



Hotels ramp up cleaning routines for post-pandemic travel

CHICAGO — The coronavirus crisis has not only sent the hotel industry reeling by cratering occupancy rates. It's forcing hotels to ramp up their cleaning protocols and hygiene — things that will be more of a priority for consumers in a post-pandemic world, where safe is the new sexy.

“What would have been in the back of customers’ minds is now front and center,” said Phil Cordell, Hilton’s global head of new brand development.

Hilton, Marriott and Chicago-based Hyatt have all announced plans for updated cleaning standards and other steps aimed at protecting the health of guests and staff at thousands of properties around the world.

Demand for hotel rooms has tanked during the pandemic. Among the U.S. hotels that are still open, about 3 out of 4 rooms are vacant, according to data released by the hospitality research company STR. In Chicago’s central business district, the occupancy rate is just shy of 14%.

When people start staying in hotels again, they’ll notice some changes as new hygiene measures get rolled out in the coming weeks and months.

Expect less furniture to make way for more social distancing in lobbies and other public areas. Hand sanitizing stations will be highly visible. So will housekeepers, whose role moves from behind-the-scenes to center stage as they frequently and conspicuously wipe down railings, elevator buttons and door handles with hospital-grade disinfectants.

“You can’t just tell people you’re cleaning, you have to let them see people cleaning,” said Jonathon Day, associate professor at Purdue University’s School of Hospitality and Tourism Management in West Lafayette, Ind. “These companies need to be transparent about what they’re doing and demonstrate it, so we have a sense of comfort. It’s only when I feel safe about going back to hotels that I’m going to let my guard down enough to leave my house.”

Some housekeeping teams will have high-tech tools at their disposal, such as germ-zapping robots that look straight off the set of “Star Wars” and electrostatic sprayers to rapidly disinfect guest rooms and fitness centers. The latter is part of Marriott’s plan, which also involves testing ultraviolet light technology to sanitize guests’ key cards.

The Westin Houston Medical Center hotel started using its pair of LightStrike Germ-Zapping Robots in March. Made by Xenex Disinfection Services and costing about \$100,000 each, the machines emit broad-spectrum ultraviolet light to destroy viruses and bacteria within minutes. They’ve been used for infection control in hundreds of hospitals for several years. Now the hospitality industry is showing interest.

“We’ve been contacted by dozens and dozens of hotels in Europe, the Middle East, here in the U.S.,” company spokeswoman Melinda Hart said. “They’re all trying to find a way for travelers to feel safe again.” Hilton is working with health experts at Mayo Clinic and the makers of Lysol for its new “CleanStay” program at the company’s 6,100-plus properties spread over 18 brands, including Waldorf Astoria, Embassy Suites and Hampton hotels.

The new measures mandate extra disinfection of the 10 most-often touched parts of a hotel room — light switches, TV remotes, thermostats, toilet handles — and putting a seal on room doors to let guests know they're the first to enter their freshly cleaned quarters.

Marriott recently created a Global Cleanliness Council that's outlined multiple measures to reduce the spread of disease. Disinfecting wipes will be put in all guest rooms throughout the company's 7,300 properties. In nearly half of these hotels, guests can use their phone to check in, access their room with a digital key and order a meal that will be packaged and deposited outside the door.

Over at Hyatt, a new initiative requires that each of its 900-some properties has at least one specially trained hygiene manager by September. Hyatt also is the first hospitality brand to commit to getting all of its hotels accredited by the Global Biorisk Advisory Council, a division of the Northbrook, Ill.-based cleaning industry trade association, ISSA.

The new GBAC STAR certification is meant to ensure that a hotel — or restaurant, arena or convention center — has the proper chemicals, equipment and procedures to remove harmful pathogens. The concept of GBAC STAR certification predates the coronavirus crisis, but the pandemic fast-tracked the launch of the program, which started accepting applications Thursday.

Housekeepers at the Red Roof chain now sanitize corridors, elevators, the front desk and other high-traffic areas up to four times a day with coronavirus-killing products approved by the Environmental Protection Agency.

When The Langham hotels in the U.S. start accepting new reservations, the luxury properties will be taking guests' and employees' temperatures. If they have a high enough fever, a security officer wearing personal protective equipment will escort them to a room set aside for quarantine so they can contact their doctor for guidance.

"If they cannot reach a doctor, we will find one for them," Langham spokeswoman Louise O'Brien responded in an email.

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