BY TERENCE RONSON

MINIBARS: The cold facts

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HAS the standard inroom minibar passed its sell-by date? A facility that should provide a welcome service to guests more often than not leaves them frustrated and angry – and accusing hoteliers of ripping them off by charging outrageous mark-ups.

"Minibars are losing money hand over fist – quite possibly as much as 40% of potential revenue," says Jan Strijker, director of Brantas International Technology, which handles business development for Bartech Automatic Systems in Asia Pacific.

"Most hotel operators are burying their heads in the sand and trying to ignore this self-inflicted problem, rather than addressing it head on with an investment in technology that can, in most cases, easily be recouped in less than 36 months."

Minibars, in various guises, have been around for many years, and we've seen some interesting innovations, including the Robo-Bar [perhaps the original Robo-Cop?].

They now include models fitted with sensors that can be adjusted to allow guests the time to "see and feel" the product, and fridges with glass doors and bright lights to tempt them into buying a cold beer.

But the pleasure of enjoying a well-earned drink often evaporates as guests realise they will have to pay up to six times the street price for the privilege of consuming it in the comfort of their hotel room. And the prices charged for a pack of peanuts or a bar of chocolate are enough to make most guests choke with anger.

It doesn't have to be this way, though. With increased broadband connectivity, more people are working in their rooms, so the potential of marketing refreshments to this captive audience is enormous. It's just a matter of getting the chemistry right.

New technologies are creeping into the industry that are helping to turn a potential liability into an asset.

Various sizes and inserts allow hoteliers to customise the model for the particular needs of their markets.

For example, you can have a section of the fridge that allows guests to store their own goodies and not affect the other part that is controlled by sensors.

Minibars can switch, at pre-defined times of the day, to a "happy-hour" mode, offering discounts on individual items or the whole fridge.

Bundled package

Another option is for the property management system (PMS) to "comp a Coke" to guests ordering inroom movies as part of a bundled package.

Fully controlled "dry-sections" also allow for attractive displays of food items and merchandise.

Stocktaking is a cinch. Instead of schlepping around 300 guestrooms, you just press a couple of buttons, and immediately see the on-hand stock in all the rooms.

Restocking is no longer a chore, because the system tells you where and what was consumed. Instead of lugging loads of inventory around and maybe losing the odd bottle en route, the restocker can just take what was consumed.

You could even provide a restock facility twice daily and impress the heck out of your guests.

Reports also tell you if a guest has picked up an item but hesitated [probably because of the price] and then put it back – within a pre-defined period of one or two minutes. A report like this could help you determine buying patterns.

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Shelf lives can also be measured by telling the system that, for example, a can of beer has a shelf life of three months before losing its freshness.

When items reach that stage, the system issues a reminder – allowing you to transfer the item to another F&B department to prevent a write-off. You could even offer a "two-for-one" clearance special.

With the expiry-date control, F&B managers can start thinking outside the box by offering fresh produce, such as yoghurt drinks, and turn their minibar into a true refreshment centre.

Another neat trick is that, since these are networked back to the PMS, the fridge can have fall-back temperatures so that when a room is vacant the temperature can be automatically increased by a few degrees, which will save you a few dollars on energy costs.

Putting these new and "intelligent" minibars into guestrooms can be expensive – perhaps upwards of US$1,000 each – and that would include using your existing cabling infrastructure like TV coax, twisted pair, CAT5 or even [as recently installed in a Washington hotel] wireless.

But to help offset this burden, there are some neat financing deals around, apart from the usual leasing option.

One is to outsource the whole operation to a third party which takes care of supplying the fridges, cabling, stocking and replenishing, while returning about 10% of the revenues to the hotel.

These new technologies allow hotels to reduce losses while cutting operational overheads, which means they can set more realistic pricing levels.

At the end of the day, hotels need to use their creativity and view minibars as the service enhancers they were originally designed to be, rather than cash cows for milking the guests. ❐

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