



Guest Services

by Todd Seiders, CLSD

Eight steps to prevent undercover reporters seeking to violate guests' privacy

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On July 24th and October 5th AH&LA sent media advisories highlighting the widespread coverage of videos taken of ESPN reporter Erin Andrews reportedly via a hotel peephole, as well as the arrest of a man and the ensuing scrutiny on divulged guest information and privacy protocol. Subsequent to the arrest it was discovered that the suspect allegedly asked for a room next to Erin Andrews, on multiple occasions at different hotels that the reporter was scheduled to stay. On more than one occasion the stalker's request was granted without question by the hotels.

As a result of the unauthorized video release on the Internet and the suspect's demonstrated pattern of stalking Ms. Andrews, several news media organizations are calling or visiting hotels and asking for specific rooms, next to specific registered guests (typically undercover media producers posing as registered guests) to see what security measures are in place at the hotel. Commonly referred to as "Gotcha Journalism," various media outlets have resorted to these stings to entrap hoteliers doing something wrong and to boost their viewership ratings.

On October 12th the television magazine *Inside Edition* aired a segment in which they visited several hotels to reserve a room next to an employee who was posing as a hotel guest. In each case, the hotel was unaware of the purported sting operation. In each case, without challenging the inquirer, the reservationist complied.

So, what can and should hotels do to avoid falling prey to investigative reporters, and more importantly, ensure the safety and privacy of their guests? Here are eight steps to get started:

1. *Immediately start discussing this case with the hotel's front desk and reservations staff.* Make sure that everyone realizes the widespread magnitude and fallout of the privacy violation of Ms. Andrews. If you need more info, "Google" Erin Andrews, and you can get all the latest news from the Internet. In fact, just by searching the keywords "hotel" and "peeping tom" more than 213,000 hits will be revealed in Google, almost all referring to the Erin Andrews incident. And of course the name of the hotel where the incident occurred appears in nearly every hit.
2. *Revisit basic hotel security and privacy procedures, and do some staff training at your hotel.* Now more than ever it is appropriate to ask more questions of guests, challenge suspicious people on your property, and evaluate your security cameras, security policies, locking entrance doors, elevator and stairwell access, etc. And expect the stings by investigative journalists to continue into the foreseeable future.



3. *Empower hotel employees to challenge requests for rooms next to other guests.* Hotel staff members should ask the requester why they would like a specific room, and what their relationship is with the person they are requesting to be housed adjacent to. Do not grant the special room request without contacting the other guest and securing their permission; ask them if they know the person who is requesting the special room. We all hate to say “NO” to anyone for anything, but times have changed, and a hotel must take a more proactive stance towards guest safety and privacy.
4. *To the extent possible, do not block VIP guests or celebrities in rooms until the morning of arrival.* Only advise non-management employees about the name and room number of the celebrity on a “need to know basis” and never in advance of arrival. This will help prevent the identity and location of the celebrity from becoming known outside the hotel and individuals seeking accommodations near the celebrity’s guestroom.
5. *Be more curious and suspicious, and allow staff members some leeway in also being more careful.* Do not criticize or punish employees for being too safe. Remember, it is a different world out there from a few years ago. Safety and privacy must be the first priority of every hotel nowadays. Guests expect nothing less.
6. *If a guest complains, IT DOESN’T MEAN YOU DID SOMETHING WRONG!* As a veteran risk management director for a major hospitality insurer, I have to keep reminding my clients of this fact. Sometimes guests “think” they know a law or industry standard, when in fact many do not know what they are talking about. Hotel employees have every right to ask more questions of a guest who is requesting a room next to someone else, to refuse to connect a caller to a room number where they do not know the registered guest’s name, or to ask questions of a guest loitering around the hotel.
7. *Change your mindset from an immediate “YES” to a more carefully thought out response to guest requests that places safety and privacy at the forefront.* Start evaluating guest requests more carefully, and how they may apply to guest security issues. “YES” is always the appropriate response if the request does not compromise the safety and privacy of others or the hotel. If it does, then the correct response is a courteous “NO” with the offer of a suitable alternative (if possible).
8. *Remember, Management retains the right to ask any news media personnel off hotel premises.* You do not “have” to answer questions, especially if the media “ambushes” you with cameras in your face. If you find someone walking around your property doing a secret undercover investigation, you can order them off your property immediately. Hotels are considered private property and Management retains complete control of who can and cannot be on your property, as long as such ejection does not violate regulations, statutes or ordinances designed to eliminate illegal discrimination in hotels. Train all employees to refer all media requests only to the hotel’s designated spokesperson and discipline or terminate employees who fail to comply with the workplace rule. Finally, call the police for assistance if media refuse to comply with requests to leave the hotel’s premises. ✧

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