

TECHNOLOGY KEEPING HOSPITALITY **TRULY HOSPITABLE**

The digital age has changed the way people communicate, discover new things and conduct business. What were considered cutting-edge technologies 10 years ago today are ubiquitous, from Wi-Fi everywhere to streaming video and music. As such, consumers expect a certain level of technology presence wherever they go. That includes the hospitality industry.

Both business and pleasure travelers expect to be able to not just access the Internet, but to do so wirelessly — and have a connection strong enough to enable them to work without interruption, video chat with others, or listen to their favorite radio station via web stream. Dead spots or slow connections are no longer acceptable in today's technology-centric environment.

Similarly, the advent of cloud-based technologies offers hotels the ability to exceed guest expectations for customer service and user experience. Hotels must have the necessary bandwidth to enable such technologies and perform their back-office operations seamlessly and without interruption. Having the right connectivity portfolio that provides robust bandwidth to meet all needs, from operations to the guest experience, is a must for hotels that want to stay relevant today and meet technology needs in the future.

MEETING CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS

These days, guests check into hotels expecting, at the very least, a strong Wi-Fi connection. And a growing number are looking for that Wi-Fi to be free of charge: Eighty-two percent of respondents to an Accenture survey say in-room Wi-Fi is important, and 66 percent said property-wide Wi-Fi is important in their booking decisions.¹

However, it's no longer enough for a hotel to offer a broadband connection and movies on demand — or even Wi-Fi. Today's technology-savvy guests want a robust wireless connection throughout a facility, no matter how large, to be able to access their online personal services such as streaming music channels or video on demand. They want to use however many devic-

es they have — tablet, laptop, smartphone — simultaneously on the same network. In short, they want to enjoy a connectivity experience that is equal to or better than the experience they have at home.

These customer wants come at a price to the network, however. Streaming video and music increasingly are consuming more bandwidth as users demand a continuous experience with no buffering. Likewise, with voice over IP or web chatting applications, all of these services require a robust network—and one that doesn't require the user to plug a wire into a wall.

What's more, the amount of business travel is on the rise — according to the U.S. Travel Association, U.S. residents logged 455 million trips for business purposes in 2015, with 37.9 percent for meetings and events.² That means an increasing number of guests will require a high-quality connection to enable them to remain productive away from their office. Business travelers require more than basic connectivity: In addition to being able to log on to their corporate networks to access email and important files, business travelers want to have the ability to conduct web chats and video conferences from the comfort of their hotel room.

In many hotels, however, current Wi-Fi connectivity can be spotty and expensive for the user to use and the hotel to manage. As Wi-Fi has shifted from a “nice-to-have” to a “must-have” amenity for business travelers, it is up to the hotel to provide its guests with a strong, always-available experience at a low or no cost to the guests.

Having unreliable or weak connections can negatively impact the guest experience and damage a hotel's reputation among customers, who often use social media to lodge complaints or voice their frustration—and also praise top-notch services or amenities.

SERVICES TO ENHANCE THE GUEST EXPERIENCE

Guests — both business and pleasure — increasingly are looking for amenities and services that take their visit beyond the usual hotel stay. Helping create that experience are a growing number of technologies and applications aimed at, or that work well within, the hospitality industry.

The Internet of Things (IoT) is one example. IoT is driving a new breed of user-centric applications that enable guests to use their smartphones to perform a myriad of tasks, such as unlocking their door or adjusting the lighting, air temperature and even the window blinds to their taste before they even get to their room.

Digital media devices inside guest rooms and smartphones enable guests to request extra pillows, book a massage or order room service, for example. Or, if they don't like their room, they can pull up a map of the hotel on their phone and see available rooms, then request to move to the room of their choice — all without dialing down to the front desk.

What's more, televisions in guest rooms can be personalized to a guest's preferred channels

and settings, even greeting guests with a personal message when they arrive. They also can be used as a monitor for video chats or streaming video, or as a vehicle to message with hotel staff for two-way communication.

Such network-dependent technologies increasingly are becoming important as hotels look for ways to distinguish themselves from their competitors. Providing such services can help bolster a hotel's reputation and propel it to "preferred" status among travelers, increasing occupancy rates and, ultimately, the hotel's bottom line.

CLOUDIFYING THE BACK OFFICE

The cloud has been a transformative force in enabling the hospitality and other industries to overhaul their operations and deliver first-rate user experiences via a selection of next-generation applications—without having to overhaul their infrastructure.

A growing number of hotels are harnessing the power and flexibility of the cloud to deliver the next level of services to customers while decreasing their reliance of on-premises hardware. A number of applications, from CRM systems to reservations systems, have been "cloudified," delivering greater ability and agility to hotels at a fraction of the cost of traditional hardware/software systems.

Cloud-based technologies have the double-benefit of helping companies save money and streamline their operations—because less hardware is needed, hotels spend less on purchasing and maintaining infrastructure components, reducing the necessity of an onsite IT pro.

Customer-facing technologies, too, are becoming more cloud-based: Electronic point-of-sale systems are showing up in tablet form in many more establishments, allowing guests to pay for food, drink and other products and services wherever they are in the hotel. Tablets and other digital devices in public areas, meanwhile, enable guests to check in and out of their room, forgoing the lines at the check-in counter.

However, cloud-based technologies rely on a robust network to work effectively. Without connectivity, even the most comprehensive cloud-based hospitality application simply won't work. Imagine a line of hotel guests waiting to check in only to discover they aren't able to because the network is down and systems are offline. The damage to the hotel's business and its reputation could be devastating. To prevent such a scenario from happening, hotels must have an infrastructure that can handle all manner of traffic, from voice to video to Internet and beyond at both on and off-peak times.

THE NETWORK IS THE KEY

In the hospitality sector, technology can be a catalyst to creating satisfying guest experiences,

putting control quite literally at guests' fingertips and addressing their expectations of constant connectivity and availability on online services. It is critical, then, that the hotel's network can meet those expectations and deliver a stellar experience.

As the digital economy shifts the cloud and other technologies into the spotlight, hotels must be sure they can handle the increased load effectively and without interruption. Their network should be powerful enough to be able to deliver critical applications and connectivity for all areas, from the back office to guest rooms no matter how busy the hotel is. An overburdened network slows operations and degrades performance, which can frustrate both employees and guests.

Shifting beyond Wi-Fi connectivity and into services that further enhance the guest experience requires a network that includes both wired and wireless connectivity, to enable the hotel to have more control over network access for its guests. What's more, the network should be flexible enough to handle an increase or decrease in bandwidth to help the hotel keep up with the needs of their guests while managing costs.

As the hotel increases its services to better serve its guests or further improve operations, a robust network can take on the new applications and services without fear of compromising the current guest experience.

To provide connectivity today and the path for advanced technologies down the road, hotels should look for a network service provider that can provide a reliable, high-performance network that can meet varying bandwidth needs. A good network service provider will address demands to allow a hotel to continue to provide its guests with top-level service.

CONCLUSION

Technology has effected change throughout the hospitality industry, from the connectivity expectations of guests to the way services are delivered. A robust network can help hotels deliver a high-quality guest experience while adopting new technologies that can help it manage costs and streamline operations

1 "Destination: Connected Travel; 5 Big Ideas to Master Digital in Hospitality," Accenture, 2015 <https://www.accenture.com/us-en/~/media/Accenture/next-gen/acn-hospitality/Accenture-connected-travel-5-big-ideas-to-master-digital-in-hospitality.pdf>

2 "U.S. Travel Answer Sheet," U.S. Travel Association, 2016 <https://www.ustravel.org/answersheet>