The Importance of Infrastructure: Planning for the Future
By: Elizabeth Lauer Ivey

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What allows a hotel to stand the test of time? You know the type; the grand dames of hospitality, world-renowned, ever-dynamic, always beautiful and usually higher rated (as in ADR) hotel properties. They sprinkle themselves with diamonds and stars and make you remember a night there forever. As a strategist I wonder: What entitles some hotels to prosper for dozens of decades, while competitors fade away in increments of 30 years?

In most cases, it began with a vision, a capable team of supporters, good advice and of course, some cash. This was followed by an on-going commitment to adapt and evolve with the modern world, but to always uphold the ideals that made it a great place to visit in the beginning. Whether it was located on the U.S. railroad at the turn of the last century or an exotic locale during the Golden Age of world travel, this combination of strategies (along with a little more cash) allowed the hotel to grow up for all of us to enjoy.

As technology becomes more integral to the hotel business environment, operators view it as critical to their ability to deliver and receive services. That service may be a guest amenity or a data transfer from an offsite service provider; however, the ability to take advantage of innovation, either now or someday in the near future, is dependent upon infrastructure. This term is used loosely in tech buzz, but for this article it refers to a structured cabling system supporting all networks deployed within the building.

Many real estate developers do not understand the importance of telecommunications building standards, such as those published by ANSI and TISA. Worse, these practices are often dismissed in order to save money on development costs. The practice of “daisy chaining” voice and data connections is something akin to skimping on your IRA contribution. It will catch up with you in the future. Most reputable contractors will no longer loop data connections and it is important for the owner to understand the risk of warrantee cancellation by the cable manufacturer—devastating when you have to knock down walls or send IT guys into airshafts to troubleshoot the network.

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Here’s a typical hotel industry cabling scenario: Voice system distributors will
contract for cabling required for the telephone systems, while the local hardware vendors often set up data networks for administrative staff. Application vendors such as PMS and POS companies provide guidelines for connecting workstations to servers. Pay-per-view vendors give specifications for video networks. These components are then put out to bid by the general contractor. The result has been a rise in retrofit technology, cables crisscrossing workspaces, running through ventilation pathways and a setting for what some call a spaghetti nightmare. Because cable components are so often chosen at the lowest price for what is currently required, consideration is seldom given for the increased use of networks in today’s hotel environment. It was not until the advent of Internet access from the guestroom that hotel builders confirmed that the need for structured cabling systems in the hotel had significantly increased.

Unlike a commercial building where cabling systems have an economic life of 5 to 10 years, the physical plant of a hotel is much more difficult to change in the future. Hard deck construction is prevalent in hotels; there are almost no drop ceilings and little conduit (pathways to protect cable runs and make them accessible in the future). While most network engineers do not notice hotels demanding the network performance requirements of their commercial building brethren, hotels still require an increasingly sophisticated cable plant.

Randy Kunert, president of Source One DCC, said, “What makes hotels more complex than other commercial projects is the diversity of the operations.” Source One is a development consulting and construction services firm specializing in the hospitality industry. There are multiple outlets (restaurants, spas, meeting facilities) and many types of systems and users. There is technology for the guest and technology for the staff, as well as multiple channels to the outside world. He said, “This network complexity should be addressed sooner rather than later in the building process and pre-opening phase.”

Although there is little precedence for structured cabling systems in the hotel environment, they permeate almost every new commercial building, as well as educational buildings, health care facilities and just as importantly, new home construction. The MDU and condominium developers are building with future communication needs in mind, so are the entertainment facility developers. It’s time that hoteliers stopped overlooking the importance of infrastructure, and start ensuring it is addressed during a major renovation or re-development project.

There are plenty of consultants that can provide reliable structured cabling advice and design services in this day and age. Some will cost more money up front but one sure truth is this: It is much more expensive and very difficult to re-wire a hotel in the future, than it is to plan ahead for changes. On that same note, recognizing the need for modernization before it is too late allows great hotels to become even better hotels, withstanding the test of time.

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