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11 PMS Innovations

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Hoteliers are expecting more and more from their property-management systems (PMS). As such, the most innovative solutions are those robust systems with add-on modules that take care of nearly every aspect of a hotel's operations, from reservations to food and beverage to the point of sale. This month, Hospitality Technology interviewed an array of hotel technology managers to discover what top innovations in PMS are exciting them. Identified here, in no particular order, are some of the most compelling PMS innovations from 2007.

1. Web-Based or remote applications.

Michael Walzl, general manager of Phoenix Inn Suites' Beaverton, Oregon Hotel in the Willamette Valley, says that one of the biggest innovations in PMS is Web-based and remote applications. Phoenix Inn Suites uses the Novexsys system designed by Centrada Solutions (www.centrada.com) that is accessed via the Web, while the inventory and data are stored remotely. "This alleviates much of the concern over crashing systems and lost data," says Walzl. "Also by being Web-based we are able to access the system from anywhere with an Internet connection. This is a major sales and service advantage over the old bulky property management systems of yesteryear."

2. Managing multiple properties on one database.

Lisa Jane Wheaton, director of revenue management for Vintage Hotels is delighted that her Maestro PMS by Northwind (www.maestropms.com/4D), connects all three Niagara-on-the-Lake properties, allowing for sharing of guest profiles, customer relationship management and property cross-selling.

"The system also allows us to generate the spending patterns of our guests. For instance, some guests book the spa while others opt for bike tours. Knowing this information and having it readily available allows us to target their interest with personalized marketing," explains Wheaton.

3. Integrated online booking engines.

New online booking systems are integrated with labor and yield management to sell rooms up to the last minute, explains Wheaton. This helps hoteliers maximize sales and have an accurate sense of availability at all times.

"I can increase room revenue and reduce labor costs," shares Wheaton. Maestro's on-line real-time global distribution service (GDS) reservation engine provides access to a wide range of on-line distribution channels, ranging from direct GDS connectivity to travel portals and on-line travel agencies.

4. Connecting on-property and third-party attractions.

When ancillary systems speak to each other, great things happen, says Dominic Van Nes, vice president of information services for Pebble Beach Resorts. Pebble Beach's three properties can now integrate spa, dining and other ancillary activities such as golf as part of one mainframe database using the SMS Host suite from PAR Springer-Miller (www.springermiller.com).

"The system allows us to create an individualized itinerary. So when a guest calls to book a room, he or she can also book a tee time and make dinner reservations all in one phone call," explains Van Nes. "I can provide a more personal level of service and wow the customer. We can even book third-party activities such as kayaking for the guest."

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5. Self-service kiosks.

Kevin Drinan, technology manager for Rosen Centre Hotel, a Rosen Hotels convention property in Orlando, Florida, launched a successful pilot program using V1 Kiosks from Agilysys (www.agilysys.com) in March 2007. Guests can check-in and check-out by themselves, avoiding long lines during busy periods. "Usage has been at 1 percent to 2 percent so far and the goal is to get up to 4 percent to 5 percent," says Drinan. Rosen Center has two kiosks at the front desk where guests can check-in and get room keys in fewer than 45 seconds. "It depends on the hotel's management style," adds Drinan. "Some hotels want that face-to-face interaction so they can have that warm and fuzzy feeling with the guest. For us, a convention hotel, we want to provide fast, easy and convenient check-in and check-out for a large amount of guests."



here.

6. Handheld devices.

Handheld devices linked directly to the PMS are also helping to facilitate fast, easy and convenient check-in for properties catering to large amounts of guests. Kris Singleton, IT vice president of business solutions for MGM Mirage, says that the Mirage Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas is almost always at 98 percent occupancy. With a company this size -- operating more than 20 properties, some with up to 5,000 rooms each -- it becomes a necessity to quickly move through long lines while preserving the face-to-face interaction. Handhelds help them do that. The handhelds interact with peripherals, such as printers, and are equipped with the latest wireless security.

7. Centralization.

MGM Mirage properties use a combination of Micros' Opera PMS (www.micros.com), Agilysys and their own proprietary system called Stratus. One of the innovations Singleton says she's currently working on is total centralization; that is, linking everything from in-room controls such as lights, TV and drapes, to back-office systems such as accounting, all to the PMS. "I'd like to see hotel accounts and receivables more integrated with the financial system. PMS captures room retail charges, room or show comps, and dining charges, but right now that information is entered manually into the financial system. I'm working to get all these things integrated," explains Singleton.

8. Cellular phone interaction.

Another way hotels are providing personalized service is by taking direct advantage of the guest's cell phone. Messages can be sent from the PMS to alert guests of when their room is ready, show times, dinner reservation confirmation or check-out times.

What's more amazing is new technology that allows the guest's cell phone to be used as their room key or guest room phone (to call room service, the front desk, etc.). A radio frequency (RF) chip in the room door will capture the signal from the cell phone once programmed to do so, explains Singleton. "We are currently working on this at MGM. It may require us to attach a sticker with the barcode to the cell phone. We're working that out."

9. E-mail.

No one prints out confirmation letters any more, making snail-mail unnecessary. Faxes... who uses those? E-mail is a must.

10. Guest privacy and encryption.

Privacy of data is no longer an option. Systems must be designed from the ground up to protect guest privacy. Van Nes explains that actual credit card numbers are no longer stored in the PMS. "All card numbers are encrypted and very few people have access to a guest's personal details. We are very guarded about our client list."

11. Easy to maintain and use.

Today's PMSs no longer require hotels to purchase new equipment. They no longer require high-priced IT staffers to maintain systems and perform backups because these functions are handled by the service provider. Most PMS manufacturers allow for free upgrades so

you never have to be worried about being behind a version, explains Walzl. Also, user interfaces are simple, from both usability and training standpoints; this back-to-basics philosophy is making PMS software as easy to use as Internet applications. This approach is required to maintain the attention of today's users. And with easier to understand user interfaces, minimal training requirements, and no new hardware, there's hardly a reason to send people on property to install. It's doesn't get easier than that.

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