

Vegas hotel to pilot wireless guest check-in

By Matt Hamblen



(IDG) – The Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas plans to launch a pilot program this summer that's aimed at using wireless devices to ensure that rooms are ready for arriving guests.

Guests will meet hotel clerks at any of several entrances, including the car drop-off area, and be able to show a credit card to check reservations via a wireless LAN connection to a server in real time. Once the reservation has been confirmed, the clerk will be able to encode a room-key card for the guest.

The goal is to eliminate check-in lines at the 3,000-room hotel, which is connected to a casino and conference center, said Chris Stacey, the Internet marketing manager at The Venetian Hotel who is overseeing the pilot.

The pilot is expected to cost "much less than \$100,000" and will be deemed a success if it "helps our business flow and is not a disruption" for clerks to handle the devices, Stacey said. More important, Stacey and Venetian officials are hoping the systems will "facilitate guest needs and serve them faster," he said.

A critical element of the trial is having the check-in data compared with reservations in the hotel's IBM iSeries server in real time, rather than having the data batched together and matched with reservations and room inventory later, Stacey said.

"With conferences, we sometimes turn over 3,000 rooms in a [single] day," and the hotel can't put a guest in a room unless room inventory data shows that it is truly open, he explained. Lansa Inc. in Chicago provided the wireless software development tools for the process after having built the hotel's online reservation system.

Clerks will use rugged Model 1740 handhelds from Symbol Technologies Inc. in Holtsville, N.Y., running on the Palm OS operating system, with attached magnetic stripe readers for gathering credit card information. The handheld will be secured with a strap to a clerk's hand, and it will be connected to a separate device on the belt to encode the room-key cards, said Criss Chrestman, an e-business practice manager at Inter-American Data Inc. in Lawrenceville, Ga., the project integrator.

A short-range radio connection from the handheld to the device on the belt will be used instead of a coiled phone-type cord or an infrared connection, which were considered too awkward in previous trials, Chrestman said.

Despite some concerns of analysts and users that wireless pilots are luxuries during an economic downturn, Stacey said The Venetian hasn't been hurt by the slowing economy and that the trial investment "isn't obscene.

"The posh hotel, built two years ago, was designed with wireless innovations in mind, including cell towers that permit a variety of cell phones to function. Eventually, guests will be able to check in with their personal cell phones using a password, said Stacey.

The hotel's wireless LAN, an 802.11b network, is similar to many that are now being deployed by businesses around the world, analysts said. The 802.11b method is one of the brightest spots in the wireless world right now, said Alan Reiter, an analyst at Wireless Internet and Mobile Computing in Chevy Chase, Md. Such networks are now being installed in Capetown, South Africa, and Helsinki, Finland, to serve multiple businesses, he said.

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