



Housekeeping

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

Hotels can learn many lessons from reports of towel and amenity theft

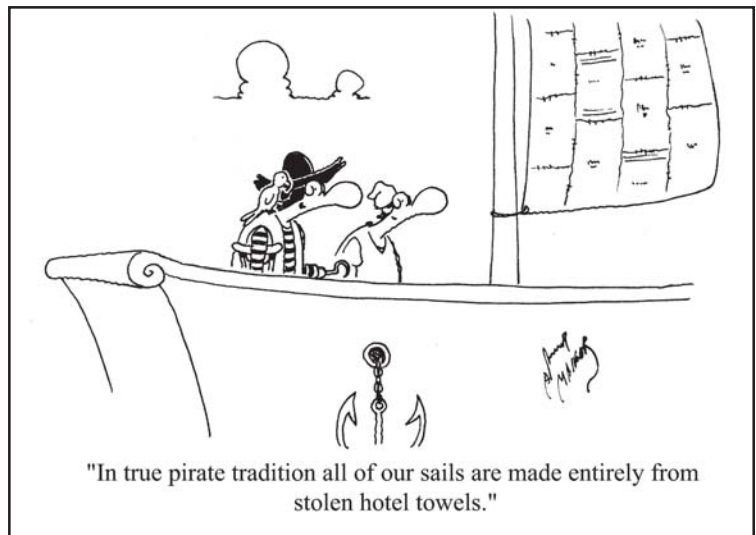
Another great article from *The Rooms Chronicle*®, the #1 journal for hotel rooms management®! ***Important notice: This article may not be reproduced without permission of the publisher or the author.*** College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Niagara University, P.O. Box 2036, Niagara University, NY 14109-2036. Phone: 866-Read TRC. E-mail: editor@roomschronicle.com

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Ever wonder why the replacement expense for housekeeping linens and amenities are so high? Perhaps it is a lack of controls and inventory safeguards that contributes to exorbitant shrinkage of these items. After payroll, typically the highest departmental expense for any housekeeping director is replacement linens and consumable guestroom amenities such as coffee, soap, shampoo, conditioner, body lotion, and even toilet paper. A typical 250 room full-service hotel may have as much as half a million dollars tied up in its housekeeping supplies.

Stories of theft

Sounds crazy? Consider the news report about a family recently vacationing at the Sheraton Moriah Eilat hotel near the Red Sea in Israel this month. After the family returned to their home near Tel Aviv, police searched their house in connection with a drug raid only to find that the family had made off with 63 towels bearing the hotel's logo, 370 bags of Turkish coffee, and a multitude of other toiletry amenities from the Sheraton hotel. Quoting one police officer, "The quantity of towels and other items was so large, we needed another patrol car to move it to the station."



The mother rendered the following incredulous statement, "I didn't steal the towels and the coffee. I took them like everyone else who returns from a stay at a hotel." Apparently, towel theft in Israel is rampant (if not customary) as it is estimated that between 300,000 and 400,000 towels are taken each year from Israeli hotels alone. When notified by police, the hotel manager conceded that the hotel was unaware that so many towels or other amenities were missing. It is believed that the majority of pilfered items were taken from an unsecured housekeeping closet.

But theft of hotel items is not confined just to Israeli hotels. Some hotel guests in the United States are checking out with their bags packed a little fuller than when they checked in. The American Hotel & Lodging Association has estimated that travelers steal as much as \$100 million worth of hotel goods each year. This figure does not include the allotment of complimentary amenity items placed in a guest's room during their stay, but it does incorporate items taken from storage closets and housekeeping carts.

During an interview in 2004, Mark Snyder, senior vice-president of brand management for Holiday Inn in the United States, estimated that 560,000 towels are stolen each year from Holiday Inn hotels. In fact, the theft was so widespread that Holiday Inn held a "Towel Amnesty Day" for guilt-ridden guests who had absconded with an iconic green-striped towel from a Holiday Inn property. In exchange for sharing their Holiday Inn memories to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Kemmons Wilson's innovative hotel concept, travelers were granted forgiveness for their towel transgressions. These memories were compiled into a full-color coffee table book, *About the Towels, We Forgive You: Absorbing Tales of Borrowed Towels*, that traces a 52-year history of the Holiday Inn company through stories from guests who had "borrowed" its towels.

Anti-theft practices

Realizing that theft of housekeeping supplies is costly and detrimental to the department's bottom line, what can housekeeping managers do to minimize these losses? Here are some suggestions:

- *Keep housekeeping closets and storage rooms locked at all times when they are not being accessed by authorized personnel.* As the Israeli story above illustrates, if given the opportunity to raid supplies from a closet, some guests will seize it. Restrict access to these storage areas only to those housekeeping personnel assigned to that floor. Consider eliminating metal keys for storerooms and replacing them with electronic card key systems so access can be better managed, recorded, and investigated if theft were to occur. Keep only the necessary supplies and amenities in each floor's housekeeping closet to accommodate that floor's guestrooms for one or two days. Otherwise, if an employee fails to secure the closet, the hotel could realize a significant loss of resources.
- *Similarly, do not allow room attendants to leave fully-stocked housekeeping carts in the hallway unattended, if possible.* While it is a recommended practice for safety reasons that room attendants close the door to the guestroom while servicing it, it will only be easier for guests (or non-guests) walking by to help themselves to items off of an unsecure housekeeper's cart. Therefore, do not place extensive amounts of amenity items or linens on the cart if it will be left unattended. Employ a procedure where a houseman will restock each housekeepers' cart at frequent intervals through the day. Or, consider investing in room attendants' carts with locking covers, drawers, and panels. In short, if it's not in plain sight, it is less likely to "take flight".
- *Only replace bed and bath linens on stayover rooms on a "one-for-one" basis.* If a guest requests extra sheets or towels, these extra linens should be recorded in the daily linen/amenity disbursement log for special requests which is maintained in the Housekeeping office for full-service hotels and at the front desk for limited-service and select-service hotels.
- *Have room attendants count the number of bed and bath linens retrieved from rooms that have checked out.* They should immediately report any discrepancies to their supervisor or the front desk for follow up, as warranted.
- *Use separate color towels for the hotel's swimming pool, spa, and workout facility so they are not confused with guestroom linens.* Sometimes guests will bring pool towels back to their guestroom, which can defeat the guestroom towel count process if they appear similar.
- *Do not place the hotel logo on hotel linens, ashtrays, or bathrobes.* Studies have revealed that this is the primary reason these items are taken by guests as souvenirs. Instead, employ unmonogrammed or non-logoed items so guests will be less likely to keep them as souvenirs of their hotel stay. The reason that Holiday Inn towels were so popular was because of their unique green stripe and sculpted Holiday Inn logo emblazoned on the towel.
- *Conduct monthly linen and amenity inventories to monitor usage.* Keep continuous records of these inventories to analyze for spikes in use or replacement that are not warranted by a correlated occupancy. Maintain a "linen discard record" for sheets and towels removed from service due to wear and tear or irreparable soilage. Have different employees conduct the inventories at the end of each month to ensure accurate accounts that are free from collusion, and never permit an employee to count the inventory supplies on any floor or section they are usually assigned to.
- *Offer hotel linens, coffee, and other guestroom amenity items for sale in the hotel gift shop.* This will provide guests the option to purchase amenity items they wish to take home with them as souvenirs or gifts without resorting to theft, especially monogrammed or logoed items. Place a notice in the guestroom that these items are available from purchase through the gift shop, Front Desk or Housekeeping.
- *Do not permit hotel employees to possess hotel assets off property.* Do not sell or give unserviceable linens to employees for their personal use. Donate used linens and amenity items to local homeless or battered women's shelters instead. Require that employees show the contents of their personal bags to Security or Management when departing the hotel. ✧

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