



# Meeting Expectations

Are you catching the conference trade? A little investment could win dazzling rewards for your business

As cutting-edge technology disseminates to the masses and ups our expectations, the pressure's really on for conference facilities to deliver the goods to corporate clients. We all know the horrors of unreliable technology; the squealing radio mike; the frozen slide show and the failing connections between a thousand bits of kit – each critical to a smooth-running seminar. But solve these little glitches and you may still be a step behind satisfying this important client.

Keeping up with the requirements of this lucrative market requires constant investment and a sharp eye on the needs of guests. "We conducted research which showed that both the eight-hour and 24-hour meetings market rate value for money and technology highly on their wish lists," says Sarah Finlay, business development manager at The Royal Terrace Hotel in Edinburgh. Last summer the hotel splashed out £5.2 million on a makeover that included the instalment of digital entertainment

and internet systems in all 107 bedrooms and provides LCD projectors in everyday delegate packages. "Our aim was to add value to our existing facilities," explains Ms Finlay. "We already have a good reputation with the corporate market but we know we can't be complacent and we are constantly sourcing ways to enhance the experience for our corporate guests."

## Keeping Up

The shifting sands of modern technology and its dizzying functionality means that hoteliers must keep a finger on the pulse or risk missing out to those that do. "For venues to remain competitive they must be ahead of the connectivity 'wave'," says Mark Teasdale, managing director of RIEO Communications. "Users are becoming more demanding because of the heavy load applications they are running or need access to. The move from basic email and light web surfing to heavy email use and web content heralds a trend towards the use of many online applications. Sending and receiving huge attachments is the norm, as is web casting, video conferencing, access to streaming video and finally using applications like iTunes, YouTube, Joost, SlingBox and SKYPE.

"In terms of high speed internet access (HSIA) this is an expected norm," continues Mr Teasdale. "Any hotels that fail to offer this essential service will be missing out on enormous sales opportunities. But it isn't a simple case of delivering laptop connectivity. These days hotels and conference centres must have the

flexibility of service offering that permits access for all delegates, does not slow and strain under the load of many connections, is secure, offers VPN (virtual private network) functionality for all users, delivers speed and quality of service. Wired and WiFi connections are also absolutely essential in order to gain the confidence and loyalty of businesses, corporate enterprises and conference organisers."

## Up to Speed

The importance of free HSIA was recently recognised by The Rezidor Hotel Group which announced the service for all participants of meetings and events in Radisson SAS hotels in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. This latest development is part of the brand's continuing investment in meeting guest's needs; Radisson SAS was the first international hotel chain to offer free high-speed internet access for all resident guests, and is now extending this 'E@sy Connect' system so that non-resident meeting delegates can also surf fast for free. "We have a long commitment to being among the first to anticipate the needs of business travellers", says John Kennedy, vice president of marketing and customer relationship at Rezidor. "Getting connected to their corporate networks, checking e-mails or downloading documents is important to our meeting guests, and we are now offering a

complimentary and easy-to-use service to all of them – even if they don't have a room reservation and are just visiting us for the day. However, whilst the Radisson properties may play host to multinational brands, smaller, niche hotels are likely to cater to smaller and more diverse clientèle. So surely the size of company attending impacts on the facilities they expect? "It's almost irrelevant," counters Mr Teasdale. "Users from any business size expect similar speeds and quality of services as they would at the office or at home. Larger businesses and corporate enterprises will deliver far greater numbers of delegates, and in these circumstances hotels must have deployed networks that are able to cope with larger numbers and higher bandwidth demands. Above all, security, ease of connectivity and quality in equal measures are essential, as is readily available and proactive help and support."

So, what extras can be added to ensure the edge over competitors and seal the deal with corporate bookers? "WiFi, speed and contention ratios," answers Mr Teasdale. "WiFi is fast becoming the connection of choice for most users. "Offering greater speeds and service levels will allow hotels to argue the case for continued billing; to reintroduce billing where the free to guest route has been taken; or simply to win very high-value conference business."

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