



# Recent hotel pranks emphasize the need for caution and... common sense

*Another great article from The Rooms Chronicle<sup>®</sup>, the #1 journal for hotel rooms management<sup>®</sup>! \*\*\*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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Imagine staying in a hotel room and receiving a call from the front desk clerk who tells you there is a fire on your floor and that you must pull the fire alarm in the hallway immediately. Yet, you don't smell smoke or see other guests running for the nearest exit. Would you heed the caller's instructions or ignore them?

Recently, hotel guests and employees alike throughout the United States have followed instructions like these, and then are shocked only to find out the call was a joke, resulting in thousands of dollars in property damage and wracked nerves. In the end, only the pranksters are laughing.

### Types of pranks

The pranks have occurred in Florida, Alabama, Arkansas, California and Nebraska across a wide spectrum of hotel brands including, but not limited to, Comfort Inn and Comfort Suites, Holiday Inn Express, Hilton Garden Inn, Hampton Inn, and Best Western.

Some hotels have paid a high price because of these pranks. At an Alabama hotel, a guest was convinced by a caller to activate the hotel sprinklers for a fire that didn't exist. It cost the hotel more than \$10,000 in damages.

A couple visiting Orlando with their three children were woken from their sleep at 7am and tricked into smashing out the window of their hotel room with a toilet tank after receiving a bogus phone call that there was a gas leak in the hotel. They were then instructed to break the mirror on the wall, use a lamp to bash a hole in the wall to free a guest trapped on the other side, and then to throw the mattress out the window. The guests, one of which was a deputy sheriff, willingly complied. Their final instructions were to jump out the window; but this deed was foiled when the general manager arrived to check on the excessive noise only to notify them that there was no gas leak. Property damage resulting from this prank exceeded \$5,000.

In Conway, Arkansas, a prankster posing as a sprinkler company employee convinced a hotel worker to take part in a test of the property's emergency alarm system by activating the sprinkler system.

There was no emergency test. The result was ankle-deep water and \$50,000 of damage to the hotel.

A similar prank was initiated via phone at a property in Daphne, Alabama. The caller ordered the desk clerk to activate the sprinkler system for a fire that didn't exist. Property damages totaled over \$10,000. Around the same time, a



caller convinced guests to break windows at a sister hotel in Saraland, Alabama, about 25 miles away because of a gas leak that didn't exist.

In San Luis Obispo, California, a night auditor received a phone call at the front desk from a stranger impersonating a fireman stating that the hotel's fire alarm monitoring company was not responding to the fire department's calls regarding a potential flood if the hotel didn't tap the closest fire sprinkler. When the night auditor requested to speak to his manager before taking action, the caller insisted there was little time before the flood would occur. Feeling pressured, the employee followed the caller's instructions to climb on a chair and tap the closest fire sprinkler. The sprinklers activated, soaking the lobby's computers, fax machines, and printers and resulting in more than \$20,000 in damages.

In yet another prank, after a noisy fire alarm was activated at a York, Nebraska hotel, agitated guests started congregating in the lobby. A front desk clerk then received a phone call from an individual claiming to be from the alarm service. The caller advised the clerk not to call the fire department because it would result in a hefty fine. Not aware that this statement was untrue, the concerned employee followed the caller's specific instructions on "how to make the alarm stop" by pulling on a lever on the fire alarm mechanism itself, and then visiting a website that ended up being pornographic in nature. The clerk was next instructed that the front glass area of the hotel lobby needed to be broken. With coaxing from the person on the phone, a truck driver, who was staying at the hotel, was persuaded to drive his rig through the front door of the lobby.



### **Recommendations for hoteliers**

These hotel pranks are dangerous and costly, not only in terms of repair or replacement of damaged hotel assets, but in the loss of utility and revenue generation of these items, especially during the prime travel season for most hotels. More significant is the damaged reputation of the property or hotel brand when employees become an unwitting dupe in the execution of these pranks. Guests may question the extent of their personal safety when staying at a hotel that has become victim to these anonymous pranksters.

To ensure the safety of all guests and employees and protect hotel assets, hoteliers should be aware of these important points of information and consider implementing the following procedures:

- Be aware that hotel guests have been receiving these calls most often during the early morning hours, when they're likely asleep, and are groggy when they answer the phone. Often the caller claims to be the general manager of the hotel announcing an emergency, and will urge the guest to follow specific instructions, as bizarre as the instructions may be.
- A knowledgeable guest who receives a call of this nature will hang up and immediately call the hotel's front desk for verification. Therefore, it is imperative that front desks be operational 24 hours a day and that calls are answered promptly. If a call is not answered in the first few rings, the guest may panic and choose to comply with the bizarre instructions in the interest of self-preservation.
- Require non-managerial employees who receive phone calls from dubious sources to seek authorization from a hotel manager before implementing any extreme action that could harm others or damage hotel assets, even if it means calling a manager at home and waking them up in the middle of the night. Alternatively, consider designating a single individual on each shift who can decide what action to take. Educate staff that all such calls should be reported to that individual and no action should be taken by any other employee unless that individual cannot be found or unless there is physical evidence, such as smoke or fire, to support the warning contained in any call.
- The best way to combat this situation and minimize future damage is by building awareness for both hotel employees and guests. Tell your staff to be on alert for similar calls, and review the details of your property's standard security procedures and emergency plans. Encourage them to act in accordance with these plans and - in advance - address any questions they have should they receive these calls, or if a fire situation should arise. Consider posting notices for guests that any emergency situations will be announced via the hotel's public address system and not through phone calls to guestrooms.
- Encourage employees to acknowledge awareness of the incidents when asked by guests; this may require having a manager address a guest's questions or concerns.
- Alert local authorities if your property receives phone calls of this nature.

- Use this as an opportunity to make sure your fire detection devices are properly functioning, and that your emergency fire plan is updated and in accordance with your brand's standards and local fire marshal requirements, making improvements as necessary.
- Finally, and most importantly, train all staff to **NEVER CONNECT AN INCOMING CALL TO A GUESTROOM UNLESS THE CALLER KNOWS THE NAME OF THE GUEST REGISTERED TO THAT ROOM.** Similarly, ensure that all house phones only ring to the front desk or PBX operator and that guestrooms and function rooms may not be directly dialed from house phones. ✧

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### **Check It Out for Yourself**

**Don't think that telephone pranks are that rampant or serious in hotels?**

**Visit this website ([www.phonelosers.org/hotel](http://www.phonelosers.org/hotel)) where you can listen to dozens of pranks that outside callers, posing as hotel employees, have perpetrated on unwitting guests.**

Note: TRC does not condone nor approve of this website or the associated actions but presents this information to readers for their self-education.