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CONNECTIVITY:
THE LINK TO GUEST SATISFACTION

10 WAYS SOLVING NETWORK LIMITATIONS CAN LEAD TO NEW LEVELS OF SERVICE

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OUTMANEUVER

Hotels have been on the losing end of a relentless cycle for years: Bandwidth demands increase, network investments buy some time, then demand soon outstrips capacity once again. At the same time, the importance of having ample bandwidth has increased: easy access to robust WiFi has quickly risen to the top of guest expectations, becoming a key determinant of what hotel a guest chooses.

"It's an extremely high driver of satisfaction, so if it doesn't work it would greatly impact the overall satisfaction of the guest experience," says Lee LaRochelle, principal of Spring Valley Hospitality Advisors which owns Sheraton Suites Market Center Dallas (**www.sheratonsuitesdallas.com**).

With the rise of bring-your-own-device (BYOD) and streaming, connectivity has rapidly shifted from a distinguishing feature to a basic utility, as essential as HVAC, water and electricity. That's sending hotels into the market in search of connectivity solutions that take them off the upgrade treadmill. Those willing to make the investment are finding an array of choices that considerably increase their capacity, buying much more time than the incremental improvements of the past.

Unexpected benefits exist as well. It turns out that investing in big jumps in capacity not only meets guest expectations, but it also frees hoteliers to consider a whole new array of guest-facing services as well as back-end applications that increase communications with staff — and equipment.

According to *HT's 2017 Customer Engagement Technology Study*, 89% of consumers say free WiFi influences their hotel booking decision. Not surprisingly, poor connectivity often tops guest' complaints, and the demand level is increasing exponentially. Today, "guests expect connectivity to power all of their devices whether it be their computer, their phones, their tablets, their gaming devices, for the entire family," says Jeff Bzdawka, senior VP global hotel technology at Hyatt Hotels (www.hyatt.com). "There's less tolerance for poor WiFi signals in the hotel room as video consumption continues to grow. Particularly on mobile devices and with the advent of over-the-top subscription services, as well as social media apps, even more burden is placed on the networks in our properties, which means we need to maintain delivering a high level of quality service."

Fortunately, hoteliers are now stepping off the perpetual upgrade cycle with new solutions that significantly boost bandwidth. For new builds, most are installing fiber optics or multiple CAT5/6 pulls to accommodate future capacity. Compression technologies, active bandwidth management, for one-access-point-per-room density and other solutions are helping hoteliers reap more value from current networks.

Boosting bookings is a clear benefit of upgrading to these more capable networks, but it's far from the only one. Hotels report their investments in robust bandwidth solutions are paying off in both predicted and unexpected ways:

Overcoming challenging geography. Boca Raton Resort & Club's hotel, beach and golf course locations, and the marina operations at Saybrook Point Inn Marina and Spa (**www.saybrook.com**) both leveraged new technologies to overcome the difficulties of getting bandwidth to less WiFi-friendly locations.

Saybrook's installation of high-speed Internet from Comcast Business (**http://business.comcast.com/enterprise**) solved those issues, bringing higher bandwidth to its CAT5-based network. The end-to-end solution also included phone and HD video to rooms, in addition to creating a mesh network with segmentation to separate guest and operations traffic.

Reducing complaints and driving rebookings. Boca Raton Resort & Club (**www.bocaresort.com**) saw its bandwidth use double after installing an Enseo (www.enseo.com) solution, while guest complaints on WiFi access declined significantly. "When people know that you have great technology, they start looking at rebooking," says Laurent Bortoluzzi, VP of IT for Revantage Corporate Services (**www.revantage.com**).

Gaining competitive advantage. A poor guest experience with connectivity doesn't just impact that guest's likelihood of a repeat booking. The popularity of online ratings and reviews means other potential guests will also hear about properties where WiFi is robust and where it falls short, directly impacting future revenue.

Attracting new customers. Since its upgrade to a fiber optics network from Corning (**www.corning.com**), Sheraton Suites Market Center Dallas has been able to attract group bookings and preferred hotel status from large tech companies, including Microsoft. "We also had good success in the pharmaceutical segment, and I think that point was [due to] the amount of content that they want to make available to their attendees," LaRochelle says.

Scaling the investment. One issue with older upgrade approaches is the requirement to overinvest in anticipation of future needs. Today's technologies mitigate that through solutions that enable operators to scale for the need. One reason Sheraton chose Corning's fiber system is "because I can monitor the overall performance of the system and then scale it up that as future applications become available to the guests," says LaRochelle.

Better in-room experience. By installing a new solution over existing coax and putting a set-top box and access point in every room, Boca Raton Resort & Club was able to begin layering on new guest services, such as controls for the energy management system and lighting, and is at work on integrating HotSOS (**https://www.amadeushospitality.com**) to root requests, such as more towels, directly to housekeeping to speed response times. "That set-top box becomes the brain of the room, capable of providing different protocols like WiFi, like Zigbee, you name it," thanks to open APIs, says Bortoluzzi.

Offering new guest services. Mobile check-in, mobile keys and auto-authentication are some of the many services that become possible once bandwidth restrictions are off the table.

About 80% of Hyatts now leverage solutions from Single Digits (**www.singledigits.com**) and other partners to enable automatic authentication into its WiFi. Once a guest connects at one Hyatt location, they remain consistently connected during the stay and also automatically connect the next time they visit any Hyatt property.

EXECUTIVE INSIGHT

Connectivity: Center Stage in Guest Satisfaction

DONNA COBB, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ENTERPRISE MARKETING, COMCAST BUSINESS

Why does connectivity play such an important role in satisfying today's heightened guest expectations?

DONNA COBB: Just five years ago, food and the comfort of beds drove hotels' value proposition. Today's guests care about being able to connect anywhere, any time. Access to free WiFi is expected. They also expect a mobile experience such as an app that allows the guest to check in online, bypass the front desk and get a mobile key. For hotels the loyalty apps provide them the opportunity to positively impact the guest experience, provide added value by serving customized content based on guest profiles and drive customer retention. Reliable, robust connectivity across-property is essential to make all that happen.

How are new bandwidth needs impacting hotels?

COBB: Guests want enough bandwidth to work, answer e-mails, do research, surf the web, play games and watch TV on their own devices, whether in the restaurant, up in their rooms or common areas; it needs to be seamless. They don't want to have to log in each time they move to a different part of the hotel.

Hotels' back-office bandwidth needs are evolving too. No one wants to gather staff for video training and have it keep buffering. We've also heard about unique bandwidth needs that aren't directly tied to the core functions of the hotel. As an example, a chef trying to stream Pandora while they work, or guests wanting to stream their workouts to treadmills. If you're on traditional T1 lines, those activities will bring your network to its knees.

How does gig-speed Internet change the narrative when it comes to hotel connectivity?

COBB: Cost-effective gig-speed broadband service is becoming more widely available across the U.S. Instead of trying to extend the bandwidth of antiquated technologies, many companies are building to the new technology. That means hoteliers no longer have to think about how much bandwidth they need or make incremental investments in more T1 lines.

You can't build the business of the future on yesterday's T-1 networks. When you eliminate bandwidth concerns, hotel operators can think about what they could do differently to improve and create new brand experiences, how they can better engage with guests. They can pivot from managing bandwidth to just managing the business, because the bandwidth is going to be there.

How does the shift from set-top boxes to software-based in-room entertainment solutions changed what's possible for hoteliers to offer?

COBB: Software rather than hardware-enabled solutions, like Comcast's X1 Platform for Hospitality with Voice Control, has fundamentally changed the way people watch TV and the content hotels are able to serve. X1 is a cloud-based platform that lets users search and navigate live TV as well as select free on-demand movies and TV shows in a simple, fast and intuitive way. The X1 platform not only enables guests to choose the programming using voice remote by saying, "Watch women's snowboarding," but also allows them to say, "Show me Jamie Anderson," and then find all related content related to her. Anderson represented Team USA to become the first female snowboarder to win more than one Olympic gold medal.

Comcast Business has been able to bring new offerings like these to the market quickly, without having to protect legacy technologies. Providing hotels of every size with next generation technologies and connectivity helps to deliver the modern experiences guests desire.

Saybrook is considering a wide range of new services, including in-room tablets to replace printed folios with dynamic listings, access to customizable cloud-based gift certificates and a guest service module to request things like logs for in-room fireplaces, as well as a guest app.

Fostering more efficient operations. Boca's Bortoluzzi sees ample high-speed bandwidth as a huge opportunity to bring together operations and IT. They will increasingly leverage the new capacity for operations uses such as IoT and building management, including communicating with HVAC capturing data. "We're trying to go after things that we were never able to do before," he says.

Enhancing staff communications. Hyatt recently began global deployment of a workflow management solution; half its housekeepers now receive and log assignments over mobile devices. The solution is integrated with Hyatt's guest mobile app, so a request for towels, for example, automatically bypasses the PBX operator and goes directly into the system, dispatching a runner via a staff mobile device, who can then report back on work complete. "It helps improve the connectivity and helps create a better experience," says Bzdawka. "We're able to address guest needs much more quickly and monitor how we are doing with those guest requests."

Saybrook equipped staff with mobile devices integrated with its Agilysys (**www.agilysys.com**) property management system, so servers take orders poolside and whisk them quickly to the kitchen, and integration with OpenTable (**www.opentable.com**) enables servers to discretely alert hosts as soon as tables open up, both speeding guest service. Work orders have also gone mobile, and the resort may add equipment monitoring and alerts to its system. Employees will also benefit from a guest services module under consideration; by tracking stats on response times, Saybrook can reward outstanding performance. "We can be more of a high-touch resort because our staff can spend more time interacting and servicing our guests," says John Lombardo, general manager.

Driving revenue. Solving the bandwidth issue opens up new revenue streams by making it easy for the guest to spend, from online games to spa appointments to late-checkouts. Another key capability is guest recovery, says Saybrook's Lombardo. The resort can send a rate-your-stay message to the guest right after checkout and then serve up different follow-up questions — and personalized responses — depending on the issues raised. "Many times the most loyal guests are the ones that had problems, and we were able to immediately respond," he says. "Guest recovery definitely has a big dollar value."

Hoteliers report that when they stop worrying about bandwidth, they open the door to all sorts of new opportunities.

"It definitely gives us much more flexibility to consider applications that we might not have been able to incorporate into our business, either business practices or guest offerings," enabling hoteliers to be resourceful and creative, says Spring Valley's LaRochelle.

"There's so much that we're able now to do riding on top of that bandwidth," adds Hyatt's Bzdawka. "It really becomes a backbone for how we're operating and intend to operate our hotels going forward." **HT**