

GuestDirectsm and Connected Hotel

Building Guest Loyalty in the Hospitality Industry through Excellence in HSIA Support

Broadband Internet usage continues to have a profound impact on the way we live and work. The estimated 33% of US households with Broadband Internet access at the end of 2005 is expected to grow to 37% by the end of 2006. Broadband internet access in the office place is now as common as the personal computer. And as an integral part of our "information society", Broadband Internet connectivity is now part of the everyday fabric of American life.

Since the first television was placed in the first hotel room, the hospitality industry has embraced the challenge of meeting the ever-increasing demands of the American consumer: from cable TV, to heated swimming pools; and from exercise facilities to a convenient hot breakfast with your morning newspaper.

And to that long list of amenities, we now add Broadband Internet or HSIA (High Speed Internet Access). And as with all such ubiquitous facets of our modern life, HSIA has brought unique challenges to the Hospitality industry and its drive for guest loyalty. Today's hotelier must now include "connecting my guests' almost endless permutations of laptops and electronic devices to an HSIA network" to an already long list of to-dos. And they must be prepared to do so while standing behind a 100% Guest Satisfaction Guarantee. No longer is a clean room, comfortable bed, and the latest Hollywood movies enough to sustain guest loyalty: you have to get them online, too!

By the end of 2005, greater than 50% of the hotels in the United States offered HSIA, with 45% of these hotels offering the service as a no-charge amenity. These numbers are expected to increase dramatically by the end of 2007 as more and more franchisors add HSIA to their list of mandatory franchisee compliance criteria.

The hospitality industry has reached out to internet and networking specialists for help in implementing the technology and systems necessary to meet the demands of today's internet-dependent guest. In most cases, these companies have met the technical challenge of providing wired and wireless access to guest rooms, meeting rooms and hotel public areas. The infrastructure necessary to allow a guest to connect is there.

What the hospitality industry has discovered is that it is not simply the existence of the amenity, but the service that is wrapped around it that counts. The impact of a great location for the hotel is diminished without a responsive, knowledgeable, helpful concierge desk. A finely appointed room becomes a cause for complaint if not properly cleaned before and during a guest's stay. And so, today's hoteliers are faced with the challenge of how to wrap the proper service around HSIA so that it becomes a competitive differentiator, a positive

piece of the guest loyalty pie. How do you insure that when your guests “check out” HSIA, they don’t end up “checking out” with you for good?

Such was the backdrop when Connected Hotel, a large provider of HSIA technology to the hospitality industry approached GuestDirectsm with the opportunity to meet the challenge of providing the most responsive, guest friendly, professional, courteous and knowledgeable HSIA technical support services on a 24/7/365 basis. Fortunately, each party brought substantial skills, experience and talent to the table. GuestDirectsm had 7 years of proven customer care and technical support call center services, as well as an Information Technology team capable of developing quick and customized call processing systems. As an owner/operator of hotels, and as a supplier of HSIA technology to the hospitality industry, Connected Hotel brought the unique perspective of a hotelier along with the engineering and technical know-how of networking experts.

Together, GuestDirectsm and Connected Hotel began to lay the groundwork for a holistic guest support process, with a clear program purpose: “Building guest loyalty for our hoteliers”.

“We had already put together a team of technical support representatives to handle the Tier 1 and 2 guest support”, says Amar Patel, Vice President of Information Technology for Connected Hotel, “but we were struggling with consistently delivering the high-touch service that guests were used to receiving from hotel staff.” Mr. Patel continues, “We had a host of issues to resolve; hiring/selecting criteria, trouble ticket system customization, ongoing agent monitoring and coaching, closed loop communications with hotel management, peak staffing and scheduling...the list went on and on. Finally, we decided to get GuestDirectsm involved.”

The two companies dissected the HSIA support process: from guest expectations to hotel management information needs; and from call center agent workflow to escalation tracking and reporting. The following outlines the key elements of the solution that has become known in the industry as GuestDirectsm:

- **Customer Service behaviors are the #1 hiring criteria**

With the belief that we must build customer service in from the very beginning of our process, we administer 6 computer-based assessments focused on customer service aptitude in a call center environment. These include: listening skills, delivering service in a call center environment, customer service attitude survey, inbound selling skills, data entry proficiency and accuracy, and spelling. Each candidate must pass these criteria before being assessed on basic technical skills. Next, a detailed one-on-one interview is administered to qualified candidates. This interview entails specific questions that help determine an applicants

aptitude in regards to mission of service, empathy, integrity, responsibility and proactivity.

- **Transform the sophisticated troubleshooting flowcharts inherent to HSIA support into a simplified, guided process of question, select from multiple answers, next question with multiple answers, etc.**

Imagine staring at 4 pages of flowcharts from a specific hotel's HSIA network while on the phone with a guest! From the perspective of training and a consistency of service delivery, it became apparent that the trouble ticket system needed to be very smart. Each trouble ticket that is opened immediately displays the hotel specific network information an agent needs to begin helping the guest. At the top of the ticket is displayed the server type, server IP address, appropriate passwords and logins, as well as a description of the in-room HSIA solution at that particular hotel.

Detailed scripting begins with the simple phrase, "How may I help you?" to which the agent has several drop options they can select such as; Guest cannot browse, Guest cannot send/receive email, Guest cannot use VPN network, Hotel Staff/Management is calling, etc. Based upon the response given, the agent is then guided through the support process in a "question, multiple answer drop-down" format. In each next step, specific scripting is providing that includes the customer service "touches" necessary to delivering the optimum guest experience. For example, *"I'd be happy to help you with that. Mr./Ms. ___ I am going to log into the server to confirm that it is up and running."* The "pleases", "thank you's", "may I's", and "considerate dialogue" are built into the troubleshooting script.

- **Close the Guest Satisfaction communication loop**

The last item an agent must select before closing or escalating a trouble ticket is the answer to the question, "What is the guest's mood?" If the answer is anything other than "Happy" or "Very Happy", the **Guest Alert** system triggers an immediate email to the property General Manager, complete with a copy of the trouble ticket, which includes the steps taken to resolve the guest's issue along with specific notes from the agent regarding details of the incident. This allows the General Manager to be proactive regarding guest satisfaction prior to checkout. The General Manager can even contact GuestDirectsm to request a .wav file of the recorded call before approaching the guest.

- **Get proactive about finding HSIA network issues**

One of the first steps an agent takes in the troubleshooting process is to verify the integrity of the hotel's HSIA network. Why take the guest through an elaborate set of troubleshooting steps on their laptop if the network is down!? As part of the system development process for GuestDirectsm, an automated **Server Monitoring** system was built to proactively (every 15 minutes) send a network request to the hotel's

servers. If the server responds “all is well”, then that information is simply stored in an up-time database. But if the server does not respond, GuestDirectsm immediately sends a “Server Down” email to Tier 2 support and appropriate personnel at the hotel. **Server Monitoring** allows us to catch problems before they impact guests.

- **Provide hotel management easy access to critical information regarding the HSIA support process**

From the convenience of their web browser, hotel management can securely access a wide variety of reporting tools designed to help them understand and interact with their HSIA support. The reports include:

- **Phone Statistics:** ASA, Talk Time, Inbound or Outbound calls, % answered in less than 60 seconds (Service Level), Abandon Rate. These reports can be run over any desired date range and immediately let hotel management know whether responsiveness is meeting guest expectations.
- **Call Disposition Report:** The “why” of the phone call. This report can be run over any date range and quickly categorizes trouble tickets into one of 12 categories, complete with totals and percentages. It allows hotel management to zero-in on potential areas of improvement.
- **Hotel Snapshot report:** This report lets management see the number of incidents (per room) generated at a property or properties that they manage. This information can be trended over time, compared to HSIA usage rates, and used to assess relative quality of the HSIA system.
- **Incident Lookups:** Find trouble tickets by a variety of filters, criteria and date ranges. For example: search by a guest name, a particular room number, a trouble ticket number, etc.
- **Franchisor compliance forms:** GuestDirectsm will even print certain franchisor “HSIA technical support” compliance forms with key technical support information already completed.

- **Schedule and staff to deliver daily ASA’s of 45 seconds or less and implement courtesy answering with guest-friendly options for continued waiting or a call back**

Inevitably, there are peak call traffic patterns unique to the hospitality guest. To address the need for prompt answering regardless of skill appropriate, agent availability, GuestDirectsm provides for live answering by a help desk receptionist after 45 seconds of queue wait time. The receptionist greets the guests, apologizes for any wait time inconveniences and offers the guest the option of continuing to wait or leaving their name and room number for a return call. The insertion of a live person into the support process at an early stage lets the guest know that their issues are important, and that they will be addressed as soon as possible. The receptionist has access to all queue and call back database

information, and is able to provide the guest with a reasonable expectation upon which they can make their decision to continue holding or to receive a call back.

- **Specifically developed call monitoring forms to score and coach the HSIA support process**

While the scripted troubleshooting process is designed to address the vast majority of situations that occur in the hospitality HSIA support process, there are always unique permutations that require the agent to adjust and use their natural customer service and technical skills. The variety of protocols and escalation procedures peculiar to the hospitality industry required the development of a customized scorecard to measure agent performance.

- **Development of an escalation process, including database tracking of all escalated incidents and escalation correspondence for Tier 2 support.**

The ability to document trouble ticket escalations in a database and have them available for immediate review by senior technicians is critical to most efficiently address systemic issues with the hotel's network and ISP service, as well as unexpected behavior from the guest's electronic devices.

Since launching in early 2005, GuestDirectsm has grown to support in excess of 100,000 hotel rooms; from Hong Kong to Great Britain, and from exclusive 5 star mega-properties to roadside inns. Each month, GuestDirectsm cares for tens of thousands of hotel guests and their need to stay connected with their office, their home, their email, and their life. In excess of 90% of calls are resolved on a first-call basis, and over 99% of trouble tickets are recorded as Happy or Very Happy in regards to guest mood. The tremendous growth of 2005 is expected to double in 2006, and is a testament to a process for guest satisfaction that works!