

Security of Guests, Staff and the Hotel

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Security

Security has always been a concern for hotels worldwide. The recent increase in terrorist acts has had its toll on travel and tourism worldwide. Whilst there is no indication that hotels are a primary target for the perpetration of terrorist acts, hoteliers must ensure that their properties are secure – if anything to give a sense of security to guests and staff whilst at the same time protecting their investment.

There are two types of security threats hotels should be concerned with:

1. Threats that might affect a guest's health, comfort or well-being.
2. Threats that affect the hotel directly, in particular its fixtures and fittings, its revenue and its reputation.

Protecting Guests

Fire

One of the major threats is that of fire. Although we have not had loss of life in hotels in Malta (perhaps as a result of our methods of construction and the absence of wall to wall carpeting) hotels here are also bound by law to take the necessary fire safety precautions. A front office manager is duty bound to ensure that he is satisfied with a hotel's –

- fire detection systems
- fire containment provisions
- escape procedures
- fire-fighting equipment

Terrorist threats

This has been dealt with in a previous module, and includes bomb threats. There is little, if anything, a front office manager and his staff may do if there is some kind of assassination attempt for instance. However, bomb threats are received by someone at the front line – a telephonist or a front office clerk – and a procedure must be in place to ensure that all the information that can be taken about the nature of the threat is in fact recorded.

Threats to privacy

It is the duty of front office to protect the privacy of its guests – even and perhaps especially if they are in the public eye. It is very tempting to tell one's friends all about a well-known person who might be staying at your hotel, but you will have no control over the information passed over from your friends to their own friends. In no time at all, your guest may be pestered by fans, autograph hunters, paparazzi and reporters.

However, it is not only the privacy of well-known guests that must be respected. Every one of our guests is entitled to his or her own privacy and steps must be taken to ensure that information about our guests is not divulged to outsiders. Giving room numbers to individuals other than the persons being accommodated in those rooms is unethical and should be avoided at all costs. There is a tendency amongst representatives locally to divulge room numbers to taxi drivers, restaurants etc. It may prove difficult to ascertain whether the breach of confidentiality is the responsibility of the hotel or not, but guests have every right to hold the hotelier accountable.

Threats to guests' property

We have already discussed in a previous lecture the hotelier's obligation to provide safe deposit facilities. Although the hotelier's liability is limited, it is in the interests of the hotel to ensure the safety of its guests and their property – if anything to protect the reputation of the hotel.

If the hotel is in an unsafe area, or in an area roamed by unscrupulous characters, guests should be made aware of this – especially if they intend to venture out of the hotel at night.

In Malta, hotels should be especially aware of the problems caused by **prostitution**. Prostitution is not *per se* illegal but a hotel would be acting illegally if it were to knowingly encourage or allow prostitution within its premises. It is not for us to make a general characterisation of prostitutes, but some prostitutes may well be thieves and since hotel guests will often negate their involvement

with a prostitute they may accuse hotel staff of pilfering their property rather than admit to the fact that they hosted a girl in their room.

Unfortunately, we must also face the fact that there are instances where guests are robbed by **staff**. There may be a "social divide" between staff and guests, which may lead the former to pilfer money or valuable items from a guest (although this is by no means the only reason why guests may be robbed by staff). If the hotel has a policy of randomly checking staff's property before they leave the hotel, this may act as a deterrent and waive the hotel's liability should this arise.

Confidence tricksters or conmen may also find themselves into a hotel. There is very little a hotel can do if a confidence trickster makes his way into a guest's "life". These type of people often settle their own room accounts and are simply guests from a hotel point of view. However, when the identity of a conman is known the hotel is ethically bound to blacklist him and refuse him accommodation in the hotel.

Guests themselves may also threaten each other's enjoyment. If a traveller turns up in a drunken state asking for a room a hotel is entitled to refuse him on the grounds that he is not a fit state to be received. This is true even if he already has a booking, as he has broken one of the implied conditions of the contract.

Similarly if the guest misbehaves throughout his stay the hotel is not obliged to let him stay. When guests complain about being kept awake by a noisy couple or a drunkard next door, it is not good enough to tell a guest that "nothing can be done about that." One must employ considerable tact in dealing with such situations.

Protecting Staff

Staff should be able to work in a harmonious and secure environment. In this sense, all measures taken to protect guests will provide further security for employees.

Some guests are unscrupulous and although it is highly unlikely that guests will rob staff property some guests may put into question the integrity of the staff. Unfortunately this may happen to female staff who refuse sexual advances from guests. It is in the interest of the hotel to protect its staff by ensuring that the integrity of employees is safeguarded and it would be unwise for a manager to immediately accept the guest's complaint without hearing the employee's version of events.

Protecting the hotel

Theft from hotel

It is unfortunate even the wealthiest of guests may have a propensity to pilfer a hotel's property if the opportunity arises. This normally happens at check out when a guest leaves the hotel with a variety of items – virtually anything that is not securely fastened down: soap, towels, mats, sheets, blankets, coathangers, lamps, trouser presses, electric kettles, TV sets and even plumbing fixtures! Some hotels ask housekeepers to check rooms for pilfering as soon as a client leaves the room to check out. This is not however always practical. Again considerable tact has to be employed when dealing with such situations and there are no fast rules to follow. There are instances where a hotel will simply have to write off stolen items rather than insist on ensuring that no items have been stolen.

Walk-outs, skippers or runners

There are a number of guests who leave without paying. These guests can generally be divided into three groups:

1. The 'accidentals'. These are guests who simply forget to pay, often their extras bills. Most of these guests do not intend to leave the hotel without paying – they simply believe their account is being settled by someone else. When contacted these guests pay their bill immediately and are highly embarrassed. The hotel should deal with them courteously.
2. 'Opportunists'. These guests check in with the intention of paying their bill on departure, but when they realise that they can get away with not paying their bill (or simply a transaction that should have found itself on their bill – eg. last minute breakfast or minibar consumption) they make a run for it!
3. 'Premeditators'. These are guests who, from the start, have the intention of leaving the hotel without paying. Some of these guests go into considerable lengths in order to avoid paying. These guests generally stay for short periods and will move to other hotels as soon as payment is demanded. When hotels network between themselves they are in a position to warn each other of such guests. Experienced room staff can often detect premeditated walkouts because generally they do not unpack their belongings to facilitate a quick run. If the hotel staff communicate effectively it may be possible for a hotel to operate like an intelligence-gathering machine, with the doubtful guest being reported on all his activities whilst the security manager determines whether or not he or she is a *bona fide* guest.

Immorality

An immoral contract, under our law, is void. This will mean that if you knowingly allow a guest to take a room with the purpose of using it for prostitution, you will not be able to enforce the contract because it based on an illicit purpose. A contract must be based on a lawful consideration (Section 966 of the Civil Code) – if it is not, then it may not be enforced in a court of law.

It is in the interest of a hotel to discourage prostitution, not only because it has a reputation to protect but also because prostitution may bring about a number of difficulties (as discussed earlier).

Similarly a hotel must ensure that other illegal practices, such as illegal gambling, are not conducted on its premises.

Bibliography

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