Technology vs. Hospitality

By Dr. Richard Kelley

Technology is changing the hospitality industry faster than just about anyone can understand or appreciate. The challenge for everyone in the Outrigger ‘ohana now, and in the foreseeable future, is to adopt technology that makes an interaction with or a stay at one of our properties much easier and more enjoyable but, at the same time, not to let the word HOSPITALITY diminish in importance, let alone disappear from our vocabulary.

In coming months, I will comment on various aspects of the impact of technology on the hotel industry. I will examine how technology is significantly affecting marketing, distribution, reservations and even local taxes. This week, I’ll focus on one of my favorites – the use of computer terminals and other technology in the hotel check-in process and how technology can make that process good, bad or even ugly.

I am old enough to vividly remember the early pre-computer days in Waikīkī, 40 years ago and more. Arriving in Waikīkī after a day-long journey from America’s East Coast or a “red eye” flight from Australia or New Zealand, guests would meet Chuck Comeau at Outrigger Waikiki, Tony Del Piano at Outrigger Reef, or Tom Burke at Outrigger West. These great managers knew how to greet these exhausted travelers and make them feel welcome and appreciated. In a few quick minutes, they had the guests on their way to just the right room for the start of a fabulous vacation.

Today, except for Outrigger and OHANA properties and a few enlightened competitors, when I walk up to the front desk of a hotel in a big city and even at many small resorts, far too often the first thing the person checking me in does is focus his or her eyes on a computer terminal while intoning the mantra, “May I see your photo ID and credit card?”

To reduce lines and congestion in the lobby near the reception areas, many hotels, particularly city-center and airport properties, are offering computer terminals at kiosks away from the front desk where a guest with a reservation can check in and receive access to his or her preassigned room without even talking to a person at the front desk.

In some systems, guests can check in with a mobile smartphone miles before they arrive at the hotel. However, this effort to make things convenient keeps guests from being able to select room types or locations. Nor can they make changes. For that kind of convenience – I call it hospitality! – it’s necessary to...
speak with a helpful, smiling front desk clerk.

A recent report by Sandra Martinez (http://ehotelier.com) indicated that some hotels are trying to blend remote/kiosk and front desk registration by providing the guest a tablet computer at the front desk where he or she can enter appropriate check-in/identification information while talking with or receiving assistance from a clerk. Theoretically, this allows the clerk to spend more time providing concierge services, but it depends very much on the technical sophistication of the guest and the person greeting him or her. I see that as a significant challenge for everyone involved.

At the other end of the hospitality spectrum are Outrigger's two properties in Fiji. At Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort, the moment travelers reach the property, generally by taxi or limo, they hear a resounding “BULA!” That's the Fijian way of saying, "Hello, welcome, we're glad you are here.” Music, flowers, a cool, moist towel and a refreshing drink follow shortly.

At Castaway Island, where most guests arrive by boat and step off onto glistening sand at the water's edge, they'll also find “BULA!” music, flowers and refreshing drinks aplenty.

The hospitality does not stop at the port-cochere or the beach. It pervades these beautiful resorts. It is no wonder that both properties have received so many awards from a variety of sources.

As noted in last week's issue of Saturday Briefing, Castaway Island, Fiji, recently received two wonderful hospitality recognitions – the AON Fiji Excellence in Tourism Award and the Readers' Choice Top 10 Award announced by Australia's Holiday with Kids magazine. Those honors speak volumes about the level of hospitality found at that wonderful resort, where there is hardly a computer in sight.

As we go forward, let's take advantage of technology wherever it is appropriate but let's never forget, at Outrigger Resorts, now stretching from Hawai’i to Mauritius, that we are in the hospitality business. 😊