



Ask Gail

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

Locking down housekeeper vacuums and hotel “emergency keys”

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Dear Gail:

I have a unique dilemma with the room attendants in my housekeeping department. Each attendant is issued her own vacuum cleaner and then we have several additional vacuums for general use by other personnel. Some attendants get very upset when someone else uses their vacuum. Many of our room attendants have even written their name on the vacuum to easily identify which is theirs and to discourage other employees from using it. Arguments and even fights have occurred over this matter. Do you have any suggestions? I can't always be there to prevent arguments over such a trivial matter.

Anna R.
Miami, FL

Dear Anna,

Surprisingly, your dilemma is more common than most would think in hotels. Many room attendants become very territorial when it comes to housekeeping carts, linen closets, and cleaning equipment.

Undoubtedly, each of your veteran room attendants has a preference for how their equipment is laid out, used and maintained. This is probably for two reasons: 1) To ensure that their allocated supplies and equipment are kept within easy reach and order to maintain optimal efficiency as they struggle to clean 16 or so guestrooms on a daily basis, and 2) To prevent others from using their equipment in fear that the equipment will malfunction, break, or not be returned how and when it was borrowed. Most room attendants take great pride in their jobs and recognize that their carts and equipment are the “tools of their trade” in much the same way that most auto mechanics view their hand tools and are reluctant or unwilling to lend them to others.

It sounds that there is not a shortage of vacuums to go around, so this should be an easy fix. Consider purchasing electrical cord locks for each room attendant. These are locks that fit over the end of the vacuum's power cord and lock into place with a key. Once in place, the vacuum is inoperable. Issue one lock and one key to each room attendant and keep the second key on a master key ring in the Housekeeping office where only managers have access.

Electrical cord locks are designed to fit both two and three-pronged plugs and are affordable. They typically cost about \$12-\$15 each and are manufactured in a variety of colors. The locks can be purchased where they are all keyed alike or keyed differently, which is what you will need. They can be ordered from most electrical supply houses or online.

Using cord locks will immediately end potential disputes over someone “borrowing” one attendant's vacuum without permission and will increase a sense of employee ownership and personal responsibility for their equipment among housekeepers.



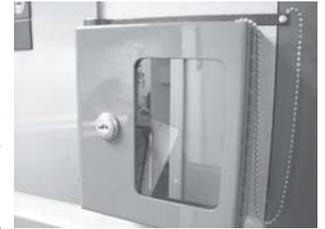
Dear Gail:

Where should the hotel's “emergency key” be kept? I have heard some general managers claim that they keep it with them at all times while others insist on locking it in a safe deposit box. Any guidance you can provide would be appreciated.

Terry W.
Aspen, CO

Dear Terry,

As you are probably aware, a hotel's "emergency key" is designed to open all electronic door locks in the hotel, including those that are deadbolted from inside the room. Because the key is designed to override deadbolts, it is the most valuable key in the hotel and should be safeguarded at all times. As such, it typically should not be assigned to a single manager or carried by a single employee. For smaller properties, it should be kept secured in the back office under lock and key but accessible if needed in an emergency. One solution to accomplish this is to place the emergency key in a locked metal box with a glass front where its presence can be visually confirmed but in an emergency the glass can be broken and the key accessed (see picture). This should be located in the back office behind the front desk.



For larger full-service hotels and resorts that employ their own security personnel around the clock, it may be advisable to create and number multiple emergency keys. Place one copy on each set of master keys that are issued to each security officer at the start of each

shift. The premise here is that if a security officer needs to access a double-locked guestroom while on patrol because he hears a guest in distress, he is able to do so. The time it would take to return to the front desk to retrieve an emergency key could possibly inhibit a timely response to a guest's need for immediate assistance. Furthermore, since the keys are "handed off" to the next shift security officer, their presence can be verified.

Other copies should be secured in a safe-deposit box or glass plated box where they can be distributed to security, engineering, or emergency response personnel in the event of a fire or other impending disaster. The larger the property, both in terms of number of guestroom/offices and square footage, the more emergency keys should be created and secured to enable quicker evacuation of a property if needed. Emergency keys should not be issued to individual managers or employees (other than patrolling security officers or the shift M.O.D.) except in emergencies. They should never leave hotel premises under any circumstances. ✧

(Dr. William D. Frye is Executive Editor of *The Rooms Chronicle* and co-author of the textbook *Managing Housekeeping Operations*, published by the American Hotel & Lodging Educational Institute. E-mail: wfrye@roomschronicle.com)

The Complaint Corner

- Settled-in Guest: (...calling the front desk from his guestroom...) The remote control in my room does not seem to work. I think the batteries may be dead. I can not figure how to turn the television on since it is one of those new flat panel LCD TVs.
- Bad Reply: The on/off button is located on the left side of the television. That should work for you until morning.
- Slightly Better: I will send the bellman to your guestroom with some fresh batteries for the remote. Hopefully that will work.
- Best Reply: I am sorry Mr. Settled-In Guest that your remote control is not working properly. I will send a maintenance engineer to your guestroom right away. He will have fresh batteries and an extra remote control to ensure that you will be able to watch the television.