

Good incentives for green hotels

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From light bulb replacement to literally going green from the ground up with Insulated Concrete Forms (ICF) construction, hotel owners and operators have the potential to increase their properties' customer base and provide a good return on investment.

"We look at it as emerging efficiency," said Michelle Veasey, Director of the New Hampshire Sustainable Lodging and Restaurant Program, an initiative of the New Hampshire Lodging and Restaurant Association. Being green is also financially good for certified properties, Veasey said. "Green energy is the energy you don't use."

Going green may have an upfront higher cost, but those initial expenses can be recouped in a short time and result in long-term savings. Practices that save energy and water, reduce waste, and eliminate toxic chemicals enhance the microcosm of a green hotel with lower operating costs and a healthier environment for both guests and employees, Veasey said. On the macro scale, of course, green hotel practices contribute to the health of the planet, something about which more and more travelers are becoming concerned.

Getting down to earth

The brick and mortar of green hotel operations is the use of ICF construction. One property of such construction is the Best Western Burlington Inn in Burlington, Ontario, Canada, built in 2003. The three-story, 59-room hotel includes conference rooms and an indoor pool area, yet its utility costs are similar to a nearby hotel with fewer rooms and no indoor pool space. Owner Amrat Patel estimates that his hotel has been able to save nearly 20% of annual utility costs compared to traditional wood-frame or even concrete block construction. The ICF construction also reduced construction time by two months, allowing the hotel's shell, including the roof, to be built in less than five months. In the five years since opening the hotel, Patel said he has recovered the additional expense related to the ICF construction.

There are other benefits to ICF construction. Patel's Best Western is located near the QEW, a major highway through Southern Ontario that handles high traffic volumes—and thus voluminous noise. ICF's concoction of concrete and Styrofoam serves to drown out the din. "You would never know we were located near a major highway without looking out the window," Patel said.

ICF's studio-quality soundproofing blocks noise transmission from outside the building as well as from room-to-room, said Fenton Groen, President of Groen Builders of Rochester, New Hampshire.

How ICF stacks up

ICF blocks are made of Styrofoam and interlock with each other in a fashion similar to Legos. The relatively lightweight, hollow blocks, measuring approximately 15 by 24 inches, are first stacked together to construct the hotel walls, Groen explained. Once the walls are set, the blocks are filled with concrete to frame the building, forming a sturdy construction design that can handle extreme weather conditions better than many traditional construction materials. The blocks are attached to concrete footings and secured with steel studs. Once the Styrofoam is in place and the concrete is poured, builders can proceed with installing electrical outlets and drywall. Heavy-duty plastic webbing inside the Styrofoam can be used to hold drywall, siding, and stucco-like materials.

Summary

Eco-friendly construction and operations practices can mean green for hoteliers.

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Construction using ICF is relatively new in the Northeast, but has been used in Minnesota, Texas, and Florida for several years, Groen said. It has been successful in those states because it is hurricane resistant, impervious to bugs and rot, and a barrier to drafts. According to Groen, the impermeability of ICF blocks keeps out water and humidity, which could lead to mold formation. These qualities add up to greater safety, efficiency, and (perhaps most gratifying to hotel guests) comfort.

“The ICF creates a uniform heating and air-conditioning atmosphere,” Groen said. It’s not uncommon to stay in a hotel and adjust the heat up during winter months or turn air-conditioning temperatures down when it’s hot. Overnight, however, the room temperature will vary, being either too cold or too warm, which disrupts sleep. That’s because in a wood-frame building a thermostat can be set at 73 degrees and feel cooler than an ICF building set at 69 degrees, Groen said. Exterior heat or cold can infiltrate through openings in the building because of inefficient insulation, forcing heating or air-conditioning units to constantly operate to maintain a particular temperature, he said. In an ICF building, the natural insulation created from the concrete and Styrofoam blocks serves as an impermeable barrier to exterior heat or cold, which would otherwise play havoc with room temperatures. The result benefits guests with a more comfortable room and owners with lower heating and cooling costs, all compliments of a constant temperature.

Saving energy: simple steps toward efficiency

Existing hotels, even those of antiquated construction, don’t need to be razed and rebuilt to reap the rewards of a greener operation. Less dramatic measures can be undertaken to make just about any hotel’s operation more sustainable.

A branch of the New Hampshire Lodging and Restaurant Association is dedicated to evaluating hotels and granting different degrees of certification based on the extent of a property’s sustainable operations. The Association also works closely with local utility companies to help educate hotel and restaurant owners on energy-saving practices.

Public Service of New Hampshire (PSNH), the largest utility vendor in the state, provides business customers with a free analysis of their properties’ utility use, said PSNH’s Ann Karczmarczyk. Energy efficiency has some strong incentives and a quick payback, she said. Through the NH Saves Program, utilities rebate up to 50% of installation costs for lighting retrofitting changes, helping to reduce the initial cost of the switchover. Over time, the retrofitting places the business on a lower rate schedule, which provides additional savings.

One example of a prosperous investment in such modifications is the Highlander Inn of Manchester, New Hampshire, which retrofitted all of its hallway and bathroom lighting fixtures in 2000. The hotel had broken even on the expense of the changeover after only 18 months, saving on utility bills and maintenance costs, Veasey said. Light bulbs lasted a remarkable five years before they were replaced in 2005, saving the hotel an estimated \$25,000 per year in utility and maintenance costs. In addition to the light fixtures, the hotel installed ENERGY STAR appliances, implemented a preventative maintenance program, and installed low-flow devices to conserve water.

Veasey cited some additional means of energy conservation:

- Replace windows with energy-efficient models. This will allow hotels and restaurants to draw more natural light and reduce the demand for artificial lighting in many public spaces.
- In buildings that haven’t converted to energy-efficient windows, close curtains. This reduces the impact of the cold air in the winter and heat in the summer on heating and air-conditioning use.
- Install low-wattage night lights in guest bathrooms to reduce the use of bathroom lighting as a hotel room night light.
- Use affixed dispensers for shower soap and shampoo to replace disposable plastic containers. While the form and function of early dispenser designs could be off-putting, the latest designs of these dispensers are far

more appealing.

- Purchase laundry soaps in bulk and concentrated form to reduce packaging. Reuse the plastic spray bottles used by housekeeping staff.
- Convert to Compact Fluorescent Lighting (CFL), which doesn't generate the heat of traditional lighting. CFL also uses less energy to create the same volume of light. This results in lower cooling costs in the summer. This is particularly important in public spaces where lights are on for six or more hours per day.
- Install motion detectors in public bathrooms, meeting rooms, and other public spaces. Lights will turn on when a person enters the room and automatically shut off when no motion is sensed for a certain length of time, substantially reducing wasted light output.
- Landscape using native and low-water-use plants. After a plant has established roots, cut back on the watering schedule by using a drip-irrigation system and watering early in the morning and late at night to reduce evaporation.
- Provide newspapers on a requested basis versus a blanket distribution to all rooms. Provide copies of the newspaper in public areas such as the breakfast area, restaurant, or lobby. Recycle newspapers each day, along with office paper used by hotel staff. Newsprint can also be used for cleaning mirrors, windows, and other hard surfaces, reducing the need for rags, which require laundering.

Promotions

Practices such as these reduce operating costs, increase operating efficiency, and positively impact a property's image among environmentally conscious travelers.

"Hotels have shown a higher interest (in sustainable operations), not just to save money, but to become green," Karczmarczyk said. "It's not just a good business decision for the bottom line. It's good business."

Greenery is vibrant, attractive, and green efforts need to be promoted more by individual hotels and restaurants, said Veasey. A special logo is available for hotels and restaurants participating in the New Hampshire Sustainable Lodging and Restaurant Program to use in promotional material. Veasey said she would like the certified properties to do more promotion of their green efforts on their hotel or restaurant Web sites as well.

"Green tourism is becoming more popular. Those properties that do promote that on their Web site are getting a lot of attention," Veasey said. "This is a statement of their commitment. When we started this program four years ago, people showed an interest, but not a commitment. They've seen the impact it can have on their operations and now we have a couple new businesses joining our effort every week."

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For additional information on green energy practices, check out the following Internet sites:

American Hotel & Lodging Association's Good Earthkeeping http://www.ahla.com/good_earth_overview.asp

ENERGY STAR for Hospitality

http://www.energystar.gov/index.cfm?c=hospitality.bus_hospitality