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BUSINESS MONDAY:

Accreditation gives properties an edge in a competitive market, experts say

Hotel safety rises to new standards

Secure accommodations improve business by putting guests and meeting planners at ease, experts say

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It was the kind of incident that sends a cold wind down America's hotel corridors.

In February, a woman staying at the Cherry Hill Hilton in New Jersey died while attending a sales convention. Seven other participants were sent to the hospital amid fears of an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease or an anthrax attack. Later, it was determined the woman had died from pneumonia and a blood infection unrelated to the hotel.

"Anything like that is a catastrophe for a hotel - even if it had nothing to do with the hotel," said Theresa Petrelius, director of sales and marketing for Davis Management Co. Inc., a meeting-planning company in Cherry Hill that didn't handle the convention.

The alarm surrounding the case illustrates how critical hotel safety is, particularly in capturing a share of the \$102.3 billion market made up of meetings, trade shows, conventions and events.



When a guest at the Cherry Hill, N.J., Hilton died in February, the hotel closed while the death was investigated. It was found to be unrelated to the hotel, but such incidents can be disastrous to a hotel's business.

"Hotels these days are looking for any unique point of differentiation," said Robert Gilbert, president of the Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International in Washington. "Safety is important for the meeting market segment because you have intermediaries, such as meeting planners, accountable to the organization for the selection."

In recognition of this, the 217-room Hotel du Pont recently agreed to a safety assessment by **SafePlace Corp.**, a Wilmington company that has developed a lodging-facility accreditation program. The hotel is the first property in the nation to receive the SafePlace seal of approval.

The hope is that the designation will give the 89-year-old hotel a competitive edge among meeting planners, said William A. Sullivan, managing director of hospitality with the DuPont Co.

Safety as a selling point

As the hotel industry struggles to recover from several tough quarters following the most profitable year in hotel history in 2000, safety has become the newest sales tool. A December survey by the Convention Industry Council found that safety and security were among the top three concerns among meeting planners.

"I think since Sept. 11, everyone has a heightened awareness of security," said Joey Roberts, chief executive of Roberts Events Group Inc. in Elkins Park, Pa.

High-level corporate gatherings are moneymakers for hotels. Some properties do 60 percent to 70 percent of their annual billings in retreats, strategic planning sessions, sales training or new-product launchings, said Lori E. Raleigh, executive director of the International Society of Hospitality Consultants in Naples, Fla.

The Hotel du Pont does 45 percent of its business in meetings, which Sullivan says is a comfortable level. However, competition among hotels for the business is extremely stiff.



Hotel du Pont front-desk clerk Nikka Nkansa checks in Randy Marks of Midland, Mich. The hotel will include its safety seal on marketing materials

While there are a limited number of properties that can handle 500 people, many hotels can accommodate meeting groups of 100, said Mary Power of the Convention Industry Council. Corporations also have become more cost-conscious, putting additional pressure on the meetings industry.

Hotels are searching for ways to make them stand out from the crowd, she said. For example, the new Mohegan Sun resort in Uncasville, Conn., created by the Mohegan Indian Tribe of Connecticut, sets itself apart by requiring all its convention managers to be certified meeting planners.

Power called the move by the Hotel du Pont to get a safety accreditation "shrewd."

"You can't go wrong offering security and safety," she said.

Certification sets standards

Sullivan of the Hotel du Pont and others in the industry said they are unaware of any other accreditation programs similar to SafePlace. The credential will go on all of the hotel's marketing materials, and Sullivan said he hopes it will one day have the authority of other rating programs, such as those offered by Mobil Travel Guide and AAA.

SafePlace, headed by fire protection and industrial security expert John C. Fannin III, built its certification procedures around national fire and health safety standards.



John C. Fannin III is president of Wilmington-based SafePlace Corp., which recently evaluated the Hotel du Pont's security and granted its first safety seal of approval

Fannin checked for such good practices for all travelers as: the use of key cards (as opposed to keys); self-closing doors; smoke detectors and sprinklers in the guest rooms; throw-bolt locks on doors; good water quality; and safe work practices among the hotel staff. For example, workers behind the front desk should never announce a guest's room number. Instead, the hotel employee should point to the number on the folder holding the key card. standards and codes, Fannin said. The Hotel du Pont far exceeded most codes, Fannin said.

Jan Jessup travels extensively for her home furnishings consulting firm Jan Jessup & Co. in Wilmington, most recently to a textile fair in Como, Italy. She said in an e-mail interview that she's very aware of safe hotel practices.

"Hotel security has certainly gotten better over the years - hotels no longer 'announce' your room number when handing you the key. And I've had security personnel accompany me to my room if returning after midnight," she wrote. "I'm pleased the Hotel du Pont has earned [the accreditation]."

SafePlace has received about 25 inquiries a week since March from hotels interested in the program, a spokeswoman said. The company is in the process of accrediting several hotels.

Corporate security is key

SafePlace also evaluated security at the Hotel du Pont as it relates specifically to business meetings and corporate executives.

Corporate meetings have an additional set of security requirements. Information discussed at such gatherings can be so sensitive that hotels have been known to have security guards stationed in meeting rooms through the night, said Jim Cohn, publisher of Mid-Atlantic Events Magazine in Huntingdon Valley, Pa. Pharmaceutical companies are especially security-conscious, he said.

Because Wilmington is a center for court battles involving corporate mergers, bankruptcies and patents, the Hotel du Pont has plenty of experience in providing a secure environment for lawyers and corporate executives.

For example, when Carly Fiorina, chief executive of Hewlett-Packard Co., was in Wilmington recently to testify in the lawsuit brought by dissident shareholder Walter B. Hewlett, security was an issue.

Sullivan would not discuss the measures the hotel took, but an off-duty city police sergeant guarded Fiorina when she arrived at court. **Fannin** said the Hotel du Pont uses both off-duty officers and plainclothes security. Executive kidnapping is always a concern when the guest is a captain of industry, he said.

The hotel has a leg up on many other hotels in providing this kind of high-level security because it is not only owned by DuPont, but also physically connected to the company's executive suites, Fannin said.

Such things as closed-circuit video surveillance in the public spaces, secure data and telephone systems, and around-the-clock security checks are utilized. And because protection of intellectual property is a concern, rooms are soundproof at the Hotel du Pont.

"Otherwise, someone can rent the room next door and listen," Fannin said. "It happens."

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