

RETHINKING ROOM SERVICE

Changing With The Times

by Chris McBeath

Much is happening in room service these days. Where some hotels are choosing to eliminate it all together in favour of providing a grab-and-go service in the lobby, others are morphing it into a deluxe in-room dining experience. There are even properties that are starting to deploy robots to deliver guest requests, complete with coherent speech as well as R2-D2-like bleeps and whistles.

Redefining Purpose

With its dedicated staff, rolling tables, and meal delivery, traditional room service is hardly a money-maker. According to PKF Hospitality Research, it accounts for (on average) a little over 1% of overall hotel revenues, and although few guests actually take advantage of it, the service is still an expected feature, especially in upscale and luxury properties.

“For some hotels, room service is not meant to make a profit. It is a brand standard and an important amenity that contributes to star status,” describes Darren Hicks, a hotel branding consultant. “It’s a very labour-intensive cost-centre but they would lose customers if they didn’t offer in-room dining. As a result, the trend is to deluxe up the menu, create in-room-only dining specialties, and use room service to differentiate between a hotel’s standard and superior rooms.”

Joseph Smith, a senior hospitality industry executive, agrees. “Twenty years ago, you could order anything through room service that the hotel was serving in its full-service restaurant. Nowadays, the room service menu is truly its own design. It’s smaller plates, and items that are easier to prepare, transport, and serve.”



Photo courtesy of Marriott Residence Inns

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Splasy comfort foods such as macaroni and cheese with fresh lobster and Parmesan cheese paired with craft beer or signature wine and decadent desserts are proving popular. Over-the-top offerings like mixologist-customized cocktails for an in-room meal are also available at some properties. In the case of Four Seasons, a 15-20 minute fast delivery program was initially focused on business travellers; however, the program has expanded to include transient guests and children, and now represents about 20% of the brand's room service business.

Transitioning Concepts

Although room service continues to be among the first areas to scale back when budgets are under pressure, hotels are repackaging the concept to make it more economical.

When Hilton Worldwide discontinued room service completely at one of its signature properties two years ago, guest reaction forced the company to a fallback position: offering to deliver items to guestrooms that they had purchased in the hotel's new upscale grab-and-go market Herb N' Kitchen. Since then other chains have followed suit, prompting analysts to note that the growth of in-house food markets appears to parallel the decline of traditional room service. After all, guests don't have to endure 30-minute delivery times, the price point is lower than room service, they can see what they're ordering, and they are instantly gratified.

Geared to longer-term stays, complimentary grocery shopping service has long been a brand standard at Marriott Residence Inns, and is a popular feature in hotels like the Lakeview Signature Inn Calgary Airport, although the latter does charge a nominal service fee. Additional ideas include repurposing the mini-bar fridges with customized options that guests pre-order and pay for when making their reservation.

At the Courtyard Calgary Airport Hotel and the Residence Inn Calgary Airport, guests also have access to a take-away service out of the

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Courtyard Bistro. "The two properties are Select and Extended Stay brands respectively, so room service is not part of the amenity package," explains Richard Main, General Manager. "However, in this age of convenience eating, guests really enjoy being able to order and take-out a meal from our bistro menu for in-room dining, so they can work uninterrupted, or eat in front of their favourite movie as they would at home."

The Millennial Influence

The emerging millennial traveller is changing the way many hotels do business - in property design, use of technology, and a management philosophy that enables and encourages interaction. Today, new builds and renovated properties include multi-functional lobbies that promote people flow and engagement as never before.

According to Robert Mandelbaum, PKF Hospitality Research, "The millennials are known to be social. They'd much rather hang out with their colleagues in the lobby, and if they can get a beer and a hamburger there, all the better. They generally prefer that than going back to their rooms, ordering room service, and eating by themselves."

Smith continues, "It's about giving the guest options. When the grab-and-go concept started, it was primarily about providing guests with a quick, inexpensive option for breakfast. Now the markets are all-day enterprises, with the available items changing through the day. And where that's not



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Photo courtesy of Savioke

possible, hotels are more open than ever to partner with outside vendors as an alternative to room service, making arrangements with nearby restaurants to act as surrogate kitchens and deliver food to their hotel rooms."

Located in the heart of Edmonton's "foodie-ville", Whyte Avenue, the Metterra and Varscona Hotels on Whyte offer two options for dinner by local restaurants - Chianti's (Italian) and Origin India (Indian) - which the hotel plates and delivers to guests for in-room dining.

"Being in a great foodie neighbourhood is part of the attraction of our hotels, so we opted for non-traditional room service," describes Dawn Li, General Manager, whose focus is on the guest experience. "It's about lifestyle interests and choices, so we do a complimentary wine tasting every night except Sunday with different wines, cheeses, and hot appetizers. On Thursdays, we feature chocolate and wine, and once a month we have a local beer tasting. By offering these added-value services, we've established a social and happening vibe, which really appeals to our guests who want to experience all that Old Strathcona has to offer. It negates the need for room service."

Indeed, as hoteliers start to rethink their room service offerings, data from GrubHub Inc., a leading online and mobile food ordering service, shows that takeout orders to hotels are increasingly popular.

i-Order

With technology starting to automate room service requests, the entire delivery process is fast becoming more cost effective. "Younger travellers especially won't mind not having a live person take their order. Not only will they not have a problem with it, they'll demand it," Smith says. "In placing an order with an app on a smartphone, it goes directly to the cook station. The guest is sending it directly to the end production person who starts preparing it immediately. You've eliminated the order-taking position entirely. In some chain properties, on-line requests already constitute about 30% of the total orders and it's growing exponentially."

i-Robot

Operating rather like the Star Wars droid R2-D2 but with stylish finesse, Savioke's robotic butler is as effective as it is novel. Equipped with an empty compartment to transport various small items, its built-in Wi-Fi and 4G enables the unit to connect with the concierge, call an elevator, and navigate through lobbies, down hallways and around obstacles. With the 6-month pilot program ending earlier this year, exclusively at Aloft, and with 1,000 deliveries to its credit, this 3-ft tall robot is getting ready for broader horizons and in greater numbers. Should the force be with you, room service could take on a whole new dimension. ☺