



Front Office

by Dr. Gabor Forgacs

Walking a guest is never easy, so prepare early

*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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Capacity management is a widely used revenue management tactic, especially in the lodging industry. Its objective is to sell the most possible guestrooms on any given night. There are times when management's well-intended efforts result in overbooking the hotel and that may force the front desk to turn away guests who arrive with a guaranteed and confirmed reservation. This article discusses the nuts and bolts of successfully preparing to weather the impending storm known as "walking a guest."

Preventive Measures

Smart front office managers prevent overstays on critical days. It is wise to flag the account of those guests whose reservations are suspect and get a commitment to an exact departure date. To communicate and ensure an undisputed departure date, some front desks will require registering guests to initial their printed departure date on the registration card.

Yet, some guests may not know how long they will stay or fail to communicate with the front office if their plans do change. It is up to the front office manager to track down the guests and communicate clearly the date up to which a hotel can extend a guest's reservation.

Pre-block VIPs, elite-level frequent-stay club members, group arrivals, honey-mooners, special requests, multi-night stays, and others who would not make good candidates for relocation. Keep in mind that the guests to be walked should be those who arrive last who are not pre-blocked. Because of the potential lateness of the hour, generally, female travelers and seasoned business travelers who may require an early wake-up call are not the best candidates to be relocated. Remember, the business guest is probably traveling on an expense account, so they are much less price sensitive and more time sensitive than the leisure traveler. Identify non-business single-night arrivals and leisure guests as potential targets for walking.

Confirming the overbooked situation

Generally, the Front Office Manager will examine the count from the list of expected departures and expected arrivals and add this difference to the current count of occupied rooms in order to determine if the hotel will be faced with a walk situation. It can happen to the best of FOMs and revenue management specialists. The only question on those days is whether the hotel may need to walk 4 guests or 40. If the overbooked number is relatively small, or the number of expected last-minute cancellations or no-shows is large, walking may be a non-issue. Otherwise, the FOM needs to implement steps now to avoid disastrous encounters later in the evening.

Look to reclaim rooms

The experienced FOM knows that oftentimes, additional guestrooms for the evening can be found within property just by looking. The first step is to compare the housekeeping report for the day, which is based on a physical inspection of each guestroom at check-out time, and compare it to the house-count room status in the computerized property management system. Any discrepancies between the system's room status and housekeeping's report must be resolved.

If some rooms are reported vacant and the computerized system shows a registered occupant (or vice-versa), the FOM needs to know what the true status is. This usually means that the FOM needs to visually inspect the signed registration card for any changes in departure date made by the guest but not updated by a desk clerk in the computer

system. Accordingly, the FOM or housekeeping manager will likely need to inspect the guestroom in question and search for any evidence of an early departure, or attempt to ascertain the identity of the guest who is actually residing in the room. Examining nametags on luggage is a helpful tool in this effort.

Another possible source is out-of-order (OOO) or out-of-service status (OOS) rooms. Enter the property management system and examine the reason code associated with each OOO or OOS guestroom. Determine if the room can be repaired or returned to a saleable state. Some rooms may have been taken out of service by housekeeping to prepare for scheduled deep cleaning. Others may have been placed out of order because of small furniture repairs or cosmetic damage. If a room can be used, even at a reduced rate, it makes sense to use it instead of walking a guest. Housekeeping and engineering staff know the guestrooms best and can work with the Front Office Manager to identify OOO or OOS rooms that may be used.

Some hotels have small boardrooms or executive conference rooms which could be temporarily set up for one-night stays. If these rooms are equipped with a washroom and a pull-out sofa, or if a cot or rollaway can be placed in the room, some guests may accept them for one night in exchange for a reduced room rate, complimentary meal voucher, or even gratis. Most local health and safety regulations will require that each “temporary room” be equipped with its own toilet facilities, telephone, and door with separate locking mechanism. Remember to contact housekeeping early in the afternoon to get these rooms and rollaway cots ready.

If the hotel has suites where the connecting door between the parlor and bedroom can be locked, and both rooms have televisions and full baths, consider selling each room separately. For this reason, most parlors are equipped with pull-out sofas; or a rollaway can be placed in the room. Parlors can be offered to volunteers at a reduced rate.

Another tactic is to offer to upgrade a small group of guests if the hotel is oversold for a particular room type. Offer to upgrade two or three colleagues into a single multi-bedroom suite in exchange for their separate standard accommodations. It may help to throw in a cheese plate amenity and bottle of wine as incentives.

Securing Extra Capacity Nearby

Based on the number of guests the hotel expects to walk, the FOM will next call hotels in the vicinity to secure rooms. In North America, most hotels will pick up the room charge of guests who are bumped, so it makes sense to negotiate a fair rate. In some cities, hotels typically have reciprocal walk-rates already negotiated in advance. This makes good sense, as the accommodating hotel may need the favor returned in the future.

A key aspect to keep in mind when considering where to relocate a guest is that the accommodating hotel should be of equivalent or greater service level or rating classification if possible. In order to prevent a situation going from bad to worse, an FOM should never walk a guest to a lower rated hotel. Similarly, if the reservation holder is relocated to a substantially more premium hotel, it may be more difficult to win the guest back for future stays or to bring him back if the initial stay was for more than one night.

The other details

Once the hotel’s front office manager has determined that relocating guests will be necessary and rooms nearby have been secured, walk-authorization letters and travel directions should be prepared. Have hotel transportation or taxis standing by to take walked guests to their new hotel. Determine the appropriate taxi fare plus gratuity for transportation and have the requisite amounts available for disbursement. Advise guest services or bell staff of the situation and ensure that they are on hand to escort a walked guest to the provided transportation or even across the street to the secured accommodations. Finally, prepare to explain to guests why they are being relocated. ✧

In the next issue of TRC:

- The actual mechanics of how to walk a guest once they have arrived will be presented.

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Hot tip

When preparing walk authorization letters, make sure that they are only printed on hotel letterhead and signed by the night manager or M.O.D. Each letter should state exactly the name of the guest to be accommodated and what charges and amounts that may be direct-billed back to the originating hotel. Seal the walk authorization letter in an envelope with the guest’s name on the front and ask the guest or bell person to present it to the front desk of the new hotel. This will help prevent individuals from perpetrating fraud by seeking unauthorized services or accommodations at the expense of another hotel.