



Front Office

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

What are your front desk clerks watching? And who is watching them?

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Yogi Berra, the Yankee ballplayer, pseudo-celebrity and consummate philosopher had it right when he quipped, “You can observe a lot by watching.” Taking a common-sense lesson from this axiom, hotel owners and senior management should be more appropriately asking themselves, “Who’s watching my hotel?” Better yet, “Who’s watching out for my hotel?”

Since hotels are “round the clock” operations, Management certainly can’t be in all places at once to supervise personnel, assess potential threats to or from guests or immediately recognize hotel vulnerabilities. While many luxury and full-service hotels rely extensively on in-house security officers, an assigned manager-on-duty, or even close-circuit television to serve as the eyes and, perhaps, ears of senior management in their absence, limited-service and select-service lodging properties typically lack sufficient employment depth to carry out these functions. But one commonality remains among nearly all hotel properties regardless of size or service level; most hotel front desks are staffed 24 hours a day.

Aside from checking guests in and out, performing cashier duties, conducting the night audit, serving as a make-shift concierge and PBX operator, setting up and breaking down the breakfast bar, and perhaps even folding bath linens from the on-premise laundry which might be located behind the front desk at a limited-service property, front desk agents must fulfill the most important role that exists – to mind “the store” – or in this case, the hotel. In most limited-service and select-service hotels this means to watch the lobby and the coming and going of all persons, as well as to monitor the many closed-circuit cameras that may be recording the various hotel entrances, parking areas, and public spaces. Sounds pretty straightforward and simple right? Not quite.

In an effort to be more productive and expense conscious, hotel managers sometimes expect too much from desk personnel to the point where this most important surveillance function is frequently compromised, and so too is the safety of the guests and employees and the potential security of the property. In my extensive travels as the executive editor of *The Rooms Chronicle*® for the past five years, I can recall hundreds of situations where hotel lobbies have been unattended, front desks have been unstaffed for prolonged periods of time, repeated internal calls to the hotel switchboard have gone unanswered, and complete strangers have congregated near the front desk in bewilderment wondering if the hotel has become a ghost ship abandoned by all who might be employed there. What is a guest to think about this situation? And equally significant, what might criminals start to think?

If these aforementioned circumstances sound remotely like your hotel, don’t be surprised one day if you come to work to find the lobby furniture missing, complaints about vandalized cars, or even that no one is working the desk or answering the phone. When a front desk clerk’s attention is diverted away from the lobby, bad things can happen. And to make matters worse, many hotels make a practice of only scheduling a single employee for the evening or graveyard shift. Think about it for a moment, who calls the police when that sole employee is assaulted or worse? Where is their “back-up”?

Every limited-service hotel manager’s nightmare would probably entail arriving to work at 7am only to find an abandoned lobby. As you step behind the desk or into the back office, you find your night auditor unconscious or perhaps dead, laying in a pool of blood. Or what if there is no employee anywhere to be found? Does this mean that your night auditor was kidnapped? Did he quit in the middle of his shift without informing you? Did he ever make it to work to start his shift? You have no idea what happened.

This is why it is imperative to always schedule at least two employees for every shift, regardless of occupancy or hotel size. Every employee must have another who can watch his back or call for help. No desk clerk should be assigned tasks that will leave the lobby, front desk and switchboard unstaffed.

Inevitably, front desk clerks at limited-service hotels will be called upon to unplug guestroom toilets, help guests with luggage, deliver extra towels, cribs or rollaway beds, or to lock down the indoor swimming pool. But even the simple fulfillment of these tasks leaves the hotel vulnerable and the lobby unattended if that employee works alone. Never schedule employees to work alone, under any circumstances. It will cost more in payroll expense, but you can sleep easy knowing that someone is watching

your employee who is supposed to be watching your hotel. No amount of payroll savings can offset the negative publicity associated with a violent crime that occurs on property, or the guilt that a manager will forever bear knowing that he or she should not have staffed an employee to work alone. And don't forget to notify your hotel's insurance agent about your new two-deep staffing policy; the hotel will likely benefit from a rate reduction as a result. ✧

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