

The arching entrance hall with the vast, sweeping staircase – the hotel reception area is traditionally the most impressive part of a property, and with good reason as it's the first point of contact with guests. But will moves to automate the front desk kill off the grand hotel lobby? *Emma Allen* reports

PUTTING UP A GOOD FRONT



It's late, you've had a long day and you're about to check in to your hotel. The last thing you feel like is being faced with a barrage of questions about pillow preferences and loyalty programmes from an over-attentive receptionist.

And thankfully, all you have to do is wave your BlackBerry at a screen reader, swipe your credit card at the door and you're checked in. Within seconds, you're off to the privacy of your room, having already been sent a text with room directions from the hotel.

While mobile phone technology isn't at this level yet, it won't be long before we could all be using handsets to get into a hotel, according to Paul Finch, sales director at hospitality software specialist Micros. "Making a reser-

vation with your BlackBerry is an idea being discussed. It's only a matter of time before it comes into practice."

And for certain brands, particularly those geared to corporate users, the idea of the traditional hotel front desk, where travellers queue up with their luggage to wait, and wait some more, is fast becoming outdated.

One idea already starting to make its mark in the USA and Japan is radio frequency identification (RFID). Still to gain acceptance here because of concerns over IT security, it works by assigning a virtual room key to the customer's RFID-enabled credit card. This is then recognised by the hotel's locking system, allowing that guest to enter automatically and bypass the check-in process completely.

While self check-in is nothing new in the hotel industry – budget brands like Etap and Formule 1 have been using contactless entry systems for years – the trend has started to catch on elsewhere in the market, with full-service brands such as City Inn or Radisson offering automated check-in as a service amenity.

"The kiosks might be highly visible, or tucked away in the corner," explains Finch, "but increasingly hotels use them because they're quick, they offer people a choice, and they cover the legal requirements of check-in with a regular methodology."

But what about the human touch, the person on reception who greets you, asks how your journey went, and then tells you about a

little place they know down a small street, second on the left?

According to hotel industry consultant Melvin Gold, automated check-ins are seen by many places as a step back in service. "Guests in four-star and upwards are looking for some form of comfort and service they can't get at home," he insists.

"In fact, we're seeing a more personalised check-in taking hold that probably originated in the boutique or country house hotel market, and is an attempt to gear things more towards the guest."

One such is the Von Essen Samling hotel in the Lake District. There, all new arrivals are met by general manager Daniel Jonberger, or a senior member of the team, and escorted ▶



The lobby of the Cumberland Hotel (top); at the Samling hotel (above) there's no reception desk

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

1. Relate to them

"You can see if someone's had a long day when they arrive, and they don't want to hear about the loyalty programme. Staff should key in to this immediately and be naturally engaging. The focus has to be on the guest, not the check-in process. That's one reason why we decided to eradicate registration cards, so that receptionists aren't just tapping away on a keyboard."

David Taylor, general manager, the Hoxton hotel, London

2. Offer to do things

"We always suggest hanging their suit up, arranging to charge their mobile phones – essentially alleviating any small problems or worries that could mar their stay, but without appearing to be insincere or superficial,"

Andrew Stenbridge, managing director, Chewton Glen, Hampshire

3. Be welcoming, not officious

"The real key to making guests feel welcome is genuine warmth – being hospitable should be what we do well in our industry. Try to wear a nice smile, not a 'have a nice day' grimace, then make eye contact and use a pleasant tone of voice."

Mike Prager, the Real Hotel Company

4. Use their name – a lot

"The first two minutes of a guest's stay can either make or ruin their entire experience, so first impressions are vital. At the luxury end, it's all about personal contact and the doorman's greeting has to be phenomenal, as if he's welcoming the person into their own home. Using the person's name is terribly important. Few things are better than recognition in a new place."

David Morgan-Hewitt, managing director, the Goring hotel, London

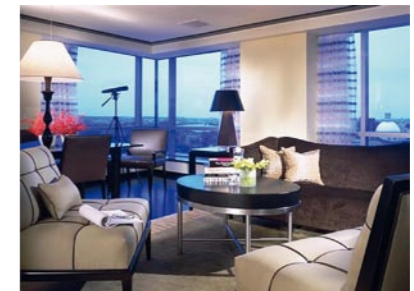


The lobby of the Andaz hotel in east London (left) which has reception "pods" (above)

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME?

It might sound like a Bond film gimmick, but iris entry scanning has already been introduced in a number of hotels around the world. The Murano in Paris and the boutique Nine Zero in Boston have guests checking in this way.

In Boston, at the Cloud Nine penthouse suite, people enter, literally, with a blink of an eye. An iris is digitally photographed, and people then look at



The Nine Zero, Boston, uses iris scanners

a scanner at the door of the suite.

The people at Nine Zero say that templates of irises are destroyed at checkout unless repeat guests want them on file.

Fingerprints can

also unlock rooms. The Soho Loft, a seven-room hotel in



New York, was one of the first to use technology which captures the data favoured by many a police force of yore.

Five rooms in the hotel can be opened, with guests' prints scanned on the room lock. From then on, people gain access by pressing their index fingers on the locks and, for an extra layer of security, keying in a numerical code.

The hotel throws away the scanned fingerprints every few days.

◀ to their room. There's no reception desk at all – the idea, according to Jonberger, is to make the guest feel as if they are stepping into a private house.

The way around the normal reception procedure is for the guest's details to be taken beforehand. "We take the credit card at the time of booking, as well as any dietary requirements or specific table requests for the restaurant. Then we don't want to see their credit card until they check-out," Jonberger explains.

While Jonberger admits that this approach is easier with smaller properties with a high staff-to-guest ratio, the majority of guests still expect some sort of interaction on arrival, he believes.

"It doesn't matter how many rooms you have, every guest should be greeted by somebody who knows the hotel. It creates a more relaxed, assured feel that sets the tone for their stay."

Patrick Reardon, managing director of hotel architects Reardon Smith, whose clients include Four Seasons Hotels and the Savoy Group, believes that not every hotel can provide such service, but that the hotel's lobby or

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reception is still important in setting first impressions.

"The days of huge lobbies and atriums have largely passed, as hotels prefer to spend money on guest bedrooms and bathrooms, and areas from which they can derive income," Reardon explains. "But they still create an atmosphere. The traditional reception desk is still around because people usually need some sort of base or focus."

One example is the Cumberland hotel in London, one of Reardon Smith's clients, where the lobby is more art gallery than reception, with sculptures, funky lighting and

regularly changing artwork on show, designed to create a sense of calm away from the hustle and bustle of nearby Oxford Street.

Desks aren't fixed any more, now lower in height and moveable. Computer screens are at receptionist level so people can maintain eye contact with their guests.

"A desk isn't so much of a barrier now – it's more about the interaction between staff and guest," Reardon says.

At the 267-bedroom Andaz hotel in east London, owned by Hyatt, reception "pods", or stations dotted around can be a useful way to save space in smaller lobbies. Formerly the Great Eastern hotel, and under part-Sir Terence Conran ownership, Andaz spent £8m on refitting the hotel before reopening last year, with the bulk of the spend directed towards the lobby, or "living room" as the hotel now calls it.

Rather than being steered over to a traditional reception, guests are greeted by a host who acts as receptionist and concierge. Then, over a glass of wine or coffee, check-in is carried out on a wireless PDA linked to the hotel's reservation system. An e-concierge system,

prompted when people book online, promotes the hotel's art and entertainment packages.

According to Simon Warrington, Andaz marketing communications manager, the move away from a conventional front desk was carried out to break down barriers. "We realised that we didn't need three people – receptionist, concierge and bellhop – where one person could greet, wheel through the luggage and get to know a guest all at the same time," he explains.

"The host's job is to understand the guest and find out what they're looking for from their stay. It could be that they want a party weekend in Shoreditch, or they're looking for a more traditional sightseeing tour."

Even with such personalised attention, however, Warrington admits things did take a while to settle down at the hotel. "We still had guests trying to queue even when we took the barrier of a desk away. People weren't sure what to do. As a result, we boosted the number of staff on-site, and made sure we were out at the front, talking to people."

A year on, Warrington believes that the system has transformed the way he and other

"Obviously, we want people to relax and hang out with us, have a glass of wine or grab something to eat, rather than nip out to the local Pret, for example"

members of the hotel communicate with its guests. "Marketing is much more entrepreneurial among our staff. We don't put flyers in rooms because we want people to ask questions – whether about the restaurant, or what's going on locally," he says.

Andaz is an unusual, new luxury hotel, that is doing many things its own way, but major firms are also looking at the lobby too. Sheraton Hotels & Resorts, part of the Starwood brand, is spending \$1.3b (£740,000) worldwide on renovations, seeking to create a more welcoming first part of the hotel.

New features include playing music, differ-

ent lighting, and perfume devised for Sheraton sprayed into the lobby. There's also an area that allows guests to work or surf the net.

For Colin Bennett, Sheraton area manager for England, upgrading lobby space is not only a means of distinguishing the brand from competitors such as Marriott and Hilton, but a way to retain guest spend. "Obviously, we want people to relax and hang out with us, have a glass of wine or grab something to eat, rather than nip out to the local Pret, for example," he says.

But it's also a recognition, built into the new design, that people like spending time among other people, and the lobby is a place for this as much as it is for a grand welcome.

"They don't necessarily want to sit working alone in their room or in the business centre," he explains. "We wanted to allow them to interact with other guests, and get back that feeling of community in public spaces."

The lobby is changing, but it may be wrong to throw out the front desk and receptionist in order to switch to the fully automated check-in wholesale – especially for those who actually welcome human contact.