

Housekeeping to Take Center Stage in the New Normal

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Many predictions have already been made for what hospitality will look like after the lockdown is over, but none are clearer than the need for drastically bolstered cleaning procedures.

Regardless of any new government mandates that eventually come about from COVID-19, guests will still be quite timid once travel restrictions are lifted and will need a heavy hand of reassurance from hotels to give them peace of mind while traveling. This means markedly increased safety and sanitization practices for both public spaces and guestrooms.

But with every new policy comes a steep cost, and all will inevitably have to be passed through to the customer via the room rate. So, even though the worst may be over, the coronavirus pandemic will continue to influence housekeeping and what guests expect from hotels in this regard for the rest of the decade ahead, resulting in a very different way of operating. Let's start, though, by looking at what the immediate aftermath will look like.

Phasing into the New Balance

The stories of New York hotels converted to sleeping quarters for healthcare practitioners in the midst of the pandemic offer a stark picture of the worst case for hotels in the near future – all guests and staff forced through singular entranceways to have their temperatures taken, with the interiors resembling dystopic hellscapes of plastic-covered furnishings and continually disinfected surfaces.

This is not hospitality. It works as a precautionary measure for a specific time, place and group of travelers with a high risk of exposure to the pathogen. But once the panic tapers off, the average guest will yearn for a more calming environment, albeit one that's compliant with many new safety features.

Even in the initial reopening phase, being greeted by front desk personnel in hazmat suits will only put visitors on edge, and yet any housekeeping malfeasance, however small, will likewise be treated with rampant disgust. The balance will come by updating and reinforcing your SOPs, then still doing your best to provide 'service with a smile', even though guests may not see those pearly whites under your PPE.

While in the past housekeeping was a core operation that was designed to be 'flawless yet invisible', now it must be 'beyond flawless and highly visible'. Cleanliness and adherence to any new certification standards that come about will act as a marketing tool. Moreover, through what we are touting as 'cleanliness theatre', hotels will benefit from, for instance, having custodians visibly sanitizing public areas during morning and afternoon peak periods instead of only during the wee hours of the morning.

More critically, though, will be what's required to alleviate viral concerns within the guestrooms – not to mention catering, banqueting, restaurants, spa and any other business silos – translating into significantly longer cleaning times and a larger workforce required to fulfill those duties. Especially considering that many properties are debating a 24-hour wait period after checkout before reassigning a room (to thereby let any lingering virus particles degrade), all these extra cleaning costs will have to be factored into the nightly rate just to break even.

A suitable reaction to these new demands for an overly sanitized hotel space may help to restore confidence in the very near term, but these safety upgrades are largely unsustainable for the current hospitality model over the long run because the operating costs make them prohibitive to the average customer. And this is particularly true when you factor in that most consumers for the rest of 2020 won't have nearly as much disposable income to put towards trips due to mounting economic troubles.

Hence, the balance of doing too much versus doing too little will need to be constantly reassessed over the next few quarters so that hotels stay safe while still producing some form of profitability. As travel ramps back up in the fall or into 2021 – and as we progress through each phase of the return to some semblance of normalcy – expect that several of the more strenuous coronavirus-specific measures to

slide in importance. This is not to say that cleaning will fade in guests' minds, but that their peace of mind won't be solely derived from seeing employees cleaning the lobby in hazmat suits.

Assembling the Task Force

Gathering together your very own Avengers is the first step. With housekeeping, and cleaning in general, becoming all the more critical, this visibility will also make this department more heavily integrated with other operations. After all, these bolstered procedures will not only apply to guestrooms but also for all other spaces and onsite foodservice. Everyone must be aware and be able to voice their ideas related to cleanliness as it is now a pervasive issue.

Determining where you need to be at for reopening, the start of autumn, the upcoming winter and this time next year will require a vigilant and diverse team to formulate and implement all changes to your current practices. This task force should be comprised of individuals from several departments so as to account for all possible points of guest and staff contact. Everything should be up for review, especially now that 'contactless' is the operative word.

The best solution for an acceptable level of sanitization, though, may not be derived from an increased frequency of cleaning specific surfaces, but rather from removing the need to constantly wipe these materials down in the first place. Technology will thus work wonders to help your teams stay efficient with their time. For example, housekeeping management software, guest messaging apps, mobile check-in platforms, BLE-activated locks, wearable devices and ecommerce payment systems will all help to ultimately reduce the burden on room attendants, public area janitors and even servers who may be loaded with extra restaurant cleanup duties.

Such a task force will be instrumental for finding ways to stay compliant with what will make guests feel secure and any new government regulations as well as any cost saving engagements. Moreover, as many authorities have forewarned, we may experience a second wave of this virus as flu season returns with the cold weather, further validating the need for a nimble team that can keep pace with the news cycle and rapidly deliver solutions that are attuned to each phase of lockdown.

Ultimately, we're all in this fight together, and yet it comes down to the actions of each individual hotelier to ensure that we succeed. If we all take the necessary actions now to update our brand standards while still remaining true to the age-old ideals of hospitality, then we will restore customer confidence to the point where a healthy number of guests will be motivated to travel as soon as possible and enjoy our hospitality once again.

Source: <https://www.hotelmogel.com/housekeeping-to-take-centerstage-in-the-new-normal/>