



Risk Management

by Jim Stover

Hotel security: How much is too much from guests' perspective?

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Since the tragic terrorist attacks directed at hotels in Mumbai in late 2008, the American press – briefly – investigated the state of hotel security in the United States. After being interviewed by several major publications and reading the resultant stories, it quickly became apparent to this author that the collective lodging industry is not ready for increased security at our hotels, primarily because guests will not tolerate such invasive and restrictive measures needed to keep them safe.

Open campus, open architecture

By the very nature of their business, hotels are designed to be open and inviting places for the public's enjoyment. They welcome all to their properties and encourage potential guests by offering multiple access points to the parking lot and hotel as well as multiple entrances to the building. Although most major U.S. hotel companies are controlling access to remote entrances via key cards, there is a trend to decrease security by substituting self-service check-in kiosks for the traditional front desk experience. Thus, while many hotels are controlling access to their buildings from the outside, they are actually decreasing their level of security inside the hotel. It takes very little imagination for a terrorist to check into a hotel, secure a guestroom key card, and then open a remote door for his compatriots. It is somewhat ironic to note that one major hotel company demands photo identification when guests check-in at the front desk but also offers self-service kiosks that bypass any human interaction at all during the check-in process.

Lessons from Mumbai

The terrorist attacks in Mumbai were executed by a small band of well-trained and fanatically dedicated individuals who wreaked havoc in the city for over 60 hours. They attacked two popular hotels, among other targets, and succeeded in killing approximately 145 people during their assault. The Indian government was helpless to stop the attack and largely ineffective in hunting down the killers and freeing their hostages.

We in the United States would probably fare just a bit better. More than likely, we would be unable to prevent the initial terror attack, but with specialized police and military antiterrorist forces, we would eliminate the terrorists fairly quickly. We would respond with more speed and force than the Indians; we would not, however, escape arms and grenades. One shudders to think of the carnage the terrorists could have generated if they possessed plastic explosives, much less chemical, biological or radiological weapons.

Security in U.S. hotels

As mentioned in several published articles, the hotel industry is able and willing to provide the level of security the American public wants and, most importantly, will tolerate. Yet, given the amount of grumbling one hears at any airport security screening point, the American public appears unwilling to tolerate much interference. As previously mentioned, hotels are designed to be attractive gathering places that welcome the public. But, to enhance security to meet current prevailing threats, the following changes would likely have to be made:



- Fence the circumference of the property with an 8- to 10-foot tall fence.
- Limit vehicle and pedestrian access to only one entrance to the property.
- Vehicles would have to be valet parked only, and then at some distance from the building.
- Install a state-of-the-art video and electronic surveillance system to monitor the entrance to the property, the perimeter fence, and all public spaces.
- Install metal detectors and explosive sniffers at the ONLY entrance to the building. Expect guests waiting in lines similar to an airport security screening point.
- Increase the numbers and the training of the security staff. Increase security officers' wages to a level where this becomes a desired employment position and is not considered a "throwaway". Establish strict educational and physical requirements for these positions.
- Teach hotel staff how to recognize unusual behaviors and how to respond to them appropriately.
- Control access to guestroom floors by requiring key cards to enter stairwells from public spaces and to operate the elevators.
- Ensure all hotel employees are well trained in emergency response.



The likelihood of instituting these draconian measures is nil. What it comes down to is the guest must take a certain measure of personal responsibility for their own safety.

A reasonable response to terrorism in the U.S.

For the foreseeable future, the lodging industry will focus on traditional, non-intrusive security measures. Many of these steps have become standard practice in the Lodging Industry for some time now. They include:

- Security officers on duty 24 hours a day/7 days a week.
- A color, digital, Internet-capable, closed circuit television system is rapidly becoming the industry standard.
- Hotel employees – most particularly those with frequent guestroom floor access (e.g., room attendants, security personnel, engineers, etc.) – are being trained in emergency response procedures.
- Requesting assistance from local law enforcement and the Department of Homeland Security for security evaluations.
- Educating the traveling public as to their role in ensuring their own security as well as that of their fellow travelers.
- The American Hotel & Lodging Association's Travelers' Safety Tips should be updated to include terrorism-related issues as well as fire and life safety.

When it is all said and done, the Lodging Industry stands ready to provide the level of security demanded by the American public. The public must first tell us what it wants and what it will tolerate. As long as future terrorist attempts are prevented or kept offshore of American soil, Americans will express less tolerance for invasive or inconvenient safeguards at hotels. This doesn't mean that they are not needed. If however, significant terrorist acts come to fruition domestically, then a change in perspective will likely ensue and the Lodging Industry will be ready to meet the increased security expectations of its guests. ✧

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