

Taming the Guest from Hell - By Steven Ferry

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Back in 2006, the concept of the Guest from Hell was introduced to the industry in two articles entitled Besting and then Muzzling the Guest from Hell published by several industry organs.

The feedback demonstrated strong support for the idea of an international database for the hospitality industry that would put an end to the free run of free service some guests have enjoyed by following the formula of 'complain loud enough, be mean enough, and the suckers will comp you.' This strategy echoes Hitler's 'The bigger the lie, the more the people will believe it' - as long as they fail to face up to the unpleasantness and do nothing about it.

Typical of the feedback received was, 'Your articles have given us strength to carry on. It seems these people gravitate to new facilities such as ours in the hope less-experienced staff and managers will be easier prey....and they may be right.'

'Please let me know if anything comes of the national database. It is a wonderful idea and will find tremendous support from the hospitality managers if not the entire industry.'

Several readers shared their own experiences with guests from hell, such as the following: 'Reading your article about guests from hell has made my day. I had only been in this business for less than a year as the GM of a modestly sized hotel in a small Mid-western town, when I was ready to look for any other work. Why? Because of the stress caused by the few bad guests out of the thousands of good guests we had served. I believe, as you, that these are indeed serial criminals acting the way they do just to get free lodging.

'Take one guest who had reserved a room for one night. The next day, he asked to extend for a day and we granted that. The next day, his wife complained that a housekeeper had stolen make-up from the room. We checked with the staff, but no one had noticed any make-up in the room. Still, we purchased comparable make-up for her and I offered a discount on the cost of their room (as a result of which my owners now want to pre-approve all purchases). The next day, the couple was supposed to check out and did not do so, although all their possessions had been removed from the room, so we ran their card and checked them out. That night they came back upset that their key would not work. The gentleman ranted about having a five-day reservation and would not listen to anything else, including any apology. We put them back in the same room, rearranging future reservations for other guests in order to do so. I even extended the additional discount to all five days of their stay. When they finally left, it was a distinct relief for everyone involved.

'A few days later, the gentleman called the hotel demanding to know what the additional charge was on his credit card statement. I asked him to send me a copy of his statement so that I could research any unauthorized charges. When I pulled up his folio, the 'additional charge' was for the first two days and the other one was for the next three days. I refunded the first two days' charges and ended my letter to him with, 'I hope you find future stays in other hotels to be more enjoyable' ...hoping he would take the hint and never return.

'I have also had guests demand the manager come in late at night so they could argue about rates, one of these guests brought my front desk clerk to tears with his abuse, then complained to our HQ when I asked him not to return to our facility.

There are also the saboteurs. We had a couple complain to our headquarters that the toilet constantly flushed all night and they could not sleep. It was not flushing when I was in their room helping them with Internet access, but after they left, it was running constantly because someone had moved the flapper off by 90 degrees. He complained that the AC would not work and he could not get cool all night. She complained that it was too cold and she could not get the heat to work. Maintenance found that the PTAC thermocouple had been bent out of shape and was unusable. It had been working fine while I was up there earlier. They filed an official complaint that counted against us, and yes, they got their comp room.

'I guess that in this business you see the full range of people and the 98% who are pleasant just seem to fade into the background due to the noise of the 2% of guests from hell. Thank you for offering a glimmer of hope for the future. Maybe with that database of guests from hell we would be better prepared and wouldn't lose so many good people to less stressful jobs, like bomb squads and hostage negotiations.'

In searching for a partner to create and manage this Guest from Hell database, early advice included: 'Your article was quite something. I am told that Talbots has computerized customers who continually create problems, particularly with their gracious return policy. They track these folks and their history and actually get to the point where they inform this type of customer that they are no longer welcome to shop at Talbots. Hospitality and sensibility only go so far when someone has ransacked the relationship. Typically, the guests from hell you are referencing receive free meals, rooms, cocktails, etc, and sometimes they even bring suit-a nuisance and expense. Perhaps consider working with and being sponsored by insurance companies that cover hotels for such suits (presented on the expense side, it would fall under their umbrella, and insurance companies probably already have this info somewhere, as all businesses are subject to ruse), as well as the larger hotel chains and the AH&MA. Good lord, credit card companies have protection built in, too, for any charge, which may be the seamless protector needed and offered as a service or specialty to their market.'

However, the editor of the magazine publishing the articles said in July 2007 that he would like to use his resources to run the database. He put his Sales and Marketing Director onto the project and the Institute provided the initial text for the Web site and overview and policies on how the program should run, as well as a program of steps to take to bring it to fruition. After providing initial feedback on the name of the database (Guest from Hell was fine for editorial, not a serious business), the

Sales and Marketing Director ran with the concept, brought in investors and by the beginning of 2008, launched the database as Hotel Safeguard.

Keeping the Database on Target

The danger of keeping a database on guests is that it can set the hospitality industry on a course that belies its true nature: hospitality being, after all, a caring welcome for strangers, no questions asked. We cannot turn into Stasi or FBI agents, suspicious and challenging of our guests, secretly collecting information on them in ever more intrusive ways or using the threat of blacklisting to bulldoze genuine guest complaints, justifying shoddy service. The answer is to define clearly the very few who are to be reported on, and hold vigorously and unfailingly to this definition. Otherwise, like the Federal Income Tax of 1913, or the current Alternative Minimum Tax, both of which targeted a small percentage of the very wealthy and gradually expanded to include everybody (Income tax currently, AMT predictably eventually), all guests may have files kept on them eventually.

This database or directory should not be for guests who occasionally have issues and are either comp'ed by the hotel to redress an imbalance in service or product delivered, or who seek to be comp'ed in proportion to an actual failure to serve or damage done.

Nor is an angry, inconsiderate, rude, and generally highly unpleasant person really the definition of a guest from hell. Yes, there are hellacious guests and we'd prefer not to service them, but in hospitality, one is there to serve graciously. Such unpleasant guests are part of the terrain, they are often not always so, and it is not for hotels to screen guests according to their character.

To illustrate the point, let's take this story from a hospitality professional: 'As I walked into the front desk area of a beautiful property, a woman was going ballistic at the hotel manager, ranting and raving and giving him a mouthful in a very serious manner about how she didn't need to bring business to his hotel. I couldn't help but ask the lovely front desk girl what the problem was all about, as I thought something really bad had happened. Can you believe that the woman had asked for a horseback ride to be arranged and, in order to be fitted with the correct horse, had been asked her age, height, and weight! What a very sad person she must have been to make such a commotion over something so trifling.'

What hoteliers do have a right to do is prevent fraud. Anger and antisocial conduct in and of themselves do not show intent to defraud. Consider these two stories.

'In 25 years, the strangest guest(s) was a family staying at large hotel near Disney I managed in the mid 1980's. The husband reported money had been stolen from their room. The new Manager on Duty reported it to me as I was leaving for the day so I decided to assist. On arriving at the room, we were met by a husband, wife, and two kids. The husband was fuming and beet red, telling us how \$10,000 had been stolen from his room while they were at the attractions. I asked to see where the money had last been seen. Yelling and calling us all kinds of names, he showed me a black overnight bag. I asked him if he travels differently when with family versus for business, and could he have put the wallet someplace else. Across the room lunges his 4-foot 2-inch wife, bounding up on the bed in a feeble attempt to go eye to eye with my 6 foot 2 frame while calling us names that must still be hanging in space over Disney.

'I called the law. The law arrives and took their report. Included in the wallet were credit cards and travelers checks. I offered the use of my phone and office so he could place cancellation calls. Again, he continued to call us names when in the office, in front of his kids and others. He placed a call to his boss instructing me to tell him what had happened. Feeling for the kids, we offered to buy them dinner in one of the restaurants. During the meal, he told anybody and everybody his opinion about what had happened to his wallet. He demanded to speak with the housekeeping staff and I told him that would not happen. His response was that he would talk to anybody he wanted on a Sunday morning.

'The next morning, as I entered my unlit office, the phone line lit up. Looking down at it I said to myself 'That has got to be Mr. Guest from heck.' I answered the call. It was his wife. She wanted to tell me that they had found the wallet. She asked me if I could call their credit card and Traveler Check Company to cancel their cancellation. Hours later, the wife appeared in the lobby to checkout while her husband sat in the car...maybe, just maybe, too embarrassed to make eye contact. Method of payment? Credit card or traveler checks....those had been canceled...of course, I helped them out to help the kids....

'The award for second place goes to the case of the Lost-and-Found hand gun

Same hotel, highly populated by families with kids. A guest checks out. Room cleaner calls to report gun found. I approach it with caution, empty it, cover it in a towel and take to my office for inventory and placement in the safe.

'Several days later, the guest calls housekeeping to see if he had left his gun at our hotel. The call is transferred to me. The caller announces 'I cannot understand why that imbecile transferred me to you. All I want is my gun back.' I asked the caller to describe the gun, with manufacturers name and serial number. To which he replied, 'I guess you are the hard ass there.' My response was that I was just doing my job. After we exchanged stats and pleasantries, I asked when he would be stopping back to pick it up? He said 'You *****ing idiot, I live in the Great Lakes area and will not be back there for years. Just mail it to me.' I had to explain to him that I could not mail it to him as it is against the law and weapons can only be shipped from one dealer to another. At that point he said 'Just stick it in a box and mail the *****thing, you *****' To which I said, 'OK, you can pick it up at the County Police Department,' giving him the number and address. To this day, I can still here him yelling as we closed our phone conversation. Thanks for listening: better and cheaper than a psychiatrist.'

To make the grade as a Guest from Hell, there really has to be the distinct intention to defraud, and a pattern of doing so or attempting to do so from one hotel to another. In such cases, the game or focus for hoteliers switches from providing hospitality to playing cop.

That is what should have happened at a hotel where I was training the butlers, but did not happen because no mechanism existed for defining and pushing back against guests from hell. It was what gave me the idea for such a database. Picture a hotel opening where the staff had pulled off miracles to open on time (the owner and his family even rolling up their sleeves to sweep floors, organize, push, debug and drive through the myriad projects and sub projects involved in constructing and opening a large, five-star standard hotel). With great anticipation, the opening ceremony goes smoothly. The full house includes one gentleman and his entourage in the Presidential and adjoining suite. We first started to notice trouble when this guest ordered breakfast from the butlers and from room service. He requested different items for different times from each department. When the butlers and room service independently delivered the requested items at the requested time, the guest complained they were early/late and had forgotten items. This upset the employees initially until they compared notes. At checkout, the guest listed these and myriad similar 'failings' and demanded the entire week's stay for himself and entourage be comped.

It was.

Subsequent enquiries with two hotel chains found this individual to be blacklisted within each chain for what essentially is fraud. It is this kind of deliberate effort to steal or defraud, as well as tendency to damage property, which should be the subjects of reports for any Guest from Hell database.

Another way of putting it, is we are not behavior monitors or censors, but hospitality professionals with a duty to employees, corporations, and guests to discourage and eliminate criminality when it raises its ugly head. Every time a Guest from Hell, who may have been written up in another hotel's database, comes to your hotel(s), you are behind the 8-ball and have to go through grief before becoming the wiser. For the one-time effort of transferring any existing database and ongoing input of information, and a fee per hotel, you can have access to a far more complete database than your hotel alone can create, save on comps and their narrowing of the profit margins, increase employee equanimity for better service, and leave the chore of running the database to another.

So the next time a guest trashes a suite or noisily demands to be comped at the end of a stay for reasons without merit, you don't have to fawn or smile a smile you do not mean and hope that the steam coming out of your ears isn't visible. You can do something about it! Skewer away!

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