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Housekeeping

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Stay In or Go Out?

Experts debate the merits of in-house housekeeping versus outsourcing.

Surveys have shown that hotel cleanliness is the main feature travellers look for when choosing where to stay, outranking room price, location and amenities. Housekeeping is therefore the guardian of any brand — but it's also the largest labour expense. Is it possible to keep costs under control without compromising quality?

The answer is yes, but the hotelier's success depends on two factors: whether to outsource housekeeping or keep it in-house, and the cleaning products and procedures used.

Robert McNamara, national general manager for Jani-King of Canada, points out that as operating costs go up and revenue per room remains flat, many hoteliers have taken the outsource route. He says the main benefits of outsourcing are reduced overtime and other employee costs, plus converting a variable cost to a fixed cost. Outsourcing also avoids potential worker compensation costs.

Bryan Pilbeam, vice-president/general manager for Hotel Five540Forty in Kamloops, says that when he was assistant general manager/director of operations at ResortQuest Whistler, the benefits of outsourcing included "not having to look after hiring, training and staffing for approximately half of our 1,100 units. Whistler was a seasonal resort and ramping up and down



The main feature that travellers are looking at when choosing a hotel is its cleanliness.

employees was difficult. And the fixed cost of outsourcing made our models and productivity matrix much more measurable.”

However, Pilbeam adds that, “every other company I have worked with since has had in-house housekeeping, including Hotel Five540Forty.”

McNamara stresses that in order for outsourcing to work, hoteliers must maintain control: “You can’t have a situation where the vendor can’t or won’t deliver a quality product within brand standards.” He says hoteliers leaning towards outsourcing should determine their housekeeping needs before finding an appropriate vendor. Once one is selected, “Ensure a written contract is prepared and reviewed. The document should clearly outline each party’s role and responsibilities. Also, work hand in hand to ensure a good relationship: ensure your provider is considered part of your team by inviting his people to participate in management and staff meetings.”

Should an hotelier stay in-house, McNamara suggests ways the operation can be streamlined: “For housekeeping positions such as houseman, laundry attendants, and room inspectors, establish labour standards per occupied rooms: for example, one eight-hour houseman for every 50 to 80 occupied rooms. Labour standards should be established for all housekeeping positions and followed daily.”

McNamara adds, “Room 10-day forecasts need to be as accurate as possible. A bad forecast leads to high labour costs due to overstaffing. Also, housemen should be trained to strip dirty linens and remove trash from guest rooms prior to attendants servicing the guest room.”

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Not surprisingly, many professionals associated with the hospitality sector have strong opinions about outsourcing versus staying in-house. “I think a hotel with high occupancy doesn’t benefit as much from outsourcing,” says Howard Rybuck, a vice-president of Wesclean Equipment & Cleaning Supplies Ltd. “As the largest provider of cleaning supplies in Western Canada, what we do is try to partner with hotels, train their housekeeping staff and determine

the best efficiencies. Even by today’s strict standards, all it takes is a good routine to get a room sparkling clean.”

Bill Brooks, North American sales manager for UniMac, points out that “in the realm of laundry, outsourcing tends to result in increased costs instead of cost savings because of the transportation and extra handling involved. For example, a typical 100 room hotel that generates 1,200 pounds of laundry every turnout will pay about 45 cents per pound; but a well-thought out in-house laundry will cost only 12-15 cents per pound.”

SilverBirch Hotels & Resorts, with 19 properties currently in its portfolio, is a strong believer in keeping everything in-house. “We’re not against outsourcing,” emphasizes president and CEO Steve Giblin. “It’s just that we have several staff positions that are crucial to the guest experience, and our director of housekeeping is one of them.”

Giblin notes that for his 300-400 room hotels, the housekeeping manager will typically preside over a staff of about 40.

“We’ve found that the most effective way to keep control of labour costs is through thorough training,” he says. “Techniques such as accurate room forecasting and establishing labour standards have helped significantly, and I also can’t stress enough the importance of using the right equipment for the right job.”



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Improving efficiencies at SilverBirch doesn't end with appropriate equipment purchases. "We distribute the equipment in strategic areas of each hotel for easy access," says Giblin. "Also, we've streamlined certain pieces of equipment. For example, the heavy carts that housekeepers used to push have been replaced by smaller canvas carts that are pulled. They're easier on the housekeepers and they take up less hallway space."

Even something as seemingly innocuous as a mattress encasement can go a long way in reducing housekeeping costs. Tanya Mirza, brand manager, specialty, for Caber Sure Fit Inc., points out that encasements are the number one way to protect the mattress from bed bugs, dust mites, bacteria and fluid damage. (Caber has developed mattress protection products specifically designed for hotel applications: its Caber Sure Fit's BedCare line consists of encasements that are specifically created for industrial use and made to endure the rigorous wear and tear hotel beds are subjected to daily.)

The preferences of manufacturers and hoteliers notwithstanding, maintaining cost as well as quality is possible whether an hotelier outsources or stays in-house. By exercising due diligence and effective management, any property can achieve new standards of cleanliness — without breaking the bank. ●