

Boston Hospitality Review

www.bu.edu/bhr

Published by the Boston University School of Hospitality Administration

Navigating Hotel Operations in Times of Covid-19

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Special Edition: COVID-19 Crisis



While, the hotel industry has entered into territories unknown and never seen before in our lifetime, there is no reason to panic. This present perfect storm, has – both a health and financial - crisis occurring at the same time. Between the combined terror-related travel concern disruptions from 9/11 (from the historical drop in demand) and 2008 financial crisis –make today’s crisis, something that has never been experienced before.

But buckle up, it is going to get worse before it gets better. The country of Spain, as of 3.24.20, has forced the closure of all hotels in the country (Ollila, 2020c) and India has a 21-day lockdown (Gettleman & Schultz, 2020). With the unprecedented times for hotel closures, three of the major brands are reporting international closures.

- *Hilton* (as of 2.14.20) has shut 150, or 2% of their global portfolio in China alone (Ollila, 2020a). They have also shut down the 1,878 room New York Hilton Midtown (Riegler, 2020), with more US closures expected.
- *IHG* (as of 2.18.20) has shut 160 of their 470 China properties (Ollila, 2020b).
- *Marriott* has (as of 2.27.20) closed 90 of their 375 hotels in China (Jelski, 2020).

In some cases, a full-service hotel might have as few as 7-15 employees working. A dilemma of concern is the financial burden that comes with keeping the hotel open, with a skeleton crew, vs. the unknown challenges and costs that a complete closure with re-opening would incur (e.g. having to obtain a certificate of occupancy). Many hotels still have guests staying in hotels, this can include emergency response teams, medical companies, and transportation companies. In most cases, you are doing everything you can to cut costs, but your creativity to think differently about how you handle business will help reduce expenses even further.

While every brand, management, and owner may have their own crisis strategy, included are some basic recommendations to keep you on track.

1. Stay Calm!

This too shall pass. But at this time, you are going to be working with a reduced workforce. In turn, this is going to restrict the operations of the hotels and properties will need to alter their ways of conducting day-to-day business. Take the path of positivity, the spirit of hope and hospitality with the strength that this industry brings, will carry us through this event.

2. Adjust Hotel Operations

Start by condensing the location of where guests are staying in the hotel. This will cut down on room attendant travel, since fewer people will be cleaning the rooms. Follow engineering procedures to help save energy expenses, by setting thermostats on closed floors to lower temperatures.

Consider restricting the hours and daily service provided by housekeeping. This might be the time to implement a strategy that the extended stay hotel model uses, by providing full cleaning service once a week; or reduce to every third or fourth day. To continue to trim costs, linen does not need to be cleaned daily for stayover rooms. Inform your guests of the change and continue to provide daily towel replacements and toiletries.

Upon check-in, provide the guests with an updated letter detailing changes in the services provided, enhancements being made to the cleaning policies, and how to contact staff in an emergency.

3. Modified Food and Beverage Offerings

It is important to note, that you need to abide by the updated laws that are placed on a city or state. To this end, it likely will require a reduced set of operating hours. With the federal guidance of gatherings restricted to no more than 10 persons, the option for delivery or take out is the only opportunity. Hence, make grab and go food offerings available. Offer more than just breakfast to go! Room Service can also offer an option of contact-free delivery service to their guests in order to prevent close interaction with people.

4. Ramp Up Cleaning Protocols

The cleaning protocols for your public space and guest rooms will need to be ramped up. While the appropriate CDC recommended chemicals and cleaning solutions are vital, it is also important to wear personal protective equipment (PPE), such as gloves.

Make sure to have enough gloves in your inventory for your employees. Even if employees do not want to wear gloves, remind them that it is for their safety.

The high-touch surfaces need extra attention. Make sure to focus on disinfecting doorknobs, elevator buttons, and phones to lessen the spread of germs. A re-training of all associates on the chemicals used in the rooms is a good way to ensure room attendants and public space attendants are doing their job, to keep everyone safe and germ-free. Increase the frequency of the high-traffic areas, to hourly to every two hours. Create a checklist for cleaning and a cleaning record chart – which can be placed on the back of the doors; this holds the attendant responsible and signals clearly to the guest, you are on top of it!

Ecolab has provided their clients with updated cleaning procedures for guestrooms and some important steps all room attendants should be following. Room attendants should be using a new pair of gloves for each individual room, as well as different rags for each room. This will reduce the spread of germs from one room to the next (*Coronavirus (COVID-19)*, n.d.).

The front desk team should implement a key card sterilization process since the keys are reused. Using a peroxide-based chemical or an alcohol solution, with at least 70% alcohol, will disinfect the keys properly. Make sure to wear gloves while disinfecting the keys, so that germs do not spread to other people or surfaces. Hotels, if possible, can have guests use mobile keys and mobile check-in during their stay.

Have sanitizing wipes available, and proper cleaning spray and paper towels; upon the departure of each guest from the front desk clean the space. This will be time-consuming, but there are not as many guests presently and the next guest will appreciate your efforts. Have hand sanitizer in many more locations throughout the hotel, including several bottles at the front desk. Placing sanitizer stations around the hotel is a good practice; make sure to check these stations frequently if they need to be refilled.

First and foremost, it is important to speak with your employees about personal hygiene during this pandemic. Make sure to have sanitizer and soap readily available for your employees in prominent spots around the hotel. Another good strategy is to bring in hospital staff to explain the virus and measures to protect yourself better. This will help ease the concerns of the employees working for you and ensure you all work together to make sure they are on the same page to keep everyone safe. This is also an opportunity for your staff to ask questions to a medical professional to get the facts about COVID-19.

5. Institute Social Distancing Practices

Create a deeper barrier at the front desk to keep the space between the agent and the guest. Instead of handing key cards to guests, place it on the front desk. Also, restrict large groups from gathering in the lobby and near elevators. Post signs for guests about

not overcrowding elevators and waiting for the next elevator, so that everyone can practice social distancing.

If your hotel offers coffee stations in the lobby, it is a good idea to eliminate these stations and offer to-go coffee, where one person is in charge of passing out the coffee. This will help guests with distancing themselves from each other.

Should there be a line, identify a way to space out people standing by setting markers for six feet. This could be your roped lines with signage or small cones on the floor. Be clever and creative!

Shut down your fitness center and swimming pool. In most cases, the state has shut these businesses down, and you should as well. Since this virus can remain on surfaces for longer than anticipated, it is a safer practice. You can offer your guest print outs of different in-room exercises they could do since the fitness center is closed. Cancel all functions, according to the federal government gatherings of 10 or more should be avoided.

6. Exposed Guest Protocols

Should your guest and/or employee be exposed and confirmed, then call the local health department and follow the cleaning procedure for the guest room. It is important to deep clean and sanitize the room of the guest who tested positive for COVID-19. Since hotel occupancy is low, the hotel is able to keep the room out of inventory to make sure all the germs are gone. It is recommended that a room is kept out of inventory for at least ten days. What is important is that exposure to associates needs to be tracked back. Therefore, keep track of the guest to associate contact, during the time of the guest stay (Kline et al., 2020).

The Future – What Does It Look Like?

By keeping the hotels open, it keeps the economy going, which keeps employees working. Encourage event planners to reschedule their event, “postpone – don’t cancel!” This will help the recovery move faster.

A question about the future, what happens if domestic flights get shut down, what will things look like moving forward? For hotels, with airline base business, those contracts will disappear when the airlines cut back. It will be interesting to follow hotel performance for the impact to their occupancy changes, should airlines cut back on domestic flights.

The economic stimulus plan is in the final stages of approval, what this offers to associates, who have been furloughed or laid off, will be important for the recovery efforts.

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