

Unified hospitality communications and collaboration: future scenarios

by *David-Leonhard Steinbauer* 

Unified communication (UC) technology offers hoteliers a significant opportunity to streamline processes and enhance guest experiences, writes David-Leonhard Steinbauer of Unify GmbH & Co. KG – a claim he backs up with fifteen specific predictions.



Every day it seems a smartphone app or social networking technology is launched that lets us share or communicate with friends and family in all manner of new and exciting ways. The speed at which our society embraces new ideas, discards the old and looks forward to “the next best thing” is simply awesome. But just as each new technology or communication option offers opportunity, it also presents a challenge.

My focus here is the future of unified communications technology – and how the hospitality industry can best realize its very significant opportunities to streamline processes and enhance guest experiences. Knowing that whatever will become standard in five years is in existence in some form today, I will not debate whether there is a phone in a guest room or argue the mobile technology guests will bring into the hotel.

So what does unified communication (UC) mean to you? Here is my interpretation. UC groups all forms of communications onto a single network – enabling one-to-one or one-to-many conversations. Integrated and adapted to your business workflow, UC delivers a single user experience across multiple devices. Whatever you use to communicate should be integrated and adapted to your business workflow. UC reflects often a set of products providing a more or less single user experience across multiple devices. Your guest communication starts long before the guest arrives and hopefully never ends.

As new communications tools, devices and apps continue to redefine how we interact with one another, we are offered

a valuable insight into how guests want to communicate – today and tomorrow.

The hotel industry will need to adapt its communication behaviors and, as with other industries, respond to these new communication trends – because there is no doubt they will begin to affect the hotel business as the future unfolds.

A **social media** presence is crucial – and social engagement is now part of the daily routine for a steadily increasing number of hotels. Historically, the hospitality industry is an offline business – it's impossible to make beds with a click of a mouse, for example! But that was then. Today, many hotels and restaurants are going online – successfully using social media to improve services, respond to and manage feedback, and build closer connections with customers.

The **Cloud** too offers hoteliers opportunity. It's now much more than a place to simply store data. Cloud intelligence will evolve into an active resource in our daily lives, providing analysis and contextual advice.

This invaluable data will soon provide the platform for a new generation of industry apps. We'll see virtual agents planning our personal diets or the family's weekly menu – all based on individual's health profile, fitness goals, and taste preferences. Similarly, a virtual travel advisor will store trip details and, having taken into account your personal calendar, online public traffic information and more, will automatically rearrange your itinerary. It will suggest flights, cars, restaurants and hotels to book.

Be under no illusion that this is happening right now. Today, Google can tell you when to leave home to reach a meeting point at a scheduled time – even suggesting alternative travel methods and routes.

What can this data do for you? The answer is almost anything – but your hotel needs to proactively decide to be part of this Cloud, step by step as technology evolves.

The **Internet of things** is another major step in the ongoing evolution of wired and wireless connectivity. First we connected the PC, then the laptop and now the tablet and smartphone to the internet. Very soon we'll see countless other devices connected online, each with their own IP address. That's everything from light switches, thermometers, cars and rubbish bins to billboards, household appliances, doors, window blinds, and high-value items in a hotel room. Because every item of value becomes "traceable", this represents a major shift in combating theft. But it

goes much further, driving efficiencies through automated communication with a whole range of devices and objects.

One outcome of this connectivity and constant communication with the Cloud will be the aggregation of so-called Big Data. This process is already being used in building management to automatically monitor environmental factors in public areas and rooms, trace multiple devices in rooms, and to support computerized room automation systems that set the values for optimized energy consumption and comfort.

And what role does UC have in this new world? Simple: it offers the connectivity and enables the conversation between devices, people and the Cloud. Automated monitoring and control results in alerting and broadcasting of details or threshold exceptions.

Another trend now impacting hospitality communications is Radio-Frequency Identification (RFID) technology - or **Near Field Communication** (NFC). This allows devices to wirelessly communicate with one another across a distance of a few centimeters.

NFC-enabled mobile phones are already having an impact in the hospitality sector. For example, a guest's smartphone can now be used as a room key and payment method. The trick therefore is being able to recognise the guest's device and being able to interact with it. This is the Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) revolution, and it has already led some hotels to eliminate the provision of an in-room hotel phone. But a hotel's commitment to service and requirement to communicate directly with the guest has never been in question – so could an emerging App Store app over your WiFi infrastructure be that next conduit?

An unavoidable trend set to transform all businesses is **mobile commerce**. Driven by a myriad of apps, smartphones and tablets, and supported by Cloud computing and the rise of Big Data, the value of mobile commerce is huge. According to some recent estimates, it will generate more than \$108 billion by 2017 [source: eMarketer, April 2013]. And it's happening here too.

Indeed, the fusion of mobile commerce, the mobile Internet, social media and the Internet of things is set to have far reaching consequences for the way the hospitality industry communicates with customers.

Your guests have already adapted to mobile commerce, having encountered social media platforms for trading, mobile collaboration, communication, entertainment, ↓

health, and learning. For the future, hoteliers will be deploying these communication technologies in both guest-facing and internal operations.

Not only this, today's hotelier has to provide a wired and wireless in-house network, catering for all different bandwidth needs, including HD Video and HD Voice. It goes without saying that sourcing the right solutions for communication and collaboration requires both the network strategy and the most appropriate wired (LAN) and wireless network (WLAN).

Responding to change

As a general manager, duty manager, restaurant/spa owner or anyone with team management responsibilities, you need to communicate instantly with your people to ensure effective and efficient operations. Corrective actions can only take place if mistakes are communicated. In addition, you also have to listen to and respond to guests in a timely manner.

As we've seen, new guest behaviors and expectations require that hoteliers adapt to a new online culture. UC helps you do exactly that, by enabling you to plug any new kind of communication method (including social media, alerts from devices, and presence for guests and staff) directly into your network.

This is not always an easy task when legacy systems can't connect to one other, but today's new generation of guest expects you to adapt to their latest communication methods. For my parent's generation, the "latest" innovation was the fax machine. For me it was e-mail – and my kids already consider this to be antiquated.

But whatever the future holds, it's your communications system that is making it happen. PCs, tablets, smartphones, in-house telephone systems, attendant consoles and more should all support your internal and external communications in a harmonized, secure and reliable manner – regardless of the network, carrier, protocol or device.

Added to this, communication is moving to the wireless network – which you must carefully consider before deploying. You need the ability to provide a secure, reliable, and scalable wireless network that's also easy to access and complies with changing legal and safety requirements.

Ultimately, all this new technology and changing guest expectations are forcing hotels to adapt, consolidate and streamline their communications processes – and to re-evaluate the communications role of a receptionist, operator, concierge and call center agent.

So why bother?

Well, today's technology-empowered consumers are increasingly mobile, online and always on. This applies as much to your staff as it does your guests. To stay competitive, create differentiation and keep your guests coming back, you need to respond.

So let's take a look at what might become mainstream in the hotel industry in the very near future:

- Guests will increasingly want to tweet or online chat their service requests and complaints, using G+, Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp etc.
- Guests will use Cloud services to express their opinion (e.g. Yelp, Angie's List, Qype, Foursquare and many more). This will impact your reputation. Published guest reviews and pictures will be the norm. My guess is the only sustainable remedy, as in real life, is to enter an ongoing conversation with the individual guests and to offer an automated digital complaint or customer relationship management option.
- Guests will expect remote check-in, e.g. via smartphone. They'll want to be able to use their own NFC-enabled devices to open doors and pay online for services. In fact, the digital check-in is already close to mainstream.
- Guests will expect the hotel to be a digital, social community – with local in-house chat and social networking. Here AirportChatter, currently being trialled in multiple US airports, is a good example. So would your operator or receptionist be ready to have an online chat with an arrival or in-house guest, and tweet a welcome or farewell message?
- Augmented reality will allow guests to undertake virtual tours of your hotel and the surroundings. Maps and apps will showcase your property, offer options to book and allow you to interact with potential guests long before they make a reservation. You may also need to allow your operator or reservations agent to chat online in real time with someone who is viewing your hotel web page or a travel app on their phone.
- Potential customers might choose one restaurant or hotel over another when their mobile augmented-reality app flashes warnings about recent customer reviews. Augmented reality will impact on corporate reputation, and be a key driver of profitability. A hotelier's task is to actively create and maintain their own augmented reality. Simply being represented in a social network like Facebook is not enough. The aim is to constantly interact and be social, which means giving your receptionist or operator the right UC tools to track online comments and instantly respond.
- Guests will use a tablet-based video menu to decide what to eat in your restaurant, and to watch the chef preparing

the dish. If the same content is accessible as the in-house digital signage and in the mobile Internet (e.g. for Smartphones), then UC is integrated into your workflows, potential guests will be able to initiate a call back from the hotel (restaurant reservation) to personally take the booking. Clicking a button online to call someone or to receive a call back will become the norm – quickly replacing conventional telephone dialling.

- Weather, news and risk information is a subset of the hotel infotainment system that will be available on the guest's own device. Extending this further, you could allow your UC messaging system – in combination with the hotel building management system – to alert and broadcast a warning to guests and even support the event of a fire evacuation.
- A personalized hotel/restaurant bill, digitally available and transmitted to the guest via your messaging system may soon become as standard as an online purchase and reservation confirmation.
- Virtual agents will be on hand to support guest queries via their own devices. This may enable hotels to offer extended concierge services by including the concierge in the circle of guest communication to keep in touch with the guest prior, during and after his stay.
- Hotel staff communication and training will be taken online and most periodic team meetings will be based on mobile web collaboration, dramatically reducing the need to assemble staff every day in one location.
- Staff will also be able to search for guest information online and while mobile – from tracking all kinds of service requests and complaint, to looking up relevant business information according to their staff profile/access status.
- A well equipped mobile staff will reinforce the need and benefit of UC presence information and location-based tracking.
- Presence, geo-positioning and localization will become easy to deliver, while support-related alerting and exception tracking capabilities will be crucial. Health and safety concerns certainly in the residential home environment for the elderly are driving UC to take care of such positioning services. For example, UC can deliver a future hotel concierge service for foreign visitors – increasing guests' feeling of safety and enhancing their overall guest experience.
- Sales staff will use home or satellite offices as remote UC workplaces. This level of flexibility and mobility are already mainstream in most other industries.

Depending on your hotel operation, you might only have a PC and telephone at the reception desk. Or you may have a centrally-shared service center, with multiple operators and automatic call distribution (ACD) linked to your central

reservations call center. Whatever your model, it's worth taking a closer look at your current communication systems to see how you may be able to benefit from UC.

In the future, the hotel industry will need to take account of changing social and communication conventions. For hotel operators, this means the need to think mobile; empowering your staff to communicate and adopt the communication channels favored by your guest.

It's certainly becoming more complex out there, but with the right support from the right provider, unifying this new environment is easier than you might think. In fact, with UC, you could actually improve your staff and guest experiences at the same time.

Now that's worth considering.

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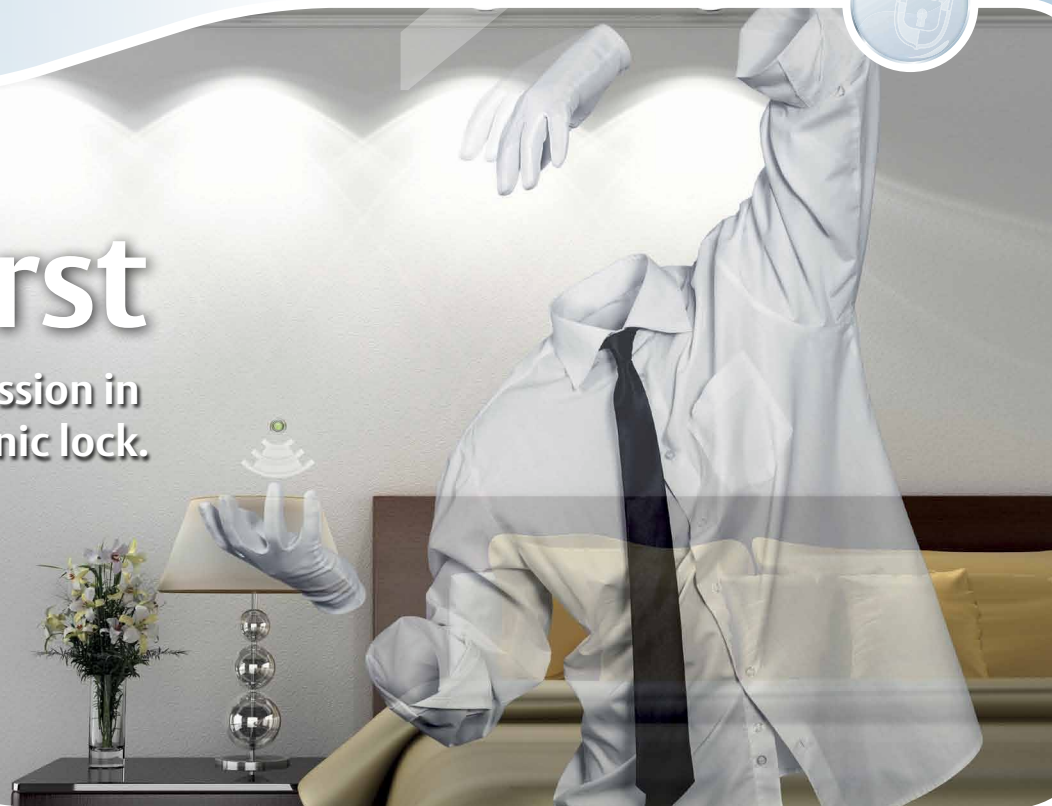
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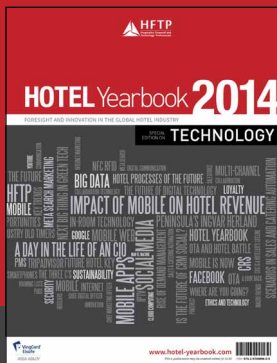


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