



Front Office

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

Lessons learned from a recent attempted hotel robbery

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Hotels are prime targets for robbery. They all keep and collect cash and other forms of payment on the premises, they are open 24 hours a day - 365 days a year, and hotels are very transitory businesses with people constantly coming and going at all hours. Yet, hotels tend to become very quiet during late night hours and fewer patrons are usually out and about. This makes front desks susceptible to individuals seeking to score some quick cash by staging a robbery.

While all hotel front desks are vulnerable to potential robbery, smaller properties are generally more prone because there are fewer guests passing through the lobby, there is often only one employee working the desk at night, and most guests staying at limited-service and select-service properties arrive and depart by personal automobile. So a waiting getaway car parked outside does not draw any unwanted attention. Also, most hotels that fit into these categories are located near suburban, rural or highway locales where there is very little activity after dark. This means fewer witnesses to identify a robber and less people to interfere with his crime.

A recent hotel robbery attempt

Earlier this month, one of my hotel students was working at a limited-service hotel in a suburban location just off of an interstate highway. He was working the 3pm-11pm shift at the front desk alone. There were no other employees working at this 117-room branded property. Early in the evening he had stepped away from the front desk to use the restroom in the lobby. When he returned he found a man wearing a sweatshirt with the hood pulled over his head, sunglasses (at night), and gloves (in early October) leaning across the front of the desk rifling through papers and attempting to open drawers. He noticed that the man had cotton stuffed in both nostrils.

When the employee asked how he could help the man, the perpetrator informed him that there was a bomb in the hotel and it would be detonated if anyone called the Police. The robber demanded all the money in the clerk's cash drawer. The clerk complied with the demand. The robber then reached into the pocket of his hoodie and fumbled to pull out what the clerk perceived was a probable gun. At this point the clerk ran into the back office, locked the door, and called 911 for help. Within five minutes a police officer kicked in the door to the office and pointed a gun at the clerk. The robber had fled the property as soon as the clerk barricaded himself in the back office. The robbery was unsuccessful, but there are many lessons to be learned from this stressful event.



Why the robbery was unsuccessful

The perpetrator did not achieve his intended outcome for many reasons:

- *The clerk locked both the cash drawer and the door to access behind the desk when he went to the restroom.* While it is never a good idea to leave a front desk unattended, if you must step away, always lock everything down. Don't forget to remove the bucket of registration cards from the counter and lock it up in the back office so others will not have access to guests' private information.
- *The clerk realized that the person reaching over the desk was a likely robber.* He realized this because the man was wearing sunglasses at night and gloves when it was not cold enough to warrant such. The man had a hoodie pulled over his head, which was uncharacteristic for the weather, and had cotton stuffed in his nose, a potential sign that the individual had medical or mental problems or was a drug user, perhaps seeking a "fix".

- *The clerk did not panic or make any sudden movements when he was informed there was a bomb in the hotel. The clerk complied with the robber's demands using slow deliberate movements so as not to anger him or give cause for retaliation.*
- *The clerk perceived a "defining moment" where he believed his life was in extreme danger despite complying with the robber's demands. He made the most secure choice given the situation. It appeared clear to the clerk that the robber was not in a "normal" mindset and was likely not in control of his mental faculties. The robber was also having a problem with his manual dexterity. These were indications to the clerk that any threat of a bomb actually existing was, in all likelihood, not true. But if the robber did have a gun, the clerk's life was in much more jeopardy now because of the mental instability of the perpetrator. The clerk did not hesitate to remove himself from the situation, seek refuge in the back office before the robber could produce the firearm, and summon help. There were no guests or other employees present, no security cameras, no panic alarms, no one to find the body or render first aid if he was shot. The clerk chose the best option to remain alive and seized it immediately.*

Hot tip

Offer free coffee and donuts to police officers around the clock. Remember that they primarily work out of their police cars within their patrol sectors, so they need to stop every hour or two to use the restroom and grab some refreshment. What better place than your hotel? A regular police presence such as this will assuredly keep most robbers away!

How this robbery could have been prevented

In most situations, robberies in commercial establishments, especially by lone perpetrators, are opportunities seized because of lax security measures in effect. In other words, most businesses are robbed because they are convenient targets that have cash and there is a perception that the robber will likely get away unscathed because of inadequate efforts made to prevent such a robbery. It is sort of like the stolen car scenario; car thieves are much more apt to steal a car that is unlocked or perhaps even has the keys left in the ignition before they will steal one that is locked or has a security system.

In this situation, the hotel did not have any security cameras, the front desk clerk was working alone, and the hotel was located in an area with minimal foot traffic. These alone are the very reasons that hotels should never staff only one employee to work at a time. Lone employees are much more susceptible to robbery and assault and they have no one to help them when they are in distress. Plus, at some point in the evening the clerk will need to leave the desk unattended to use the bathroom, attend to a guest concern or disturbance away from the lobby, or tend to other tasks such as folding laundry, filing paperwork, restocking supplies, etc. While these types of security measures will not prevent every robbery, they will likely deter most prospective robbers who are seeking targets that are easier to hit. Most robbers do their homework and "scope out" potential targets in advance, seeking soft targets that offer the least resistance and the most chance for success. If a hotel employs various equipment and practices that will greatly reduce the chance of success, the robber will move on to another target.

Tips for minimizing potential for robbery

Here are several steps that hoteliers should consider to minimize their chances of being robbed at the front desk:

- *Never schedule employees to work alone, regardless of the shift or the hotel's occupancy.* Such a practice is a huge liability to Management and a threat to the lone employee and guests. With no exceptions, always have at least two employees per shift working in the hotel.
- *Keep only the minimum amount of cash on hand needed to conduct transactions.* If a cashier takes in a large cash payment, immediately deposit the cash payment into the drop safe. Do not leave it in the cashier drawer.
- *Install visible security cameras that provide coverage for the front desk, lobby, all hotel entrances, the entrance to the indoor pool and fitness center, ATM, and the front exterior areas of the hotel and parking lot.* These cameras should digitally record all transactions, encounters, and happenings to a location off premises that will store the files. This prevents a perpetrator from seizing the hard drive when they flee the hotel and eliminating any visual record of the robbery. Post a notice at the front desk and lobby that announces the use of security cameras throughout that hotel that records to an off-site location. For limited-service and select-service properties, a video monitor should be placed near the front desk so that the clerk on duty may monitor the various cameras. Install a separate video monitor in the back office so that the cameras can continue to be monitored from there as well. This is important for two reasons: 1) Front desk clerks may need to perform tasks in the back office that cannot generally be performed easily at the front desk (i.e., folding laundry, balancing cash drawers, miscellaneous paperwork, etc.). This will enable the clerk to monitor the front desk and lobby without always



standing out front. 2) In the event that an employee needs to seek refuge from a robbery or assailant in the back office, they can watch the camera and determine when the Police have arrived. Then it is safe to emerge. In the situation described above, the Police were forced to kick in the locked door to the back office because the clerk did not know that the robber had fled the hotel or that the Police had arrived.

- *Ensure that the entrances, lobby and front desk areas are well lit.* This will assist video cameras in providing the best quality footage of any criminals and their acts. Remember that robbers want to remain as anonymous as possible.
- *Keep the windows and glass doors to the hotel lobby free of posters, decorations or other materials that may impede the vision from outsiders looking into the hotel.* If guests outside cannot see inside the hotel lobby area, they cannot call for help during a robbery.
- *Install silent panic alarms behind the front desk, in the back office, the accounting office, and also in the hotel manager's office.* Nearly every robbery attempt will occur at one of these locations. The panic alarms should ring directly to the police dispatch center or an alarm monitoring company. Consider providing a wireless panic alarm that a front desk clerk can clip to their belt so they can summon help if not located near a stationary alarm.
- *Create a "safe room" near the front desk where a clerk can seek refuge from assailants or robbers.* This most likely will be the back office or a manager's office. It must be kept unlocked and easily accessible at all times but should be lockable from the inside. The door should be sufficiently sturdy to provide an adequate measure of protection against bullets or attempts to kick open the door. There should be a telephone or a panic alarm located inside so help can be summoned. As previously mentioned, there should also be a video monitor so the clerk can ascertain when Police have arrived. Ideally, the room should have moveable furniture that can be pushed in front of the door to further withstand any attempts at forced entry or bullets fired. Train employees who seek refuge to always lie flat behind furniture in the event the perpetrator has a gun and might choose to fire into the door or walls.
- *Have security personnel stationed in or near the lobby if possible during slow periods.* If your hotel does not have dedicated security personnel, ask local law enforcement to conduct frequent visits to the hotel at random times.
- *Consider locking all hotel entrances as the evening progresses so registered guests must use their room keys to access the building.* New guests who are arriving late will be required to ring the doorbell where the front desk clerk can buzz them in. Train clerks to not buzz anyone in until they can see them through the video camera and they appear to not pose a potential threat.



Tips for surviving a robbery attempt

Train all employees in the following aspects to increase their chances of survival during a robbery attempt:

- *Never approach a person at the front desk if they make you feel uncomfortable or you suspect is a likely robber.* As in the situation cited above, if the person just doesn't look right because of how they are dressed or behaving, do not approach them. If their presence gives you the "willies", trust your instincts and do not approach. Seek refuge or flee the hotel through a back entrance and call the Police. If the person intended no harm, they will not do anything. Remember, you can't be killed or injured if you do not walk into a robbery/potential robbery.
- *Assume that all robbers are armed and will use their weapon if provoked.* Assume that all firearms are loaded. Take no chances.
- *Comply with every instruction of the robber.* Do not fight or give them cause to become upset; otherwise, they will likely resort to violence to get what they want. Repeat the instructions back to the robber before you perform the action. Move slowly and always keep your hands in view. Announce any actions you intend to take. Always give them the money. It is insured and can be replaced. Your life cannot be replaced!
- *Never leave the hotel with a robber.* If they attempt to abduct you during a robbery, fight them all the way. Research statistics show that employees who are abducted during the course of a restaurant or hotel robbery are frequently killed. Abducted hostages are extremely difficult to deal with and slow down a fugitive. If they wanted to kill you to get to the money, they would have already done so, but they didn't. When robbers abduct employees it is as a form of insurance to ensure their safe escape from the scene of a crime. Once the robber evades any Police, the criminal has no use for the abducted employee and will likely kill them in a quiet location so they can move on. ✧

(Dr. William D. Frye is an Associate Professor in the College of Hospitality and Tourism Management at Niagara University where he teaches classes and conducts research in hotel operations, including safety and security matters. E-mail: wfrye@niagara.edu)