Security through CCTV
By:Dan Phillips

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Where did those terrorists stay the night of Sept.10, 2001? If it was at a hotel, could that hotel have done anything to prevent those horrendous acts? NO, absolutely and positively NO.

So Why Bring It up?

Sept. 11 has made America more security conscious than ever before. It has become impossible to protect our borders. Now, it is up to us to protect ourselves from what may happen within our borders. The government has called upon individuals to help. Small and large businesses can help as well, perhaps being even more effective.

Enterprises that cater to masses of people, that are open to the public, must find ways to protect their property and the lives of those people at their location. It should never become a lawyer's gambit that there is liability inherent in operating a place of business that caters to large numbers of people to protect them from terrorist acts. However, I certainly hope that in the spirit that America was founded on, we, as hoteliers, do the most to protect our guests, their friends and family, our staff and our community from wanton acts of violence.

A hotel should put policies and procedures in place to cover all aspects of security and protection and on-going developments in technology are helping with this effort. For the purposes of this article, closed circuit television (CCTV) and digital video recorders (DVR) will be discussed.

CCTV is not new to hotels. Many hotels have been using this technology for years. Over this time, many flank steaks have been saved from walking out of hotel freezers on their own. The deployment of CCTV has prevented cases of beer from being stored in the trunk of the bartender's car. And, CCTV has provided documentation about that guy who hurt his back from slipping on a recently mopped floor who was just trying to pull one over on those big insurance companies that can afford a settlement anyway.

While the need for CCTV-enhanced security is growing, the prices of these systems are dropping. In addition, the capabilities of these systems are getting better almost daily. You will want to enlist a consultant or a trusted vendor, to help with the design and deployment of a system that is right for you.

The first decision to make is on the functionality of the cameras. What is the desired outcome? Basically, there are two answers to this question, surveillance and security monitoring. Surveillance is the tricky one, usually employed when there is an investigation in process or in response to suspicious activity. One would be advised not to include audio recording without court approval. In this case the cameras are usually hidden or disguised. The viewing of these camera feeds should be restricted to only those people in highest authority.

Security monitoring is more typical. The system should cover all points of access and egress. Care should be taken to design the system so that it will provide identifiable pictures of not only the people but also what they carry. Color is better than black and white here. Cameras are normally visible and can act as a deterrent.

The next step would be to decide the locations of the cameras. All portals to the hotel should be covered, including the main entrance, employee entrances and fire exits. You will want to consider covering the lobby, the valet, the parking lot and the elevator landings. When you cover the front desk area use cameras to cover both the guests from face on and the front desk staff from face on. Don't try to cover this area with just one camera. Cameras should also be located in every place where cash is changed. At the bar/lounge restrict the camera to just cover the cash register. Having a camera recording the events throughout the bar increases your liability, if ever there was a question about serving too much alcohol, for example. Other areas to include would be the loading dock, executive offices and back-of-house areas like storage rooms and luggage rooms.

The technology installed would be another step in the process. The location and function of the camera may help to determine the choice between color and black and white video. The area to be covered by a camera will determine whether a pan-tilt-zoom (PTZ) camera is required. Camera housing is an issue. Some of the best, recent developments are in DVR. The ability to have easy and quick access to a specific camera at a specific moment in time is supported very well with DVR. Storage concerns might require redundant array of independent disks (RAID) devices. Systems today can be programmed for event-triggered recording. An example could be to start recording when a door is opened, or when a cash drawer is opened. Motion detection-activated cameras are available. Motion detection can also be linked to switches, such as to turn on a light. A very important decision will be that of how to provide access to your system for outside agencies like hired security firms or local police departments. Finally, you will decide on the set up and equipment required for the in-house monitoring station.

Wouldn't it be something if your hotel installed a new CCTV system, one that linked real time to local police? Wouldn't it be something if the local police issued a warning for a specific individual, perhaps a terrorist, and the local police spotted that individual coming into your hotel while scanning your video feed? Wouldn't it be something if the police department called your security staff to put them on the look out and if the police arrived, stopping this person, before your front desk staff even checked him in? Now, wouldn't that be something?

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