



Front Office

by Samantha Marks

Tracking early arrivals increases guest satisfaction and alleviates front desk stress

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It is typical for hotels to experience high levels of check-ins and check-outs during an average week. Depending on whether the hotel in question caters mostly to the business traveler or the leisure vacationer will determine which days of the week this occurrence will most likely happen. However, when hotels are in full swing with wedding guests, sport fans, and group conventions, the chances of seeing tight guestroom turns and busy lobbies increase tremendously.

These wedding guests and sport fans enjoy the luxury of being able to check in earlier than the typical 3:00pm arrival hour and have access to their rooms in order to prepare for the evening festivities. With the group convention guests, they like to be able to unwind before having to attend the long day of meetings ahead. Mix those combinations with the average business travelers that are staying one or two nights and the result will be a very busy hotel and front desk. When the hotel has approximately 200 check-outs that are not obligated to vacate their guestrooms until 11a.m. or 12noon, and another 50 to 100 guests trying to check in by 1p.m., accommodating each and every guest seems like *mission impossible*. And since the ultimate goal of all hotels is to maintain 100% guest satisfaction on a daily basis, this prime example leaves the hotels with some hard challenges to face.

The point of this article is not, however, to give hotels a magic solution that will guarantee that satisfaction for all guests and to allow front desks to check these guests in early. It is understandable that the hotel will be unable to accommodate many of these early arrivals due to the time it takes to have the previous guest check-out, the room attendant clean the guestroom, and the housekeeping supervisor inspect the accommodation. Instead, the object of this article is to promote and encourage hotels to have a system in place to track all guests trying to check in before the published arrival hour and before the hotel has a clean and vacant room available.

“Queuing up” early arrivals

The proposed system should be tailored to each property so that it works in every environment. If the hotel is one that runs their daily operations with printed registration cards, it may be as simple as noting the time of check-in on that registration card, filing it in a specific location, and notifying Housekeeping of the guest's desire to check in. If the hotel has a computer system with the capability of tracking these guests, the system may be something else entirely. Some hotel Property Management Systems have added features incorporated into their daily functions that will allow hotels to track or “queue” all claimed room reservations and run reports showing how long each guest has been waiting.



When implementing a new procedure into the daily operation, the management team needs to evaluate every aspect of that system to ensure that there are no loose ends. The first and foremost consideration when implementing a system that tracks all early check-ins is to determine which guests the hotel should queue and in which order. The system needs to be uniform so that every front desk clerk is doing the same task and that no one is confused with the process.



For example, it appears best to queue only room reservations where guests have physically approached the check-in desk and tried to get their room keys. This decision will mean that communication between the Front Desk and Housekeeping departments is much simpler because both departments understand that all requested rooms in that queue represent people that are actually waiting for their room versus a guest who called and inquired about an early check-in. In addition, by queuing rooms for guests that have actually approached the desk, the Front Desk can ensure that the first come first served policy is upheld.

In all reality, it should be that first guest that came to check in that receives their room first due to the fact that they have been waiting the longest. However, V.I.P.s and upper-tier loyalty club members might be accorded higher priority; this is a call for Management to determine.

Pre-register the guest now

Once the guest approaches the registration desk and attempts to get access to their room, it is the front desk clerk that will move on to the next step. That next step could be to simply inform the guest that there are no clean rooms available and to notify Housekeeping to clean a specific room, before allowing the guest to walk away from the desk.

Another option is to take it one step further in guest service. The front desk clerk could be instructed to not only inform the guest of the lack of room availability and their intent to notify Housekeeping, but to also continue with the check-in process as normal, minus actually issuing room keys to the guest. This would mean that the front desk clerk would check the guest's ID, confirm the number of nights, confirm the room type and rate, obtain credit or payment, and inquire or advise the guest of any property-specific items such as parking. While this step seems time consuming during a heavy check-in time, it may ultimately save the hotel time later on when the same guest tries an hour later to check in again and does not have to wait in a line to have the information taken at that time.

If the hotel wishes to go yet another step further in customer service, they can instruct front desk clerks to ask guests being placed in queue if they would desire a phone call to their cell phone when their room is ready for check-in. There are some guests that really welcome this approach as a matter of certainty and convenience while others will say it is not necessary but will leave the registration desk with a positive feeling knowing that it was offered.

Wait or a call back?

Each front desk clerk should identify which early guests intend to wait in the lobby until their room is ready and which guests have things to do and intend to just come back at a later time. This may help the hotel successfully clear the lobby of waiting patrons and also accommodate those that are returning later for their room by placing their reservations in queue by demand.

Nothing contributes to an atmosphere of pressure, bitterness, and displeasure than a lobby full of waiting guests who all want the same thing and want it now. By permitting guests to go about their other business (dining, shopping, sightseeing, etc.) with the certainty that their guestroom will be ready when they return later can deflate the potential pressure on front desk personnel, minimize the number of waiting patrons congregating near the front desk, and signal to guests a respect for their personal time. By continuing to place reservations in queue despite the guest stating that they won't be staying in the lobby to wait will only benefit the hotel in the long run.

Another benefit of tracking waiting guests assists in the overbooking dilemma. Since most hotels overbook (if possible) on a daily basis in order to achieve that "perfect sell", Management can evaluate who they may have to walk, if in that kind of situation, by looking at the reservations not in queue. Therefore, the hotel will not accidentally walk someone that has already tried to check-in. This would save front desk personnel from an embarrassing situation and the hotel from a possible negative online review.



Training and coordination

Now that all the basics of the system have been evaluated, and decided, the procedure is ready to be implemented. The hotel now has to face the hardest obstacle yet — training the staff. Training all the users of the system is just as important as deciding that this system needs to be implemented in the first place because the success of this system and the overall operation of the hotel is only as strong as the weakest player. Hence, the management team needs to conduct consistent and thorough training of not only the Front Office staff but the Housekeeping staff as well.

Each and every one of these employees plays a significant role to understand the object of the queued reservations and being able to complete the tasks assigned to them. For the Front Office, the staff needs to understand what they are doing in regards to the actual check-in with the guest, placing the room in queue, and gaining a phone number for a call back. The Front Office needs to also be responsible for constantly checking the queues to see if a room has become available, completing the final check-in process by making the keys (since the check-in was completed earlier, the guest does not have to be present to make keys), and appointing someone to be responsible for calling guests. For Housekeeping, once the room is in queue, they need to make sure a housekeeper is being assigned to clean that particular room type next and then, after the room has been inspected, the room needs to be turned “clean and vacant” in the system, allowing the Front Desk to make those keys and call the guest back.

Conclusion

At the end of the implementation, the hotel will not only have a new system in place, but they will be better prepared for their busy Summers and tight guestroom turns. This system will allow the guests that attempt to check-in first to receive their rooms first and it allows for the front desk clerks to take control of guest service standards and “WOW” the guest.

Most guests won't be upset that the room is not ready prior to check-in time but they will be most definitely impressed by the steps that a registration clerk takes in order to get them a room in a timely fashion. The guest service of this entire operation will make an impact on the guest so that, more times than not, they will rave about the hotel and encourage their friends to stay. And absolutely no hotel would refuse those end results. ✧

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