

As hotel guests become increasingly aware of the benefits – and pitfalls – of new technology, so operators must move with the times to provide a tailored solution for their customers. Barceló UK has employed the services of telecommunications company Swisscom in order to do just that, as **Nabeela Ahmed** discovers.

NET the DEAL

The latest developments in web technology have made the demands of business hotel and conference guests ever more complex and specialised. In the case of international hotel group Barceló, however, supplying demands that would seem obscure or out of the traditional domain of hotel companies is not a problem. Barceló UK, an arm of the Spanish hotel company formerly known as Paramount, has joined with telecommunications company Swisscom and its Hospitality Services subsidiary to launch Premium Internet Services, a new development that will allow guests to access a one-stop shop of web facilities from the comfort of a hotel bedroom, conference hall or lobby.

The web portal Guestroom 2.0 was designed by Swisscom to allow Barceló UK guests to access a range of free services including remote printing, real-time flight information and online access to a database of newspapers. The Barceló Group owns hotels and conference centres

in 15 countries, including Spain, the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, the US, Mexico, the Czech Republic, Turkey and Switzerland, and operates 21 four-star hotels in the UK.

Premium Internet Services provides a 'platform that enables hoteliers to remain flexible with a view to their guests' evolving needs and allows additional

room services, such as IPTV or VoIP, to be delivered via the same, convergent infrastructure,' says Leo Brand, CEO of Swisscom Hospitality Services.

The partnership operates on a day-to-day basis, with Swisscom supporting Barceló UK through its local account management operation, a network operations centre and its multilingual, in-house customer care centre that is set up to respond to hoteliers and guests, 24 hours a day.

In maximising its guest web experience, Barceló Group is responding to growing and changing customer demands, according to Perry Thomas, IT director at Barceló UK. Business hotel guests have become more sophisticated in their demands, and have moved in a direction that may be surprising to some. Despite wireless technology being hailed as a breakthrough that has revolutionised web usage, Barceló finds its guest demographic to be aware of the pitfalls of wireless networks.

'THERE'S BEEN A GROWING TREND FOR GUESTS TO DEMAND WIRED INTERNET ACCESS.'

'There's been a growing trend in the past two or three years for guests to demand wired internet access, because they know wireless access can be a potential security risk.'



Insecure networks put sensitive data at risk.

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says Thomas. And even wireless has its physical limits, which have presented Barceló with infrastructure challenges. 'Some of our more prestigious hotels are buildings from the 1500s, with stone walls that are 3ft thick. So we can supply wireless access in only some of our properties and, even then, it can't be evenly distributed in some of our larger hotel complexes.'

To re-cable the hotels in order to introduce wired Internet would have meant a big overhaul and structural damage to many of Barceló's four or five-star properties. Swisscom, however, provided an efficient solution that caused minimal disruption to the hotel structures. Using VDSL (Very High Bitrate Digital Subscriber Line) they were able to provide wired broadband to hotel rooms via a solution known as twisted pair wiring. With Swisscom's technical know-how, Barceló was able to roll out the new development quickly, according to Thomas.

By working in partnership with a specialised company such as Swisscom, Barceló is able to cater for other new demands in the technology arena.

'Demand for internet access has increased, but more customers also want greater bandwidth,' says Thomas. The company has increased its internet speed five-fold, which has been enabled by its partnership with Swisscom.

Thomas explains the benefits of working with a specialist technology company, which can drive overheads down through efficiency and maintain quality customer service by employing people who know exactly what they are doing.

'Barceló staff don't get involved in the technology infrastructure, and we

wouldn't want to employ someone who does that, as it takes so much time,' he explains.

The Rocco Forte Collection, a luxury hotel group with an international network of properties, also leaves technological work to the experts. 'For the in-room technology, we need to leave the development of web-based services to expert companies, and provide access to those services to the guest,' says Rocco Forte corporate IT director Emmanuel Clave. He also points out the limits of web services for hoteliers. As a luxury hotel chain, Rocco Forte places the emphasis on personal service.

'It depends on the company philosophy. If you want to provide an excellent personal service to your guest, then you cannot replace this with technology,' says Clave. 'Some companies will offer room service via the television – through a web integrated platform – that requires no contact with the guest, while others prefer to have a certain level of communication with the guest during the order process.'

Thomas also points out that technology has its limits in providing services for customers, particularly when it comes to one of the main purposes of a quality hotel room; rest and relaxation. Barceló plans to enhance its web technology services for business-oriented rather than entertainment services.

'We have played with ideas such as video and music on demand in the bedroom but we have found that guests rarely use technology in the room. A recent white paper [published by technology research and advisory company Gartner] showed that the average guest spends little time even awake in the bedroom – an average of 58 minutes. The room is not used for technology.' ■ **Swisscom is performing targeted infrastructure upgrades at selected Barceló UK properties. Its internet services will be available in all 21 hotels by the end of September.**

