

TECH ACCOMMODATIONS

Prepping a guestroom to support high-tech gadgets and powerful sound systems

By Jeff Loether, ISHC

Let's look at guestroom 2.0 and the issues, implications and potential consequences resulting from our efforts to accommodate our younger generation guests. What's the nature of this updated version? It is participation, interaction and integration of the guest — the guest's technology, the room and its technology, and "the cloud." It is how the guestroom "turns on and tunes in" the guest, to borrow a phrase from the past.

First off, let's be clear: the strategy is to *accommodate*, not to compete or try to wow them. Our newer generation guests are "self-provisioning" in that they already own their favorite technologies. They check-in with their favorite laptops, cell phones, iPods, etc. They will not use your Internet-enabled television to get their e-mail; they will use their laptop or cell phone for that. They will not listen to local radio; they will listen to their XM or Sirius radio, or listen to online radio stations.

Streaming Content

So how do we accommodate the guest's tech gadgets? Readily accessible power outlets, including if you will, powered USB ports on the desk or nightstand. Quality televisions that have conveniently located "jack-packs," even though we're finding that they do not get used anywhere near as often as we thought. Provide input connections for the MP3 player both on the nightstand and television, if possible. Provide wired HSIA access connectors at the desk and night-stand if possible, as well as WiFi.

To further accommodate our newer generation guests, understand that they are "self-provisioning" their own content. What does self-provisioning content look like and what does this mean to you? How about YouTube™ and Slingbox™ and LocationFree® devices? Everyone by now knows that YouTube is the million-channel, Internet-delivered streaming video/television system. What Sling Box and LocationFree (and a dozen other similar technologies) do is give the guest a control unit as part of their home entertainment system. This allows them, from anywhere in the world where they have a broadband HSIA connection, to tune into their home system. They can watch their hometown local cable television, watch their TiVo®, see their kids soccer game from last night, etc. All courtesy of your high-speed, broadband connection.



So, what does this tell us about the capacity of our Internet access system? In a word: Fiber. Streaming video is the broadband hog of Internet applications. And the move to high-definition is making it twice as bandwidth hungry. Look at your Internet services provider and cable plan. How much concurrent bandwidth can you deliver to the guestrooms? On the low end, each standard definition YouTube channel requires 700Kb/s to 1.2 Mb/s bandwidth. On the upper end, a guest watching a HDTV program from their home server via SlingBox or LocationFree requires 4 to 16 Mb/s bandwidth for uninterrupted viewing. How many guests can you accommodate simultaneously?

We offer that providing blazing, amazing high speed Internet service will not garner your hotel extra kudos from your guests; but, it is actually the ante in today's marketplace. It is what it takes to be a player. On the flip side, not providing reliable high speed Internet earns you a reputation very quickly, and not one you want. We suggest that, above all else, when capital expense money is budgeted, look at your Internet infrastructure first and do everything you can to make it a super structure that will last well into the future.

New Standards for Sound Isolation

Let's consider another perspective on accommodating guests. At home, there is a sense of privacy and safety that we want to duplicate for our guests. We have gone to great lengths in the development of architectural design standards to ensure that the guest feels comfortable, safe and secure in the guestroom. From night latches to airtight windows with blackout curtains to door seals; we wrap the guest in visual and psychoacoustic privacy.

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But wait! Those architectural design standards were developed in the '80s, when the thing on the nightstand was a "clock radio" and the TV had a two watt, 50 cent speaker. Now we have bass-enhanced Bose Wave radios and 50 watt stereos, flat panel LCD televisions, and someplaces, even surround sound. The guestroom walls designed three decades ago were intended to provide acoustic isolation between typical bedrooms. Today's guestrooms are approaching the acoustic dynamics of dorm rooms and home theaters. We know of one high-end property whose guest complaints quadrupled immediately after installing new nightstand radios in every guestroom.

Further, even if the walls were originally built to standards published at the time, over time remodeling efforts and room changes can diminish sound isolation. Attachments such as headboards, wall art and millwork furniture act as "sounding boards" by transferring sound vibrations from one side of the wall to the other.

So, how big of a problem do we have? A conservative estimate of the difference in sound levels of today's well-equipped guestroom compared to those of the '80s is approximately 10 dB. Subjectively, what we are saying is that the sound levels generated from the music and television systems being installed today is twice as loud as before. But to sound twice as loud, that also means that this new equipment is generating eight times more sound energy, and that is what must be dealt with.

How do we improve the sound isolation qualities of the guestroom walls? Of course, there is not one simple answer, since there are a dozen different types of wall constructions used in hotels, and each has its own qualities and weaknesses. But, to put things into perspective, the "good quality" guestroom standard walls of the '80s provided approximately 48 to 50 dB of sound isolation (STC 55 wall type). In order to provide the same level of privacy, security and acoustic isolation with today's guestroom technologies, we would need to provide a minimum of approximately 60 dB of isolation (STC 65). That's a big difference.

This kind of improvement cannot be made with wall coverings. It involves the combination of mass and limp acoustically-absorptive materials. There are various specialized products and wall components available, but none work in all cases and some may exacerbate the problem if not properly specified and installed. Further, there are other factors that can have an impact on your efforts to improve acoustic isolation, such as penetrations, HVAC and peripheral sealing details, and the attachment issues described above.

So, the best suggestion we can offer as you plan your next wave of guestroom remodeling projects is to consider the opportunity you have to anticipate and prevent the unintended impact of the new guestroom technologies. Apply the Hippocratic Oath to these projects, "First, do no harm," then think how to best accommodate the new guest with their self-provisioned technology and content, and with your new high-fidelity, high-definition entertainment technologies. ■