

Luxury hotels demand a luxurious service

~ Steve Nicholson, CEO at The Cloud discusses the benefits, the struggles and the practical side of running a WiFi enabled hotel ~

The Cloud is Europe's leading provider of WiFi Internet services to the hotel sector providing services to approximately 1,200 hotels with c85,000 bedrooms.

The Cloud is certain that hoteliers fully recognise the shift in peoples perceptions and the undeniable demand for Internet access when staying in a hotel – be it a budget beater B&B right through the spectrum of hotels to the luxurious 4 and 5 star hotels, dominated by The Cloud, because of its exceptional attention to detail, high quality of service and detailed understanding of what the customer actually wants.

Long gone are the days when the business traveler was 'incommunicado' on a business trip or the family, or for that matter anyone staying in a hotel, did not want Internet access. With the advent of social networking, the easy download of music, video or streaming of TV via the ever growing number of iPlayers, it is logical that people away from home will want easy access to media over the Internet.

As a consequence today's hotels are evolving and evolving fast – they are tapping into the attitudes of the "I want it now" generation of customers and the leading hotel chains across the country are offering them exactly that. Some of the most impressive hotels in Europe (such as The Crowne Plaza) provide on-site WiFi for their customers, opening up a world of communications and local knowledge – the easiest transport, the best restaurants, and the most breathtaking sights.

The demand for fast, reliable and easy to use Internet is undeniable. There was a time when business travelers would be 'incommunicado' while visiting a conference or staying overnight at a hotel – now, that time is seen as prime time for getting those last minute emails out of the door. Business travelers see their overnight hotel stays as much a part of the working life as the usual 9-5 office routine.

Alongside this shift in perception is the fact that the demand for universal internet and communications access is no longer specific to business workers – globetrotters and holiday makers also see fast internet access as a 'must-have' on their accommodation criteria.

With the birth and consequent exponential growth of the smart-phone, the general public has become familiar with 24/7 connectivity, and sees no reason why they should give up their online status just because they are out of the office or on vacation.

This means that hotels must cater for the phone user seeking Internet access just as much as the traditional lap top user of yester year.

The benefits of being equipped to cater for both business and leisure customers are significant – providing that much-coveted 'something extra' in the form of a secure and speedy internet service will work wonders for establishing a sense of loyalty between a customer and a particular hotel chain.

More often than not, a customer will want to access the internet in their hotel room, and this can be provided in a range of different ways, and identifying a customer's needs is paramount for hoteliers.

A fixed internet connection is a suitable option for hoteliers that host corporate functions as the requirements of these events are often different to the needs of the everyday traveler. Conferences and large events are often held at luxurious hotels, and while WiFi is ideal for conference attendees and participants, there are often specific requirements (a higher bandwidth) that is able to cope with video-conferencing and content streaming for live presentations.

The benefits for hotels embracing internet access are evident. Customer satisfaction levels will increase as a result of having their personal and professional needs addressed, which will in turn improve upon a customer's perception of the hotel, ultimately resulting in every serious hoteliers' goal - an edge on the competition.

While successful WiFi installation is a tremendous boon to the modern hotel manager, it is not a simple 'DIY' solution – there are a number of intricacies that must be taken into consideration.

A quality assured service

There are people who preach “*it's quality, not quantity that counts*” (which for the most part is perfectly true), but when talking about internet coverage in 4* and 5* hotels 'quantity' and 'quality' stand shoulder to shoulder.

Service level agreements between the hotels and the service providers are essential to ensure that the speed and security of the connection is guaranteed 24/7.

We foresee the legislative environment changing and changing quickly. We already have EU Directives around anonymous Internet access with the burden of responsibility sitting squarely with the service provider – we anticipate that the legislative framework and penalties for non compliance will increase given the heightened awareness that the Internet is potentially an easy means of anonymous communications.

For this amongst many other reasons The Cloud believe that the day of the DIY service run by hotels are numbered – compliance is complicated and expensive. The Cloud works closely with various government bodies to ensure we offer a secure and fully compliant service. We take our responsibilities seriously and as a specialist WiFi service provider we struggle to see how any hotel chain could contemplate the required investments and commitments to follow the ever changing compliance regime.

The business model

There are primarily two business models adopted by hotels – one where the hotel seeks to deliver a free service paying the service provider to 'manage' the service and one where the service provider installs, maintains and manages the infrastructure, on behalf of the hotel, charging for access and sharing revenues with the hotelier. A hybrid of the two models is growing in popularity – where the hotel provides 30 minutes or an hour free and then charges.

The Cloud does not believe free access in hotels is a sustainable proposition, unless the costs of Internet access are factored into room rates and the costs of all hotel associated services – food, drink, leisure and so on. The general consumption of data person by person is roughly doubling every 6 months – the capacity required by hotels clearly increases as do the operational costs.

The Cloud perspective is 'horses for courses' - they have no allegiance nor preference to either model preferring to work through the dynamics of each model chain by chain or hotel by hotel reflective of the circumstance of each hotel – hopefully offering our best advice and the benefit of vast experience.

Whatever service the hotel manager decides to employ, it is key for them to have a superb customer care process in place to avoid damaging their brand, their service credentials and the annoyance of their staff if services fail and high-end customer service is not on hand.

It is this quest to deliver the ultimate in customer satisfaction that has led the pioneering hotel chains to utilise the expertise of WiFi providers to give customers what they are looking for, while allowing hotel staff to focus on the front line of customer satisfaction (face-to-face interaction).

This little bit extra, is, and will continue to give the more forward thinking hotel managers the edge over the competition, which in an ever toughening market could prove to be vital.