



# Risk Management

by Todd Seiders

## Beware of requests for guest information...especially if it is phoned in

*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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I have received a couple of calls from hotels asking for assistance with law enforcement requests for guest information over the phone.

The first instance, the caller identified himself as a local police department detective, using a real police detective's name. He left the actual police department's return phone number. The hotel employee became suspicious because the caller was aggressive and demanding, so she told the caller she would have to call him back. When the hotel employee called the "detective" back, she actually spoke to the real police department, but was told the named detective had retired several months ago and was no longer working as a police officer.

In the second instance, the call was made to a Hilton Hotel and the caller identified themselves as a "DEA" agent, calling from Texas. The "agent" was asking that guest records be faxed to him for an investigation. The hotel employee wasn't sure what to do and told the "agent" the hotel would call him back. When the hotel employee called the "agent" back, the phone was answered with an ordinary "hello", and not any official DEA greeting. The hotel employee told the "agent" the hotel would need a subpoena or court order before it could release any guest information. The "agent" told the hotel employee that they had "checked with the Hilton Corporate Office in Beverly Hills" and that the corporate Hilton office said it was OK for them to fax the guest information to him.

This Hilton hotel is a franchise, so I'm sure if corporate Hilton was in fact contacted, they would have informed the "agent" that Corporate would have no control over the franchised hotel, and to contact the franchise owners. The hotel employee contacted me and we agreed this entire story was suspicious. We did not release any information in both of the above situations and neither hotel has been contacted again for the information.

*Be very suspicious of law enforcement requests for information over the telephone.*

Given the value of personal information in today's society, hoteliers have a responsibility to safeguard guest information and not release it to outside parties (including the police) unless so directed in writing. Remember the general rule: Law enforcement must have a warrant, subpoena or court order commanding the hotel to release guest information. If you get a request for guest information over the phone, be polite but simply say:

"I cannot release any information over the telephone. If you show up at the hotel with proper law enforcement identification, and a warrant, subpoena, or court order, we will gladly assist you with whatever you need."

Do not accept faxed warrants, subpoenas or court orders, and do not be intimidated if the caller states, "I can arrest you for not giving me the information." Immediately notify your hotel's legal contact and corporate risk management department if you get a request for information from law enforcement.

It seems we are getting more and more of these "fake" requests for information over the telephone. Let's not be complicit in their efforts. ✧

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### Did you know?

"Pretexting" is a new term being used ostensibly these days to describe the act of pretending to be someone who you are not by telling an untruth, or creating deception. The practice of "pretexting" as it relates to the hotel industry typically involves tricking someone into disclosing personal information of a guest, with the scammer pretending to be the guest (such as requesting copies of charge receipts and folios for previous stays). While this act may constitute fraud, proving that someone committed an illegal act of this nature is very difficult, since most requests for information will be via fax or telephone. Today's technological environment of untraceable "throw-away" cell phones only assists those who seek to obtain personal information of guests without risking divulging their own real identity. Hotel managers should be cognizant of this potential for fraud and only release charge and folio information to guests once their true identity has been verified.