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On Property

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Add-modules and new features boost the functionality of property management systems

What does your property management system (PMS) say about your hotel? Is it lean and slick with only the minimum components necessary to get the job done? Or is it teeming with modules and add-ons that can compensate for any need that might arise?

If there's one thing today's property systems have, it's options. From top-of-the-line accounting systems to spa management software, there's nary a situation that a modern PMS solution can't handle. So if your archaic legacy system is sputtering, now might be the best time to upgrade with a few fancy modules.

"The most important thing about a PMS is cost and productivity efficiency," says Jean Awenenti, distribution technology manager at Wyndham Worldwide, which runs Micros (www.micros.com) systems at all of its properties. "A good PMS allows a property to manage its booking in a way that minimizes the amount of staff at a property that's needed to run its systems. You don't want to have a PMS that's going to cost an arm and a leg to implement across a property. You want something that will be cost beneficial for a number of years."

You also want a system that can manage a plethora of guest data, making life easier for the customer and the hotel.

Fairmont Hotel Company, owner of luxury hotels such as the New York Plaza, settled on Micros-Fidelio's Opera PMS solution and integrated it into all 50 of its properties. "Every property management system in every hotel is exactly the same," says Vineet Gupta, senior vice president of IT at Fairmont. "It's enabled us to build applications on top of the PMS systems that we manage centrally."

The company decided to build its own modules that work seamlessly with Opera. Applications include a restaurant management system that gathers customer information from the PMS and provides it to restaurant staff for reservations and bookings. With the restaurant module, reservations to the onsite dining facilities can be made anywhere, any time. A business traveler can feasibly plot out dinner appointments at various Fairmont properties across the country through one system, and all of his preferences will be recorded.

How does the module know what the guest wants? That's the key to most new PMS solutions. A central PMS database stores tons of information on guests: what room they are staying in, likes, dislikes, food tastes, towel preferences — it's all managed and shared between the hotels.

Time out for a spa

Not all guests are content spending their leisure time eating or sauntering in their hotel rooms. As hotels expand, so do the activities offered on the properties — the most popular being the spa. Rather than run a separate reservations/POS system in the spa, hotels are investing in modules that allow the spa system to communicate with the property management software.

At Campbell's Resort in Chelan, Washington, a Maestro (www.maestropms.com) add-on module tethers the spa reservation system to the front-end PMS. All charges made in the facility get billed directly to the guest's folio, creating a history of what the guest is utilizing regardless of where they are on the property.

"Maestro has all kinds of features in the PMS that allow us to pay better attention to our customers," says Art Campbell, president of Campbell's Resort. "We can put notes into a database that automatically pop up when a guest makes a reservation, and these comments also appear at the spa. It really allows us to tailor service to each individual." Maestro enhanced its spa program with a room-at-a-glance feature that shows which guests are in which massage room, how much time they've booked, and whether they are late for an appointment.

Not to be outdone, The Breakers Palm Beach added SpaSoft (www.springermiller.com), a complete reservation module that transfers all information directly to the PMS, allowing hotel management to work with only one accounting package. "This is very important when you are trying to maintain a full database, and to meet the needs of the guests because it's much harder to manage two databases with information on what the guests like," explains Barbara Gerth, director of internal audits at the 569-room luxury hotel.

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Web ready

One way to boost your PMS is by installing a Web component. For example, Canadian-based Pomeroy Group invested in a PMS solution that would allow guests to go online and book rooms at its 16 properties. "We found that our Web site was getting lots of hits from people, and we were getting a lot of e-mails from people requesting rooms," says Susie Goodwin, IS manager of the Pomeroy Group.

The company chose MSI's (www.msisolutions.com) WinPM system, a versatile Web booking system that is tailored for smaller companies that have a mix of branded and non-branded hotels. With the system, guests can access the hotel's PMS through a virtual private network and can actually see the hotel's inventory in real time.



[here](#).

"With other kinds of systems you have to manage your inventory externally; with this one, the management is right inside the PMS," Goodwin says. "So, we don't have to retrain managers to a whole new system." Guests also have the convenience of booking their next stay through the Internet connection in their hotel room rather than waiting in line for the front desk clerk.

The Phoenix Inn Suites recently hired Centrada Solutions (www.centrra.com) to replace its outdated management system with a Web-based PMS system. The hotel is planning to install a two-way interface that allows for live updates on its reservation system. "Before, we had to have reservations sent to us from the GDS into our e-mail and then we had to manually feed them into our system," says Cindee Stinton-Brown, general manager of the Phoenix Inn. With the old system, it might take a few hours to receive online reservations. "By that time, I could have sold out whatever room type a guest had booked, or a guest would call and ask a question about a reservation, and I wouldn't have that order yet," she says. Now information is immediately available.

"It's all about guest service and making sure that we provide guests with what they are asking for," Stinton-Brown says. "You want to make sure that you individualize every guest to their preferences." With the new system, the hotel will be able to track data for each customer. This includes anything from towel preferences to allergies. "We can set up a room to the guest's specifications before they even arrive," Stinton-Brown says. "With this system, guests know that they can trust us to have what they need."

Another benefit will be the ability for the offsite accounting department to access financial reports without having hotel management manually plugging data in every day. "I could be sitting at home and if a desk clerk is having an issue, I can view the situation on my home computer and walk her through a problem remotely," Stinton-Brown says. "We only have 11 properties — we are not the Marriott or the Hilton, so anything we can do to step up and customize our service, the better it is for our guests — even if we have to work twice as hard."

When in doubt, upgrade

Rather than add new modules, some property management systems can simply be modified to meet growing needs. The MSI system at Austin Summerfield Suites has been upgraded to track a number of functions including direct billing and long-stay guests. One option that many hotels said they were looking for in their PMS program is city billing, a service that allows guests to charge a stay directly to their company through the city ledger/accounts payable portion of the system.

Another accounting function allows management to go into any closed folio (no matter how far back) and make adjustments or corrections. "You don't have to create a whole new folio to make changes, which also keeps paperwork cleaner for accounting," says John Sweetland, general manager of the Austin Summerfield Suites by Hyatt. "It makes it a lot more user friendly for us, and it makes it more customer friendly for the guest."

Steppin' up

The Breakers has been using an Agilysys (www.agilysys.com) lodging management system since the 1980s. Since the system integrates with all future add-on components, the hotel has only been updating modules. Stepping into the 20th century, The Breakers recently added Spacelock, a door-locking system that is controlled through an interface with the PMS system. Keys are generated upon check-in, and the system controls the length of time the keys will be valid and tracks what guests go in and out of the room. This is a huge technological leap for The Breakers, which upgraded from a cumbersome manual key system.

So what took so long for the upgrade? The Breakers was first established in 1896, so updates to its technology infrastructure are difficult, says Gerth. "Because, we had to go through structural renovations, we had to change out the infrastructure and wiring and cabling to meet the technology demands."

The hotel also uses Agilysys's data imaging component to control all report archiving so that all files, folios, account receiving statements and reports are backed-up nightly to a hard drive. "We are not printing any paper anymore," Gerth says. The move was made for environmental purposes and because most employees prefer working on a computer versus hunting down a paper report. "This system is much more convenient, especially if you are handling guest issues or assisting a guest, to have everything at your fingertips," Gerth says. "It's also very efficient for the business operations and is providing the next level of guest service."



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