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Notes From an I.T. Service Shop

*Streaming Media Players
(connected TV players)*

Are They Right for Hotels?

For decades, hoteliers have received television signals over the air, through cable TV providers or other service companies that also supply additional content. Now there is another supplemental source of content that may be worth evaluating.

Streaming media players, or connected TV players, have developed rapidly over the past year. These devices connect to an in-room TV to provide Web-based video and audio content. Most connect to the Internet wirelessly or wired, and to the TV via a HDMI port. The devices present a menu that varies by manufacturer. The Boxee interface, for example, displays friends, watch later shows, movies, apps, files and the Web. Selecting shows displays many currently airing television shows. The picture quality is acceptable. Roku has a similar interface. The remote control is used to make selections, and when needed a virtual keyboard appears on the screen. There are some preset keys available for popular sites.

Apple® is leading the market with its Apple TV offering at a 32 percent market share. Other major players include Roku and Boxee, along with TeleAdapt, Sony, Netgear, and other lesser known companies.

Are these devices something that a hotel should consider offering guests, either as an

amenity or for a fee? Is guest demand sufficient to justify the expense of installation and on-going maintenance?

Research shows there is some guest demand. Some guests are traveling with their own players and using the hotel's Wi-Fi to connect to the Web. Several forums discuss how to hook up these boxes to hotels' televisions, along with tips and troubleshooting recommendations. A guest must also have a laptop so that a connection can be made. Currently, the percentage of guests using this is not documented.

LodgeNet offers a variety of content services, which in contrast to media players do not use broadband for delivery, and, the content is stored locally, on a server within the hotel. Vice President of Marketing Paul Johnson said that guests either travel with content stored on a device or access media stored in the cloud through remote servers on the Internet. Since Lodgenet is a content provider, movies that are still in theatres are available in LodgeNet equipped hotels. The company has just released an app that enables a guest to use a smartphone as a TV remote control.

Johnson said that the amount of bandwidth needed to supply media players could be significant, as could be the cost of installation and maintenance. LodgeNet delivers its content via the Coax cable therefore, IP bandwidth is not affected. Updated content is delivered automatically to the hotel server via satellite.

With an offering for both hotel and home use, Boxee does not license content, but, makes available the most popular content on the Web. Vice President of Marketing Andrew Kippen said that use in hotels is not widespread, however the Boxee device is installed in every room of a boutique hotel in Boston. He said that the consumer market is just developing.

Kippen said the TV device industry is "ripe for innovation," and will include offerings that appeal to hotel guests, segmented into business, casual and family travelers. Loyalty programs can be integrated with the help of the TV connected devices. One item that may be available to hoteliers in the future is a low-cost box that connects the guest's portable electronic device to the TV for watching content. This content would be streamed from the portable device wirelessly to the television. In addition to content streaming, Boxee offers social integration through Facebook, Twitter and others.

Having in-room media players may be attractive to guests that already subscribe to Hulu, Netflix and other similar services. A guest would login to the device with his or her credentials and watch all the content that he or she does at home. However, there are drawbacks with the current boxes. The guest user ID and password is stored in the box and has to be cleared after checkout. If not, the next guest could use the previous guest's login to buy content.

Older televisions without HDMI ports will not work without some type of adaptor, which adds to the overall cost. As stated above, bandwidth requirements can be significant, although the content can be throttled, which can cause dreaded buffering.

There are already televisions on the market that are Internet ready, allowing an Internet connection without a player device. These are mainly high-end offerings that, for now, are not practical in a large volume of guestrooms.

Streaming media players may have some application in hotels, especially as the technology improves. While widespread deployment may not be practical at this time, outfitting a selected number of rooms may prove to meet the requirements for certain guests.

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