A Fragment of the Past:
The System of Hotel Front Office Racks

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Front-of-House & Front Desk

Have you ever really noticed the front desks of the hotels that you visit? Chances are, you don't think twice about it—because more and more, the front-of-house area is designed to be subtle and unobtrusive. If you are aware of the front desk area, it's more likely to be due to its high-tech accoutrements and services. Some hotels now come equipped with features like automated check-in kiosks and even computerized luggage carriers. While this may not be the standard, it's rapidly becoming more common and indicates the direction that hotels are taking for their front-of-house environments. Since the front desk is usually the first point of contact that guests have with a hotel and is where they check in and out, request information, settle their accounts, and offer different types of feedback (Steadmon & Kasavana, 1988), the accessibility and style of this area can make a huge impact.

Prior to the introduction of computerization and other technological updates, front office tasks were performed quite differently, although the front desk was just as integral and the system was extremely orderly and efficient. The evolution of the hotel front-of-house, as overseen by the front office department, over the last several decades indicates larger changes and trends

within the hospitality industry itself. This article takes a trip back in time and offers a glimpse of the past through an exploration of the old systems of hotel front office racks.

Let's first go back to the early 20th century: during this time, hotels were considered to be "manual," and most functions were carried out by systems that leveraged heavily on human capital. Besides billing and accounting, the hotel staff were responsible for duties like room status checks and guest registration. As advancing technology began to address some of these functions, hotels gradually transitioned to the use of "electromechanical systems which were semi- automated, before moving to a wholly computerized, fully automated arrangement" (Steadmon & Kasavana, 1988). The heart of the front desk became a metal file system that consisted of pockets for the slips to be inserted into, called the room rack. You may already be familiar with the room rack without knowing: it is from this system that we have derived the term "rack rate," the undiscounted price a hotel will charge for a room. Formerly, when guests arrived at a hotel without a reservation, "traditionally, the standard rate was posted on or near the room rack." (Steadmon & Kasavana, 1988, p. 110).
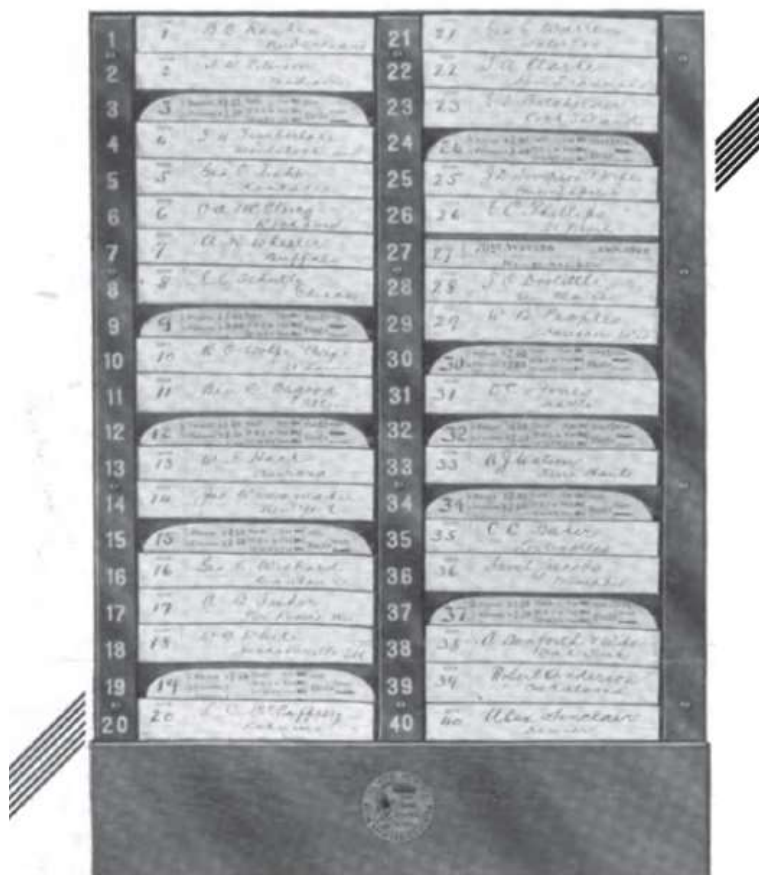
John Willy Room Rack [Advertisement] (1920, July). The Hotel Monthly, 28(328) p. 11.

The pneumatic tube was also a system used in earlier hotels. Behind the clerk's desk, where the mail and information racks were located, a battery of pneumatic tubes connected to every department of the hotel. These extensively utilitarian tubes carried a mass of information ranging from mails and orders to charges and meal checks. These tubes saved a lot of time and labor and accelerated several procedures by creating a network between service departments

(Willy, 1919). Even in the 1980's, Dr. Peter Szende, the first author of this article, regularly sent restaurant checks in plastic containers through the pressurized air network to the front office cashier. In just a few seconds, the check traveled through the pneumatic tube to the bill clerk, who would quickly post the charges before the guest checked out.

Key Front Office Positions in a Manual Hotel

Today, it would be almost impossible to maintain a room rack or pneumatic tube system because the sheer size and breakdown of contemporary hotels render it completely impracticable. However, hotels in the past were smaller and contained fewer major departments. For example, the New Yorker Hotel's front office consisted of three departments: the *reservations department*, the *mail and information department,* and the *rooms department*. Using the New Yorker Hotel as of 1931 as an example, we can trace the history and development of these departments and the positions within them.

Reservations Department

Reservation clerk: The reservation clerks answered reservation telephones and filed reservation slips or tabs in the room rack. The slips or tabs were usually color-coded to denote the type of reservations. Below is an example of a color code system (Dukas, 1960, pp. 24-25).

| Regular Reservation |
| Late Arrival |
| Special Attention |
| Conventions |
| Travel Agency |
| Reservation |

In more advanced reservation systems, hotel reservationists completed carbonated, perforated rack slips on a typewriter, after which copies were distributed to various areas of the front office and hotel as needed.

<u>Mail and Information Department</u>

Mail and information clerk: Like the reservation clerks, the mail clerks answered telephones and inquiries specific to their department's purview. They also made verifications of "unregistered" reports which are given out by switchboard operators. The mail clerk checked emergency arrival slips and accepted incoming telegrams and special delivery letters. He/she also handed out keys and mail to guests.

Tube clerk: The tube clerks were in charge of receiving and dispatching mail to and from the different floors and departments through the pneumatic tube system.

<u>Rooms department:</u>

Room clerk: Room clerks were stationed at the registration desk to serve the guests. The room clerk had to be knowledgeable about the different types of rooms in the hotels, along with their respective amenities, furniture, and location. The room clerk instantly knew how to handle each arrival, as the color of the slips the guest carried or received indicated the type of booking (Ducas, 1960).

Rack clerk: Rack clerks were in charge of checking the status and condition of the rack at any point of time, as well as at specific hours against vacancy reports, and made any necessary corrections.

Stacks of Racks: the Different Types of Racks

The room rack is only the tip of the iceberg: hotels adopted a rack system for just about every facet of their front desk operations. After World War II, hotels used the Whitney System most often. However, several other types of rack systems, such as the John Willy system and Andersen system had been developed earlier in the 20th century.

<u>Reservation Rack</u>

The reservation racks contained the names of the expected guests and their arrival dates. Typically, there was one rack for every day of the upcoming months and fewer racks for future arrival dates. In larger hotels, racks often covered the whole wall of the reservation office.
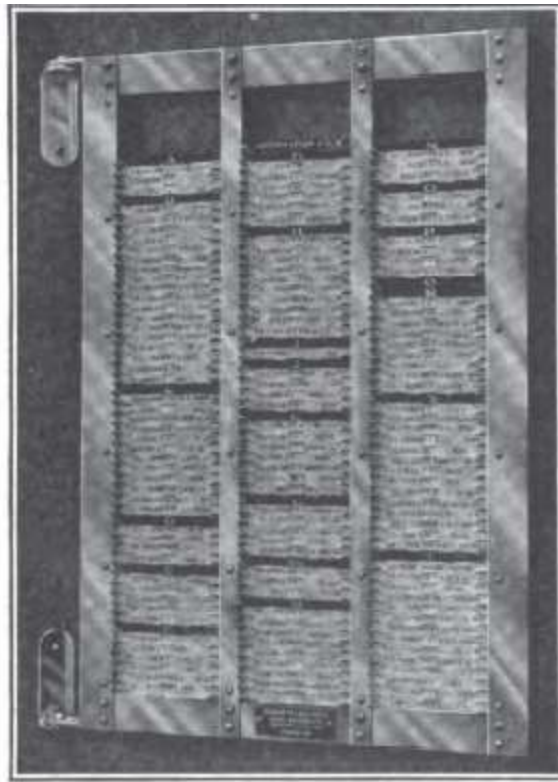
Dumont [Advertisement] (1917, April). Office Appliances, XXV(4) p. 26.

<u>Room Rack</u>

According to Ismail (2002, p. 200), "The room rack would identify each room type and configuration at a glance," as well as the occupancies and vacancies available in the hotel (Dukas, 1960, p. 37). Managers would mark each room on the rack according to a certain color code in order to note the room status. The unique code would provide information regarding the occupancy, cleanliness, and pricing of that particular room. The room rack not only indicated the type and location of the room, but also details like the room's occupancy status, its rate for single and double occupancy, and its connections to abutting rooms (Dukas, 1960).

Much like today's front desk set-ups, room racks were designed to be nearly invisible upon check-in. Sophisticated systems were typically mounted and arranged in a 60-degree angle behind the front desk. A typical room rack is shown in the picture below.

Handling Guests' Accounts and Reservations (1953, January). Hotel Monthly, 61(718), p. 45.

This is how the 'The Hotel World Magazine' described the job of room clerks upon visiting a hotel in New York City:

The room clerk has before him at all times a rack, frequently a large, framed folio, arranged that a card of uniform size for this purpose, to be slipped in the opening opposite the room number. These cards are of various colors; a red card, which will contain the occupant's name, shows that the room or apartment is held permanently; a white card shows that the room is vacant, and in order; a blue card shows the room is held by a transient and liable to be vacant at any time.

He will inquire of the new arrival what accommodations his party will require; glance at his room board, draw the white card of a three-room suite if wanted, place that number after the guest's name, while the bell-

Swan, W.R. (1921, November 12). The Hotel World: The Hotel and Travelers Journal, 93(20),

p. 10.

As with any object feature, time and innovation gradually caused the room rack to evolve. Frederick A. Muschenheim, the brother of the owner of the Astor Hotel in New York, made several innovations in hotel technology (Miscellaneous Hotel Notes, 1913, p. 66)., one of which was a room rack frame with flexible card holders mounted on pivots.
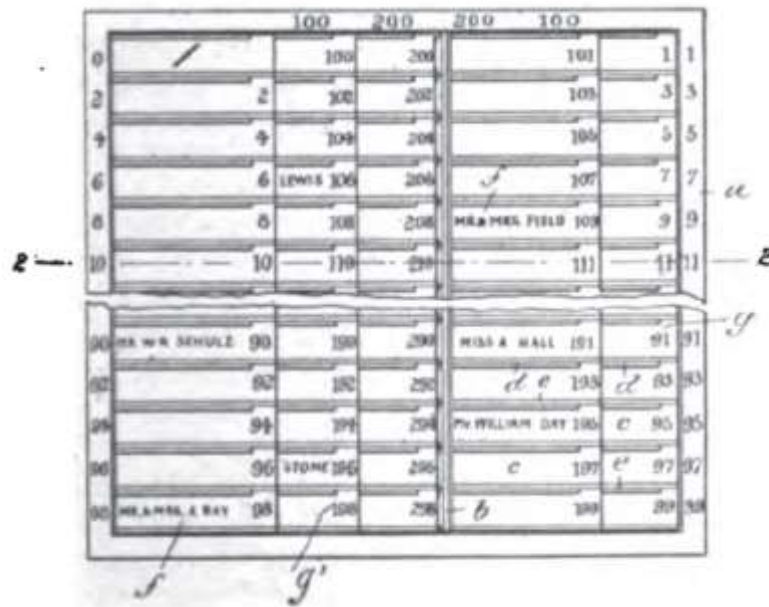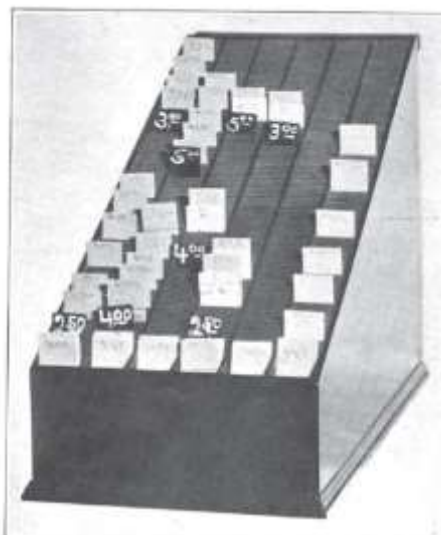

Muschenheim, F. (1908, February 11). Hotel Room Rack. U.S. Patent No. 878, 554. Washington, DC: United States Patent Office.

Sales Rack

To avoid selling the same room twice and to facilitate the sales of rooms, busy hotels used a control rack that consisted of the cards of every room in the hotel that was available for sale.

Room Sales Rack with Price Zones and Markers

The Hotel Monthly (1920, March), 28(324), p. 31.

Letter and Key Rack

The letter and key racks contained pigeon holes for the aforementioned items. They maintained guest keys and were arranged by room number.

Letter and Key Rack at the Hilton Istanbul

Hospitality Archive, Hilton College, University of Houston

Key racks were sometimes combined with the room rack in order to minimize the number of racks. Below is an example:

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Information Rack

These racks contained the names and room numbers of all the registered guests of the hotel. The racks were alphabetically organized by the guests last name.

A Rotary Type Information Rack

Source: Kohler [Advertisement] (1921, July 2.) The Hotel World: The Hotel and Travelers Journal, 93(1), p. 59.

Room Racks with Electric Signaling Devices - Early Efforts

In order to facilitate instant communication between the room clerks and the housekeeping department, the Astor Hotel in New York introduced an electrical system with lights in 1917. The system is said to have consisted of a set of sockets for small electric bulbs which were positioned at the front of the room rack. The system was directly linked to bulbs on the doors of every room. When the room clerks received notice from the cashiers that a guest had vacated the room, they would place a bulb into the corresponding room number on the rack. The bulb would light up, and the light on the room door would immediately flash up and down at regular intervals. This brought the attention of the housekeeping staff, who inserted a key below the bulb on the door when he or she went in to make up the room. This would then turn

off both the light on the door and the light on the room rack as well. The automatic signal device saved a considerable amount of time and labor (Efficiency at Astor, p. 26).

<u>Room Racks with Electric Signaling Devices – Efforts at the Advent of Computerization</u>

In the 1970s, leading hotel chains of the time, such as Hilton and InterContinental, significantly enriched their hotel signaling systems. Following in the footsteps of Muschenheim, room racks evolved to be complemented by consoles that indicated room status and housekeeping requirements. Toward the end of the 1980's, the first author of this article was in charge of coordinating the implementation of a computerized system at the Forum Hotel, Budapest. Their original room rack, installed in 1981, was designed according to the specific instructions from the InterContinental group of hotels. It was a highly sophisticated system—at the time, probably one of the best of its kind, at least before the computer revolution. The electric bulbs and combination of lights enhanced the front office equipment by indicating the exact room status, next to each room rack slip. Housekeeping employees could change the status of the room rack remotely by turning their keys in a socket located in the guest rooms. While the author regrets not having taken a picture of the old room rack, we luckily had a chance to interview Mr. Péter Várhegyi, a seasoned hotelier who worked with this Room Rack. Mr. Várhegyi was happy to share his personal notes.

Room Status Light Combinations on the Room rack at the Forum Hotel Budapest in the 1980s.

ROOM STATUS	COMBINATION OF LIGHTS		
Occupied Room	●	●	●
Occupied Room Currently Being Cleaned	○ yellow	● red	●
Occupied Room Cleaned Not Inspected Yet	●	● red	○ green
Expected Check-Out	●	● red	●
Guest Paid	○ yellow	●	○ green
Unoccupied Room Currently Being Cleaned	○ yellow	●	●
Unoccupied Room Cleaned Not Inspected Yet	○ yellow	● red	○ green
Room is Ready to be Sold	●	●	○ green

In automated systems, most of the racks discussed above were eliminated, as information is internally managed by the computer systems. Today, it is rare to find any hotel operating on a rack system; letter and key racks occasionally still exist to preserve a memento of the past.

Dr. Peter Szende has over 25 years of management experience in the hospitality industry in both Europe and North America. He joined the Boston University School of Hospitality Administration as an Assistant Professor in 2003. He was promoted to Associate Professor of the Practice in 2010. Currently, he serves as Associate Dean of Academic Affairs.

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