UTILIZING CAS
A Lost Art

Remember when hotel guests made phone calls? Remember when the new North American dialing plan came out and it was all we could do to keep up with the new area codes and exchanges? Remember Y2K?

After 25 years in the hotel industry, I remember installing my first phone system into a new hotel. I had the title of MIS director; manager of information systems. The general manager challenged me to put all of the information from the various systems I managed together into formats that made sense, which could be used for something more than just paper piling up on the floor and being put into daily audit boxes. One of the systems at my control was the call accounting system (CAS). With that data I was able to control revenue, reconcile phone bills, ensure that the new phone system was working at peak efficiency, and even catch employees making phone calls that weren't work related. Hotel phone revenue today is nearly nonexistent, and many hoteliers spend little to no time examining the data anymore. Today when a call accounting system fails many hoteliers opt not to even replace it.

Recently, a kindred spirit contacted me. I received a phone call from Kelly Gates, a member of the North Texas chapter of HFTP. During our call she told me many of her tricks in using CAS data. I was impressed that unlike many others, she uses CAS data not for the revenue side but for many other reasons that make a significant impact on the operations at her hotels. She said, "The importance of collecting data each month is not only in reviewing current billing and system postings. The magnitude of collecting monthly data is being prepared to negotiate any service by location, per region or specific call type. Taking inventory of infrastructure, services and equipment configurations of your business… is the key to successful implementation of vision."

Gates was kind enough to share some of her secrets on using her CAS with us. First, she did a little programming work. In the CAS, she labeled her trunk groups in use by the phone system to match the descriptions of the phone bills she gets. For example, the trunk group(s) that carry domestic long distance over a particular carrier are labeled as such, while other trunk groups for outbound local, outbound international or provided by other carriers, are label accordingly. This makes reconciling phone bills much easier. Also, she set her administration extension list by hotel department and inserted the GL codes for each department/extension. When she runs her admin reports, she can give them directly to the accounting department for cost allocation by general ledger code.

Gates runs a variety of reports that provides data to enable her to accomplish many things including the following: Verify that answer supervision is working correctly; generate RFPs for service providers and for new phone system equipment; optimize the hotel's trunk groups and also spot flaws in trunk routing and dead trunk ports; reconcile phone bills, both for guest revenue-producing calls validating their postings and for admin calls assigning direct costs to departments; verify that carrier contractual commitments are met; and establish benchmarks regarding cost and profit per available room which drives ADR decisions.

Information from the CAS is also helpful with sales and marketing efforts. Data can be gathered from guestroom and meeting room outbound calls that will provide the area codes called. Combining this with the inbound calls over the hotel's toll free number(s) provides the sales department with geographic locations that generate business for the hotel. Management can also analyze data on the outbound calls made by each sales staff member to ensure that each is working efficiently and within his or her respective territories. By monitoring both the CAS reports and cellphone bills, a hotel can ensure that efforts are not being made to increase those numbers fraudulently.

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Many hotels have both an internal reservations department and an outsourced central reservations system. Hotel phone systems are programmed to allow easy transfer of calls from the inside reservations department to the outside service when busy or off schedule. The service that handles these transferred calls typically charge fees based on the number of calls or reservations made. The CAS can provide valuable data on the trends and enable the reconciliation of this expense to be possible. Combining the CAS data with the automatic call distributor (ACD) reports will offer immeasurable value.

The management company that Gates works for was considering implementing SIP trunking. This service generally provides talk paths (think phone lines) that provide unlimited calling for a flat fee. By keeping a tight rein on her CAS data, she was able to easily determine that SIP trunking would not provide a cost savings.

Call accounting was never sexy, but in its heyday made hoteliers a great deal of money. There is an art to organizing and examining the data this system provides to the betterment of overall hotel management and profitability. It may be a lost art, but there are still a few who recognize the value and appreciate this art with me.

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