



by Ray Ellis, Jr.

Recent media “stings” of hotels highlight the constant need for security training

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As I reflect upon my 54 years with the lodging industry, I quickly realized that “media stings” have frequently been a motivator for hotels to clean up their security procedures. Invariably, media outlets have sought to test the security procedures of hotels and the response of its employees, all in the name of open disclosure, viewer education, and investigative journalism. Their plan of attack is simple – create situations that test the hotel’s security protocol, keep the hidden camera rolling, and see what happens. These scenarios almost always involve interactions with hotel employees to “see how they will respond” when confronted with a security-related dilemmas.

While the investigative journalists may be seeking ratings, they serve a valuable service to hoteliers. They remind us that hotel safety and security matters must remain at the forefront of our operational endeavors. In spite of the current depressed economy, hotels cannot afford to cut security training programs for all staff on a continuing basis. If they do, don’t be surprised when your hotel is featured on the 11 o’clock news in an unflattering exposé.

Unfortunately, security breaches that have made recent headlines suggest that, collectively as an industry, we still have far to go to in this realm. In July, the lodging industry encountered several stings devised by “ABC NEWS” and a local outlet in Columbus, Ohio – WBNS 10 TV designed to illustrate lax security procedures in hotels. During the same time period of the stings, an alleged security breach involving a high profile female sportscaster for ESPN occurred. A voyeur had reversed the lens in the door’s viewport (peep hole) allowing one to view into the guestroom and surreptitiously videotaped the sportscaster while undressed. The video was subsequently posted on the Internet. While this incident obviously was not planned as part of the media’s sting programs, it did little to reassure travelers about safety concerns in hotels. Furthermore, as a result of the alleged ESPN incident, several “copy cat” activities in other hotels throughout the nation have surfaced.



Unfortunately, the media has made the lodging industry an unwilling partner as they increase their audience by featuring security failures in lodging establishments with the implication that guests are in danger when staying in a hotel or resort. The more frightening the scenarios, the greater likelihood of attracting larger television audiences and higher ratings, providing a stronger base for increased advertising time revenues.

As media outlets devise new stings, hoteliers should be reminded, again and again, to never give a key card without positive identification and proof that the person requesting it is assigned to the room in question. In the past we have had the embarrassment of a general manager assisting a non-registered person into what was fortunately an unoccupied room. Admittedly, the policy of providing true hospitality leads one to make every effort to accommodate the “guest.” But, it is important to ensure that the individual is a registered guest and authorized access to the room in question.

As learned from some other stings perpetrated upon unwitting or poorly trained hotel personnel, consider adding the following essential elements to your hotel’s security training.

Don't say it aloud

Start upon arrival. Do not address the arriving guest by name; even if the guest is a "regular." Be sure there is not a person "crowding" the desk during the registration process. If so, please ask the individual to step back and assure them that their needs will be attended to as quickly as possible. Never call out the name of the guest if you are calling for bell service and NEVER call out the room number. Discreetly point out the room number on the inside of the key packet to the guest or hand it to the bell person rather than announcing it aloud.

Returning guest items

Consider training front door and bell staff to offer to remove airline tags from guests' luggage as these carry the guest's name. In one media sting the guest was able to retrieving someone else's luggage from a bell person without producing a claim check; the guest insisted that he was "Mr. Smith" as specified on the luggage tag and airline tag. The bell person failed to ask for government-issued picture identification when the guest could not produce the claim checks, not realizing he was being scammed.

In another blatant violation of security protocol, a sting operator stole hi-tech items and an extra key card by gaining entrance to the guestroom of a fellow "sting" associate at the hands of an unwitting room attendant. The sting operator then went to the valet stand and "stole" the rental car assigned to the guest in that room. He was able to do this by merely telling the parking valet the guest's name and room number and showing the extra guestroom key while claiming he had misplaced the valet claim check. Of course, the valet did not check the individual's identification to ascertain the automobile was registered or rented to him.

Never return an item to a guest without them producing the claim check! If they claim the ticket is lost, involve Security or Management, who should require identification from the guest. If there is no expedient way to match the individual to the item in question (perhaps because of missing luggage tags) require the guest to identify in multiple specific details the contents of the luggage. Then check the contents away from the presence of the guest to ensure the descriptions match. When in doubt, do not release personal property to guests without a claim check or other means of verification.

Ascertaining identity

Whenever hotel personnel are confronted by a scenario in which an alleged guest seeks entry to a guestroom with the claim the key card is in the room or is otherwise unavailable, the employee will accompany or direct the guest to the front desk. If the guest indicates the identification is in the guest room, a security officer should accompany the guest to the room and confirm the guest's claim of proper registration and assignment to the room in question. If, on the other hand, the guest properly identifies as the guest, a new or duplicate key card may be issued.

When government-issued picture identification is unavailable, one acceptable method for determining positive identification is to match the guest's signature to that previously provided on the registration card at check-in. However, many hotels no longer require guests to sign registration cards upon arrival. An alternative is to question the guest about an item in the registration profile which would be known only to the guest. This might be a cell phone number, membership number to the hotel's frequent-stay program, or even the last four digits of the credit card number furnished at check-in. Generally, home and business addresses, zip codes, and land-based telephone numbers are unreliable sources of verification as these can easily be obtained for a guest with a unique name from many Internet sources, telephone directories, or freely distributed business cards at a convention. The apology for inconvenience should emphasize the necessity of protecting the guest with the highest level of security.

Housekeeping security issues

For the safety of room attendants and the protection of guests' personal property, guestrooms should be serviced with the door closed. To avoid startling room attendants, place a sign on the door of each guestroom while it is being serviced that states:

***This room is being serviced by Housekeeping.
If it is necessary to gain entry
please use your key card and, if required,
the room attendant will return at a convenient time.***

This would protect against the unauthorized individual who enters through an open door and claims that this is their guestroom. Because of language barriers it is sometimes impractical to have the room attendant request the guest to use the key card to prove it is the assigned room. That is a security function that should not be assigned to Housekeeping.

For safety and security reasons, housekeeping managers might consider assigning teams of two room attendants for servicing each room. The true test of such an intuitive move would be successful completion of twice the workload by the team. With the presentation of heavier beds with triple-sheeting, numerous coverlets, pillows and other decorative features, the team would permit a more realistic response to OSHA recommendations. While there is currently no ergonomic mandate, a CALOSH (OSHA administered by the State of California) investigation of alleged injuries involving back, shoulders and arms sustained by a room attendant would support this concept. At a minimum, never station only one housekeeper at a time to each floor. Always pair them up, even if they are not "team cleaning".

The sting operators are becoming more ingenious. One operator entered the hotel and went to the guest floor where an associate was registered. He entered a stairwell and donned a bathrobe, poured water on his head, and when confronted by the housekeeper, claimed to have mistakenly exited the room into the corridor and didn't have his key card to enable him to re-enter his room. The room attendant opened the guestroom door for the con artist. In this example, rather than accompanying the individual to the front desk, a security officer should have been called to respond. He, in turn, could confirm the guest's identity information with the front desk using the registration data technique.

Learning a lesson from the ESPN incident, it is recommended that the viewport be added to the room attendant checklist. If when looking from the corridor side, the room is blurred, there is no problem. If they are able to see into the room, it should be immediately reported to a supervisor. The supervisor should immediately contact security; or in the absence of a security person, the chief engineer for reversing of the lens to the proper position.

Conclusion

Security training and guest protection **MUST** be an ongoing program with review on a quarterly basis. Where proper training can be confirmed, the executive committee, in cooperation with legal counsel and the union, where applicable, should consider a disciplinary program which could include dismissal of employees for violation of the security standards. Failure to do so is condoning a disregard for guests' safety. And this will only motivate media outlets to continue to try and catch hotel employees compromising the safety of guests. ✧

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