HVS

MARKET REPORT

Room Service or is it Food Delivery?

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Room service should be more than just food delivery. This article has reminders for full service hotels and ideas for limited service hotels.

I admit I am addicted to certain cartoons, including some serial ones. As a result, I regularly turn to the cartoon pages of the daily paper. I could not help but get an extra chuckle when I saw "The Family Circus" by Bill Keane on October 24, 1997. I wish we could reprint it here but they wanted $150 for that, which is reasonable, but would not let us use it on the internet version of this column which is unreasonable as it would have been a nice promo for the cartoon series.

The cartoon showed the kids looking out the door of their room into the hall of their house speaking to their mother. On the hall floor by the door was a scattered assortment of dishes, glassware and utensils. The kids were saying, "We were just playin' hotel."

We have all stayed at that hotel, haven't we? Getting room service picked up when the guest is finished is a challenge. In luxury hotels and resorts I have managed, I tried tent cards asking the guests to call us when they're done, calling the room ourselves after 45-60 minutes, and other ideas with the goal of having the tray or table never pushed into the hall. Every employee, particularly bellmen, security and housekeeping, has been trained to pick up room service, bring it to a service area, out of guest sight, and call the room service department. Bonuses have been offered and punishment meted out. In the end, one can still find a dinner room service table in a hall at 8am. They tell me the guest put it there when they got up in the morning and did not answer the phone when they were called the evening before! Maybe so, but it still bothers me.

Why bother with room service? For full service and luxury hotels, the answer is easy, it is a service people expect, enjoy and will pay for. Many women travelling alone particularly appreciate it as do guests who want to work in their room or watch television. Room service, like food and beverage service as a whole, can drive incremental departmental profit, attract more occupancy and help support a higher average daily rate for guest rooms.

Luxury hotels offer room service while most others offer food delivery. True room service can truly help make the guest feel special and reinforce the hotel's luxurious and comfortable image. Hot food hot and cold food cold, no condiments forgotten, and the order being correct the first time are just the beginning of room service. The crowning moments are the work of a caring professional server who presents the food, takes the covers off to display what is there, and sets the table or tray in the appointed place so the guest can dine in the comfort and security of their room. A good server can still sell dessert for delivery in a half hour when they may even remove the portions of the service the guest is finished with. This is service! This is hospitality!

It takes motivated and committed management to train and motivate the hotel's staff. It, like all things of quality in a hotel, takes effort and constant, constant monitoring. No room service in any mid-priced and better hotel should be any less than that. The difference between mid-priced, first class and luxury in this case should be the menu, the prices, the service setting, the servers' uniform and the quality of the room furnishings. Within a range, the quality of the service and what

the server says and does should be recognizably from the same planet.

Where the challenge truly comes out is in limited service hotels (aka economy or limited service or focused service). The guest at a Holiday Inn Express or Hampton Inn who takes their deluxe complimentary breakfast back to their room is having self-room service! The guest in any hotel who orders in a pizza is contracting out room service for one reason for another. Choice Hotels International and other chains have worked with Pizza Hut in the past to provide "Vrroom Service". Tent cards were placed in the guest rooms promoting the service. Local Pizza Hut restaurants paid a commission to Choice for the opportunity to be promoted in those guest rooms based on the volume of sales to the Choice affiliated hotels.

Many limited feature hotels have the menus for area restaurants available at the front desk or promote area restaurants in their guest directories. If the hotel has meeting space, these hotels have caterers lined up to serve functions.

One challenge hotels do not seem to be interested in is how to make money on these deliveries. Sure, the front desk staff gets a free pizza occasionally, but that does nothing for the room attendant who has to clean up the occasional mess or the owner who has to pay extra to get a bed spread cleaned or a carpet replaced prematurely! Owners and managers must take the position that the restaurant is being provided with marketing, additional seating capacity and bussing/cleaning services at no cost. While taking this position the hotelier must be mindful that the restaurant has higher food service (delivery) expense. While this food service benefits the limited feature hotel by helping it compete with full service hotels, it is also benefiting the profits of the restaurant. If it were not, why would they do it?

Somewhere in this mix of needs and wants there is potential for additional income for the limited service hotel. Why shouldn't this hotel make money from “room service” just as its full service siblings do? The limited service hotel's power to negotiate lies in the fact that its premises are private. The food delivery people do not have a constitutional right to bring food there without permission. In granting that permission, why can't the hotelier set standards and charge an access fee? Excessive demands cannot be made but there is a deal to be made, particularly if the hotel promotes the authorized vendors more heavily and denies access to unauthorized vendors.

Back when there were phone books in hotel rooms I used to have all the pizza pages torn out and replaced with a flyer for the pizza delivery restaurants we had deals with. That helped minimize the number of unauthorized pizza delivery people we turned away and minimized guest complaints. (It also resulted in my being teased by some of my hotelier friends who were aware of my stunt.)

Imagine how much money could be realized in a busy 120-room hotel if just $1.00 were collected for each delivery along with an employee party once a year from each of the four largest vendors. While you are making the deal, set service standards that will help your guests feel special and your hotel look special. Make sure that the restaurant's delivery staff are dressed appropriately and are polite to guests on the elevator and as they pass through the halls. Make sure the delivery vehicle parked in your porte cochere is well maintained on the outside as your other guests will walk by the vehicle. The driver and the vehicle become part of your ambience so do not let them detract from your other efforts.
Just as at full service hotel, someone needs to monitor the hallway vigilantly for discarded delivery items. Guests do not want to sleep with leftover food and its containers remaining in their guest rooms. Do not let this service bring down the appearance of the hotel for other guests.

And, don't forget to inspect what you expect!