



Corporate Meetings & Incentives

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HOW SAFE ARE YOUR MEETING FACILITIES?

By John Webster

Although many hotels have stepped up their security training and operations in a potentially more perilous travel atmosphere, others have a long way to go, say consultants and industry observers.

"Corporate meeting planners don't want to know what kind of pillows we have, they want to know about security," says Alan Orlob, vice president of loss prevention at Marriott International Inc., based in Washington, D.C. Orlob and his staff know firsthand the importance of having a good crisis-prevention program in place and sticking to it: The JW Marriott Hotel in Jakarta, Indonesia, was targeted by a suicide car bomber this past August.

Nonetheless, many hotels often duck the security issue, says Richard Werth, president of Event and Meeting Security Services, Franklin, Tenn. "There's a major disconnect between what's said by hotel sales and marketing staffs - which tend to downplay security and even avoid discussion of it - and by security directors."

If anything, you would think that hotels would be eager to publicize what they're doing to ensure guests' well-being. But many are not, perhaps because most of the changes are modest ones, according to a report published this year by The Center for Hospitality Research at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y. In a survey of U.S. hotel managers, researchers found that although more changes are being made to procedures and personnel overall, a relatively small percentage of respondents made changes to safety and security between 2001 and 2002. Almost 30 percent of the general managers surveyed had done nothing to alter their security procedures, and more than 50 percent had not added security employees, according to the report.

The report points out that although many hotels already had "reasonably complete security procedures in place," and many were reviewing existing policies and procedures, "others may be reluctant to disturb their existing protocols because of the risk of destroying their property's ambience."

Security Stamp of Approval

One safety accreditation company is trying to make it easier to assess how secure hotels really are. Wilmington, Del.-based **SafePlace** Corp. recently added lodging to the types of facilities it rates, which also include academic institutions and health-care facilities. Since then, it has accredited the Hotel Monteleone in New Orleans; the Sagamore Hotel in Bolton Landing, N.Y.; and the Hotel DuPont in Wilmington, Del.

Before founding **SafePlace**, John Fannin, president and chief executive officer, was a fire protection and security professional for more than 30 years. His goal is to give travelers an easy way to find safe havens.

SafePlace officials evaluate more than 600 items in three categories: fire protection, security, and health and life safety. A national network of loss-control consultants and risk-management engineers works with **SafePlace** to ensure that facility managers satisfy its list of accreditation requirements. The organization examines physical features of a facility as well as written processes, procedures, and staff training.

"We give every new employee some security orientation because we feel that all eyes in the hotel help us in the loss-prevention department," says Richard Condon, executive administrative assistant and former head of security at Hotel Monteleone.

Each staff member is responsible for learning the hotel's loss-prevention manual, which contains instructions about handling everything from injuries and accidental death to purse-snatchers and personal confrontations. A security manager is on duty during each shift, and every security staff member is trained in CPR, first aid, and the use of an on-site defibrillator.

Even without participating in the **SafePlace** program, hotels should conduct regular security and safety audits, advises Chester Doty, director of security at Hong Kong-based Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts. The hotel's auditors regularly look at things such as door-locking systems, surveillance, and quality of training. Whatever is not up to the company's requirements must be corrected within 30 days.

Doty, who oversees security at 41 facilities in 15 countries, also uses independent security experts from the countries in which his hotels are based. "They have the pulse on what's important in each location, and they also work best with local authorities," he says.

More Eyes

Some hotels in particularly risky locations have decided to increase the number of security staff. Security officials at the Omni Hotel at CNN Center in Atlanta felt especially vulnerable to terrorist threats because news organizations were the target of several anthrax mailings in the weeks after 9/11.

"Because we're in the same building as CNN, we may have stepped up security a little more than some others," reports Obie Bryant, director of security. "We've increased the number of officers on duty at one time so we can be more aware of suspicious persons and packages that are left unattended."

Bryant's staff is well-versed in evacuation procedures, including keeping track of rooms that are occupied by disabled people who have special accessibility issues. The hotel also conducts training sessions with the police and fire departments, and security personnel know exactly which local authorities to notify in the event of an emergency.

"In many cases, a good hotel security department is only as good as the outside authorities," says Bryant. "We have a direct line to local police and fire department

commanders. Early on, we went to area fire stations to get to know who we'd be working with."

Hoteliers are also deploying full-color digital video systems, which replace the old analog closed-circuit television cameras. Although the systems aren't cheap, security managers say that they offer several advantages over their analog counterparts, including ease of image manipulation and management and efficient storage.

"We recently converted our camera systems from analog to digital, and it's worth it," says Shangri-La's Doty. "To find a specific incident with analog, we had to pull a VHS tape from a rack and look through the whole thing. With digital, you just punch in the time of the incident, and the image is right there."

Training Is Essential

The final - and perhaps most important - part of the equation is staff training. Properly trained surveillance officers are more likely to notice suspicious mannerisms and body language.

Marriott, for one, trains employees in classic security procedures, and, since 9/11, in terrorist events as well. "The bombing incident in Jakarta illustrated the efficacy of a crisis prevention program we put into place 12 years ago," says Orlob. "As part of the program, we use color-coded threat level designations similar to those used by the Department of Homeland Security. After last year's Bali hotel bombing, the Jakarta location was placed on threat level red, the highest level. Under that designation, people entering the hotel are required to walk through metal detectors, and all luggage and vehicles are scanned for suspicious packages and metal or electrical items.

Then, on August 5, 2003, security officers at the Jakarta JW Marriott stopped a vehicle as it entered the driveway, about 40 yards from the lobby entrance. That's where the bomb exploded. "It killed 12 people, but only one was inside the hotel itself," says Orlob. "The vehicle inspections we do under condition red saved lives."

Security and Contracts

Verbal assurances from hotel staff that a property is safe and secure are nice to hear, but they can only go so far. You need to get it in writing.

"During the initial site visit, meeting planners need to outline what the contract will cover in terms of security, but you don't want to do that with the director of sales, you want to do it with the director of security," says Jonathan Howe, president and senior partner, Howe & Hutton Ltd., Chicago.

At a minimum, a security contract should contain a broad representation by the hotel that it complies with applicable federal, state, and local fire, safety, and health codes, laws, and ordinances, advises Jed Mandel, a partner at Neal, Gerber, & Eisenberg LLP in Chicago. In addition, Mandel advises planners to include an indemnification provision and a provision obligating the hotel to maintain adequate levels of insurance.

Contract language should also address specific or unique concerns of individuals within a meeting group, adds Howe. For example, if your group contains people with

physical disabilities, or who are sight- or hearing-impaired, make sure the security staff knows which rooms they're staying in and how they should be evacuated. By the same token, if group members speak several languages, or if you plan to meet overseas, inquire about provisions for multilingual instructions during emergencies.

What's more, a contract might require that local emergency phone numbers are placed on the back of attendee badges, because dialing 911 won't necessarily work outside the United States.