwidth more than a year ago,” said Pierre-Louis Renou, general manager of the Sofitel Washington DC Lafayette Square and a member of the Sofitel technology committee. Sofitel manages 120 hotels globally. The Sofitel So Bangkok, which opened in mid-March, goes further with iPads in all suites and common areas and Mac minis in every room.

John R. Hach, senior vice president for global product management at TravelClick, a hotel service provider in New York, said that hotels with optimized Web sites were capturing 10 percent or more of their reservations from mobile devices.

Or, as Mr. Ramos of Chancellor Hotel put it, “You don’t want to be left behind.”