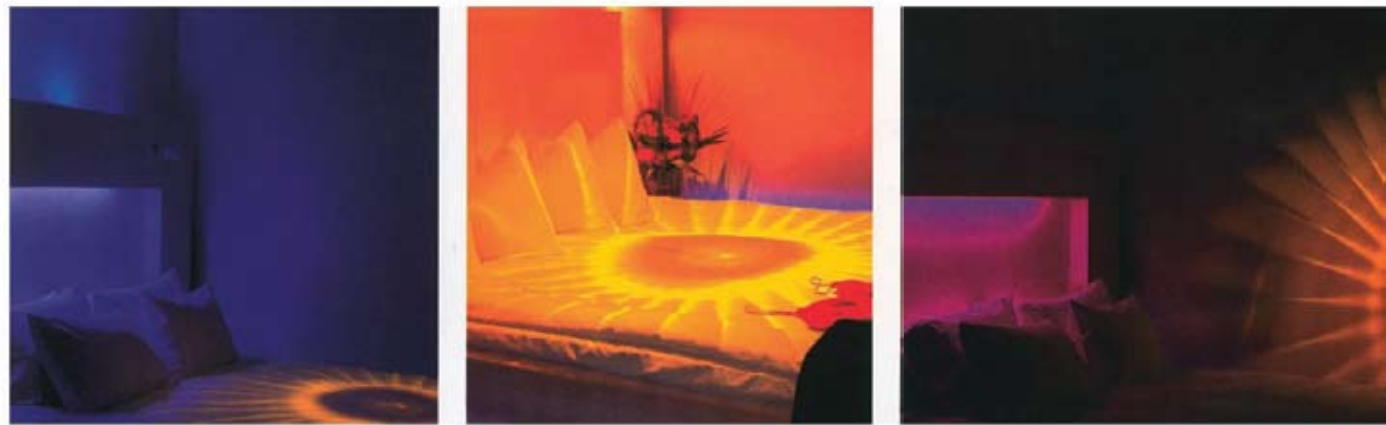## TECHNOLOGY

The hotel room of the future

How will the high-tech trend impact hotel services and room features? *By Joanna Laura Constantine, Hodema*

Are hotel rooms adapting to the changing needs of the travelers? In 10 years, what will the hotel room look like? Due to our busy lifestyles, we are constantly rushing against time while our expectations, needs and wants are increasing. As frequent travelers, we carry with us the load of our busy lives in addition to the stress of traveling, adapting to new environments and being away from home. Hoteliers have been conducting extensive research to know more about the changing needs of consumers. Marriott Corporation, Starwood Hotels & Resorts and other hotel giants have built laboratories for research and development of hotel rooms with the help of IT people, psychologists, architects and other specialists in order to identify consumers' evolving needs and find ways to satisfy them. The rooms created are then tested by hotel guests, who are surveyed for their feedback. Changes are subsequently applied to the room according to the survey's results. Year after year, more and more changes are applied to rooms, involving electronic gadgets, high-tech features, layout, size and design.

Future features
In the future, the high-tech hotel rooms will not only be about high speed or wireless internet, LCD screen or interactive TV. The technology to be used in the future for the room features will influence the hospitality industry and the guest experience: minibars that know the guest's likes and dislikes, thermostats that adjust the temperature according to whether the guest is in the room or not, a large selection of digital movies, music and books on demand, digital showers, in-room exercise amenities and electronics that alter everything from the firmness of the mattress to the art on the walls according to the guest's preferences.

You and only you
Biometrics could also play a major role in authenticating a user's identity to room access. Even within a hotel room, special sensors could be used to read a person's fingerprints, face, retina or voice. Repeat guests can automatically check in by simply placing a fingertip on a lobby kiosk. Such technology could even differentiate the in-room services used by different guests and this would eliminate misunderstandings such as long distance phone calls and use of the mini-bar.

Ghosts for guests
Hotels will also start using holograms to provide more customized experiences for high entertainment needs. A gym coach inside the room could lead the guests through exercises and a virtual concierge could give advice on where to go in the city or how to understand the room features.

Sit back and relax
Some hoteliers are already using technology in their rooms to decrease stress, like having alarm clocks that increase light in the room rather than emitting a jarring tone. Others replace windows with guest-selected computer-generated scenes of waves, forests or clouds with sounds or music to create a more restful, relaxing in-room environment. In other words, with the use of technology, hotels are able to enhance their personalized service by using highly impersonal machines.

Space-age back of the house
Technology is not only used in the hotel rooms, but also in the back of the house to improve service and operation. Hotels may replace or support staff with robots or machines, such as built-in vacuums and disinfecting systems inside the rooms. There will also be a wireless networking system where all transactions among emplo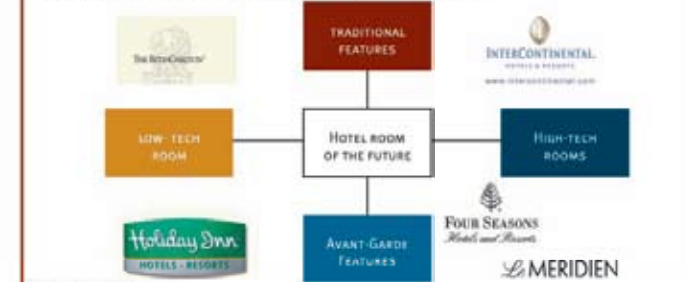yees, staff and guests are monitored through a hand held device or a PDA. For example, if a housekeeper completes the cleaning of a guestroom, they then simply click a button on the device, which allows both the housekeeping and the front desk to immediately know that the room is clean.

How much technology?
Some guests prefer traditional rooms while others have become addicted to electronic gadgets and technology. Hotel guests with low-tech needs seek a more residential feel, such as large comfortable beds with exquisite linen and feather duvets, or marble bathrooms with rich amenities. They also want to hear their preferred music, read their favorite magazines and drink their favourite coffee. These types of guests need comfort rather than speed, practically gourmet food rather than gadgets and a human touch rather than machines. In order to identify and differentiate between the specific needs of hotel guests, guest comment cards are a precious tool. However, they must be improved by hoteliers to identify needs and wants with regards to technology. Some questions that need to be asked are:
• How much time on average do you spend on a computer per day?
• What are the three things you like and hate the most about technology?
• If you could have one item of technology in your room what would it be?

The main issue or challenge here is to find the right balance between the need for technology, the hotel brand image and market demand.

Chain reaction
Hotel chains, such as the InterContinental, employ more obvious solutions to integrating technology, since they have various hotel brands that already target different clientele. By defining segmentation, the challenge lies in updating those brands with the right technology. Adding a virtual concierge for Holiday Inn hotels and providing high speed internet, with ready to use cables on all working desks, for InterContinental Hotels are some examples.

On the other hand, hotels like the Ritz-Carlton with a 'niche' clientele and a specific target market, may have a different approach. In addition to integrating new technology in the room, the Ritz-Carlton has created the 'technology butler' to assist their guests. The Four Seasons hotels installed a network in one property that allows guests to view and choose services by remote control. A selection of over 5,000 titles from major Hollywood studios can be viewed on large-size LCD television screens in every room. Some properties also feature internet services with public IP addresses as an option, in-building LAN services for conference guests and a variety of multicast TV channels. Finally, there are operators like Starwood Hotels & Resorts that have gone all out by creating a totally new product, such as the Meridien Art+Tech where every detail is dedicated to the future. Cutting edge technology meets contemporary design with the charm of a unique atmosphere.

Hotel brand sample mapping: the positioning of the hotel brand regarding the use of technology and the features in the room.

Source: hodema s.a.l.

If this is the example of the international hotel-chain scene with regards to technology, where will independent hotels position themselves?

GOING LOW-TECH INSTEAD OF HIGH-TECH?

Almost all hoteliers are integrating technology in their properties to meet their guests' changing needs and lifestyles. A few hotels, however, are going in the opposite direction: they are shifting from the 'e-room' to the 'pure room'. By leading a stressful lifestyle, some people feel they need to go back to nature and stay in a retreat with absolutely no technology involved. They are seeking peace, privacy and spectacular natural surroundings, as well as the need to feel disconnected from the world. These guests need to be in a room where there is no e-mail to check, no web to surf on, no ringing cell phone, and no TV news, everything is non-technology and stress free! Bali has a variety of such retreats; one example that builds on the island's spirituality is the COMO Shambhala retreat, designed for those seeking greater health and mental quietude through yoga and related treatments and Asian-inspired holistic therapies such as open-air yoga, meditation, reflexology, steam and more.

Are hoteliers ready for these hi-tech innovations?

By Michèle Haddad, Hodema

Hotels are increasingly recognizing that travellers expect more from their hotel accommodations. In response, hotel properties have been investing into installing and upgrading new technology, furnishing their rooms with the latest hi-tech equipment to satisfy their clientele.

Installing the gadgets
Hi-tech equipment is becoming more important, as well as necessary, in the guestroom. With this technology, hotels can strengthen customer relationships by responding to their needs more efficiently in a less costly way. New equipment gadgets and features include:
• Body-heat activated light and temperature controls: these controls turn on when a guest enters a room, and turn off shortly after they leave
• Hand-held guest detector used by hotel staff to determine if a guest is in a room: this avoids guests being disturbed by hotel staff
• A touch-panel remote control that manages lighting levels and room climate, opens and closes the curtains, controls the television, radio and the DVD player, and even repositions the head and foot of the bed. This touch panel can also be associated to the phone, like in the St. Regis New York Hotel
• Motion detection lights that activate when guests enter the room
• A biometric room safe that uses a thumbprint as the lock and key

Sleeping with the future
A foremost hotel need is a great bed. One of the latest inventions is the Multimedia Bed designed by MIT scientist Ted Selker. The bed features a large computer screen fixed on the ceiling. Customers can surf the web, check their mails, run screen savers or simply fall asleep listening to music by using an advanced wireless mouse. In addition to all these functions, the bed can turn itself off and is allowed to detect the clients' breathing; in case of stopped breathing an automatic alarm sounds.

Digitising the shower
Bathrooms in high tech hotels are becoming more and more sophisticated with computerized water temperature control, massage chairs, heated toilet seats/bidets and defogging bathroom mirrors. The most important and high tech part of the bathroom is the digital shower. Digital showers are easy and safe to use and they are powered by a small processor which can be placed under the bath. The one-touch digital shower features a system that allows the programming of the temperature. Finally, in order to make the shower a unique experience the digital shower features optional body jet types of massage, a steam bath, an oil diffuser shower and more.

Programming the concierge
InterContinental launched its 'virtual concierge' services for the Holiday Inn. The 'eHost' gives Holiday Inn guests access to all the information provided by a traditional concierge using a wireless internet-based solution. The services include area dining options, attractions, movies, shopping, transportation and events. It also provides weather and airline information, the brand history and information relating to the concerned hotel. The 'eHost' also allows customers to play games and send e-cards to their friends and family.

Marketing for the 21st century
Employees are also being trained to use new technology in their property. Guestlink software is one of the largest tourism technology system created and provided by New Vision Group to facilitate and assist hospitality employees in their job. Guestlink tools permit accommodation providers to access more sophisticated e-commerce capability, allowing them to publish a mix of indicative availability and real-time tourist information. The software assists hospitality developers to publish e-commerce data on their website, maintain and control online channels, monitor usage statistics and run seasonal tariff management.

Skipping hello and goodbye
In order to improve customer service, Ariane Systems has created an interactive check in/check out terminal. On arrival to the hotel the customers handle their own check in and obtain the chosen room access card. This workstation has a high-resolution touch screen. The features include a programmable software interface, a multilingual dialogue, and full integration with the PMS and a card locking system, as well as ability to read loyalty cards. For check out, the guests can review the bill, validate it, pay by credit card and print out the invoice.