

Case Study

hospitality

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InterContinental Hotels Group

Ricoh Helps IHG Score Big with Guests by Making Information Mobile



ABOUT THE CUSTOMER

When it comes to hotels, people have an endless supply of choice where they rest their heads or hold their meetings. It's no longer just about price, perks and proximity. Sure, those things still matter. But other considerations—especially how a hotel responds to guest needs—also come into play. If those needs aren't met, there's a glut of online vehicles to vent frustrations to the world: TripAdvisor®, Yammer®, Facebook®, Twitter and a litany of others.

InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG) is the umbrella organization that oversees well-known global luxury and economy hotel brands such as InterContinental® Hotels & Resorts, Crowne Plaza®, Holiday Inn®, Hotel Indigo® and Candlewood Suites®. Like all of its competitors, IHG keeps close tabs on what guests are saying about their hotel experiences. The organization continually monitors its guest overall satisfaction (OSAT) scores and has staff at the ready 24/7 to quickly respond to online complaints and less-than-glowing reviews.

However, IHG takes information gathering and assessment one step further. Using a proprietary formula, IHG compiles a "heartbeat score" that culls all the feedback from online sources—plus its own call center—to learn how its guests truly feel about its hotels.

Doing so has proven extremely revealing. Recent heartbeat trends uncovered dissatisfaction with business services—especially information mobility—at its Crowne Plaza hotels. As a full-service hotel with ample guest rooms and conference space, Crowne Plaza is a popular choice for organizations looking to host business conferences throughout the world.

CHALLENGE

- Lack of mobile printing for hotel guests
- Business centers far away from conference rooms
- Growing online complaints
- Adoption by franchisees

SOLUTION

- Mobile printing pilot test
- IHG branded mobile printing app and HotSpot-enabled printers
- Locate printers near conference rooms
- Local service and support

RESULTS

- Mobile printing ready for widespread rollout
- Improved scores and guest experience
- Sharp drop in customer complaints about mobile printing
- Potential for expanded mobile printing in hotel lobbies

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Unwilling to let the problem languish, and likely escalate quickly via online criticism, IHG took action. It sought a partner to pilot test mobile printing at several Crowne Plaza hotels to see just how seamlessly it could make information available to its guests—anywhere, anytime, from any device.

CHALLENGE

As the saying goes, the squeaky wheel gets the grease. Crowne Plaza conference guests had become increasingly vocal about their dissatisfaction with printing at the hotel's on-site business centers. Crowne Plaza hotels didn't offer wireless printing capabilities, so attendees had to be plugged in to print—forcing them to use the on-site business centers. But these centers were typically located far away from the conference rooms, requiring attendees to walk up to ten minutes just to retrieve printed materials and then walk another ten minutes back to their conference space.

"We received feedback from conference guests saying printing at our Crowne Plaza hotels was inconvenient and they wanted to be able to print via mobile capability," said Bert Omer, head of global hotel procurement at IHG. "We needed to resolve this issue to keep our brand attractive as a conference destination."

Unwilling to co-mingle guest information with its highly secure internal network that handles reservations and payments, IHG wanted a separate network to enable mobile printing. It also wasn't ready to leap right into a wide-spread mobile implementation without first testing the waters to see if mobile printing would be well received by Crowne Plaza owners, since most of the hotels are independent franchises.

Also, IHG insisted on a global pilot test. Wanting to avoid the perils of testing just in the U.S. and then pushing a mobile solution out globally, IHG needed a partner that could conduct testing in four areas of the world—China, Latin America, Europe and the U.S.

"We were seeing most of the complaints about lack of mobile printing in China and Latin America," said Omer. "From there, we picked a location in Europe—Paris—and then our Portland, Oregon Crowne Plaza in the U.S. because it had the highest volume of meetings."

Furthermore, IHG considered the printing hardware to be secondary in the initiative. Its focus was on software—more specifically the mobile app—that guests would use to print from their personal devices. IHG knew security concerns would make guests leery of downloading an app from a third-party vendor. And security concerns would likely trump convenience with guests—rendering any mobile printing solution ineffective. IHG needed a partner with the expertise to deliver the right mobile printing technologies and the willingness to brand them as Crowne Plaza.

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SOLUTION

Step one—find the right partner for information mobility. IHG vetted three suppliers, including Ricoh, looking for the best partner to pilot test a mobile printing solution. They reviewed the various hardware and software offerings to see which one ran the best, easily connected to the network and consumed the least amount of bandwidth. Another key—which app looked the best? Only Ricoh was willing to provide a mobile app and accompanying printers that reflected the IHG brand.

“Ricoh understood our need to maintain our brand and they were able to code everything to look like it was our printer and app,” said Omer. “In the end, they provided a transparent solution to our guests.”

IHG also took a unique approach to communicating its needs. Omer simply provided his high-level vision for mobile printing and let each supplier recommend precisely how to build it.

“I don’t want suppliers to simply regurgitate my vision back to me. I want suppliers that challenge my vision,” said Omer. “I picked Ricoh because they came with a much better mobile printing solution than I had envisioned. They live and breathe this stuff.”

With an agreement in place, IHG and Ricoh embarked on a six-month global pilot test. Ricoh installed HotSpot-enabled printers and implemented the HotSpot app for seamless mobile printing at the four test locations. The solution also included Ricoh’s Integrated Cloud Environment (ICE), which enables mobile printing as a cloud service.

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With this mobile printing solution, hotel guests simply launch the app and send their print jobs from their laptop, tablet or smartphone to the printer via the cloud. Guests then receive a four-digit code that is entered at the printer to retrieve their materials. If the materials aren’t released within 72 hours, the print job is deleted to help ensure there is no data residing on the printer that could fall into the wrong hands.

Ricoh also situated the IHG branded printers near the conference rooms so attendees wouldn’t have to walk more than a few feet to get their print jobs. Ricoh even provided a cart to house each printer so hotel employees could easily wheel the device to the exact conference room where an event is taking place.

“Ricoh’s mobile printing solution did exactly what we wanted it to do,” said Omer. “While printing costs did go up for our franchise owners, the payback will be more conferences being booked, more food and more beverage service—which is the most profitable item for a full-service hotel.”

Following the successful pilot test, Ricoh and IHG are rolling out the mobile printing solution to Crowne Plaza hotels throughout the world. Each hotel franchise owner has the option to implement the solution, which largely depends on the volume of conferences at each site. For those hotels that do implement mobile printing, Ricoh provides all the installation and employee training. Ricoh is also the first line of support for each mobile printing-enabled hotel—something IHG insisted on before finalizing the deal.

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“The two other suppliers we considered use third parties for support. Ricoh was the only one willing to send their own local people—no matter where in the world the hotel is located,” said Omer. “Now, if something breaks down, Ricoh fixes it.”

Ricoh has also assigned a project manager to each hotel site to increase guest awareness and use of mobile printing. The project manager monitors the site, provides marketing materials the hotel can distribute to guests and mans a hotline number for customer support. Mobile printing capabilities are also featured on integrated TV channels in guest rooms.

RESULTS

With Crowne Plaza being IHG’s biggest conference brand, it made sense to implement mobile printing at these hotels first. While the rollout has just begun, there are 195 Crowne Plaza hotels and more than 3,700 IHG brand hotels worldwide. The mobile printing solution will likely be added to other IHG hotels going forward—especially those that cater to conferences and business traveler needs. “Crowne Plaza is our focus right now,” said Omer. “The hotels that are using it really like it. It’s gaining traction and use continues to trend upward.”



Improved Scores, Online Chatter Silenced

There has definitely been an uptick in Crowne Plaza’s OSAT and heartbeat scores since the mobile printing implementation. In fact, the complaints about the lack of wireless printing at these hotels are conspicuously absent from the online universe.

“Our guests are happy. The devices worked. And Ricoh has supported us exactly the way we wanted,” said Omer. “Everything was exactly in line with what we expected.”

Fewer Business Centers, Better Lobby Experience

With so many guests equipped with multiple wireless devices now, the traditional hotel business center is going the way of the dinosaur. Dedicated desktop computers and printers tucked away in small, remote spaces are just too archaic and inconvenient for the always connected, always on world.

With this in mind, IHG and Ricoh are discussing how mobile printing can further distinguish the IHG brand. For example, the team is looking at implementing mobile printing technology in IHG’s hotel lobbies—the epicenter of hotel activity—where the energy of cafes, TVs and tablet activity could converge to enable guests to print everything from boarding passes to event tickets to special offers on the fly.

Leveraging Hardware, Improved Productivity

The new mobile printing solution also has IHG looking at ways it could enhance internal workflows and hotel productivity. Far from a general office printer, Ricoh’s HotSpot-enabled devices could eventually be used to offload some of the hotel staff’s routine printing that doesn’t require strict security protocols.

“These are high-end, high-speed devices and there could be potential to do more with them,” said Omer.