



Ask Gail

by William D. Frye, Ph.D., CHE

Laptop thefts from guestrooms

*Another great article from The Rooms Chronicle, the #1 journal for hotel rooms management! ***Important notice: This article may not be reproduced without permission of the publisher or the author.*** College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Niagara University, P.O. Box 2036, Niagara University, NY 14109-2036. Phone: 866-Read TRC. E-mail: editor@roomschronicle.com*

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Dear Gail:

Our hotel has had a recent rash of laptop thefts from guestrooms in the past few months. The hotel is located near an international airport and several office parks, so the majority of our guests are business travelers. Some guests stay for only a night or two while others stay for up to a month. After interrogating the electronic locks of those guestrooms affected, we and the local police have not been able to determine who is taking the computers or how they are doing it. All the thefts occurred during the dinner hour. There is no damage to the guestroom doors or locks and all the windows do not open. These events are starting to generate bad publicity for our property, not to mention that many guests are outright worried. Help!

Sherry
(location withheld)

Dear Sherry:

Based on the information that you provided, your hotel has a serious problem. You need to take action now to prevent further recurrence of guestroom theft and to reassure your existing and future guests. Failure to do so will only erode your hotel's marketshare, signal to guests and thieves alike that management really does not care to deal with this problem, and likely expose the hotel to certain financial liability for any future thefts from guestrooms. I recommend that your hotel implement these steps in the following order:

- 1. Conduct a complete inventory of all emergency, master, floor, section, and "fail-safe" keys. These are referred to as "controlled keys." Any keys other than electronic keys recently issued to guests must be recalled, accounted for, and destroyed. Create new sets of emergency, master, floor, section, and "fail-safe" keys from different key stock than used previously. Use a new unopened box of blank card keys for this task. Since each key must be introduced to the lock(s) it will open, this task should be performed by two employees working with each other but who are from different departments in the hotel (i.e., front desk clerk and a maintenance engineer). Conduct a key inventory before the recoding and introduction process and immediately after.*
- 2. Maintain a rigid and detailed written record of who is in possession of any controlled keys. Every controlled key must either be locked up in a secure and monitored environment or in the immediate possession of the employee who signed it out. Employees must be trained to not lend or share their assigned key with other employees or guests. To ensure compliance, make this hotel regulation as immediate grounds for an employee's termination or suspension.*
- 3. Because the thefts have all occurred during the evening hours, lock off all entrances to the hotel except the main entrance where guests will have to pass by the front desk after entering the hotel. This can be done by disabling access to the side and back door guestroom card readers and posting notices asking guests to enter through the hotel's main entrance. This will pose a temporary inconvenience for your guests, but they will appreciate the rationale behind the reasoning.*
- 4. Schedule at least two or more employees to work the front desk during the evening hour when thefts have occurred. Two sets of eyes looking outwards are better than one employee who may become distracted while checking in guests or answering the phone. If your hotel has a security department, position one security officer in the lobby to "greet" guests and monitor traffic flow during and immediately before dinner hours.*

5. *Have a manager or security officer make frequent patrols of the guestroom floors, the stairwells, and parking lot. The manager should be on the lookout for things that JDLR (Just Don't Look Right). This would include guestroom doors that are ajar or have been damaged, a guest spending too much time in the hallway, stairwell or exterior doors that are propped open, or individual(s) sitting in parked automobiles in the parking lot or near entrances. ✧*
6. *Invest in electronic guestroom safes that are big enough to accommodate even the largest laptop computers and where the guest can program their own combination number. These in-room safes must be bolted down to the floor or other immovable surface. While in-room safes are a major investment for a hotel, as you have learned, they are a necessity in today's world of notebook-toting travelers. Most hotels do not have large enough safe-deposit boxes behind the front desk to accommodate laptop computers. And depositing and retrieving them is an inconvenience for hotel guests. The July/August issue of TRC will discuss in-room safes in greater detail.*
7. *Finally, as an added precaution, assign each housekeeper to a different section of guestrooms on a different floor than they worked prior to the thefts. This is a good practice to help discern possible patterns of complicity with outsiders or responsibility by inside personnel. ✧*