

Is your future hotel key already in your pocket?

by **Keith Gruen** 

It may well be, says Keith Gruen, CEO of hetras. But for a host of reasons, other options – even some decidedly unsexy ones – need to be considered, too. In this overview, Keith shares with Hotel Yearbook readers the pros and cons of the main contenders for Hotel Key of the Future.

Many hoteliers – especially those building new properties – are considering the new generation of door-lock technologies.

There are several new door-lock technologies currently in production or development, such as NFC, RFID, acoustic, Bluetooth, PIN-code, magnetic swipe card and biometric.

Ignoring for the moment the technical differences, these solutions can be grouped into two fundamentally different operational strategies:

1. The guest needs to stop in the hotel lobby to pick up a key.
2. The guest can go straight to the room without stopping.

The second option is what many hotel industry leaders would like to achieve. The airlines have already achieved it. Passengers can go straight to the gate and board the plane without having to stop and pick up a boarding pass. We call this non-stop check-in.

Even though the technology is available, virtually no hotels have successfully implemented non-stop check-in. Why is this?

For non-stop check-in to work, the guest must be able to open the door with something they already have with them. Let's

consider some of these items and how they might facilitate non-stop check-in.

1. Smartphone with app. With the appropriate app, the guest registers securely and can then use the app to activate a signal – possibly via bluetooth or RFID – to unlock the door. It's a workable solution, but even in smartphone-friendly countries, the penetration is around 50%, though still on the rise. Can a hotelier expect that all their guests will download yet another app just to open the door? What if the guest does not have Internet connectivity or has deactivated data roaming and can't download the app? Do the kids and travelling companions all need their own smartphone? Of course it's not enough just to have the app. There must be a secure way for the main registered guest to transfer the virtual key to other family members.

2. Traditional mobile phone. A solution which requires only a traditional (non-smart) mobile phone can be used more universally as the phone penetration among hotel guests is nearly 100%. Such solutions would work for smartphones too. These solutions are generally based on SMS and possibly an acoustic signal. One challenge here is that the hotel needs to send many SMSs, sometimes to costly international destinations. Also, the guest needs cellular reception in front of the door, the reliability of which is outside the hotel's hands. Both the traditional and smartphone solution fail if the phone's battery is dead.



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3. Universal programmable key. Hotel door locks are not the only ones going through modernization. Some locks in private homes, cars and offices have been upgraded as well. These keys – typically based on NFC – can in theory be programmed to open multiple doors. In an ideal world, we would only have one key in our pocket, which could open everything we own. Unfortunately there are few standards and few incentives for the key providers to support each other's devices.

4. PIN Code. PIN codes have been around for a while. Guests receive an email or SMS prior to arrival with a PIN code. They can easily share it with their travelling companions. When they get to their door, they type in the code and open the door. Reasonably simple and straight-forward to implement, but not terribly sexy.

5. 2D Barcode. Most airline passengers are familiar with this. A hotel guest could receive a 2D barcode via email and scan the smartphone or a printout of the code at the door. The disadvantage with this solution is that the 2D barcode scanners are relatively expensive and power-hungry. No problem for an airport gate, but outfitting and powering 500 doors is a costly exercise.

6. Biometric. Fingerprint sensors, retina scanners or hand scanners are becoming more commonplace at airport border controls or other high-security locations. Like the 2-D barcode

scanners, biometric readers tend to be costly and power-hungry. Furthermore, the guest must have a secure way to register their fingerprint etc. before arriving. And do guests really want to give hotel companies this information?

It's clear that none of the solutions is a sure-proof way to provide non-stop check-in. The deficiencies mean that those hotels that want to offer non-stop check-in will also need some form of traditional check-in or kiosk to handle the exceptional cases.

Furthermore, in some countries, non-stop check-in is simply not possible as hotels are required by law to scan the guest's passport or collect a signature on a registration form.

Nevertheless, new generation hoteliers will continue on their quest towards the non-stop check-in. Time will tell which, if any, of the above concepts becomes the standard.

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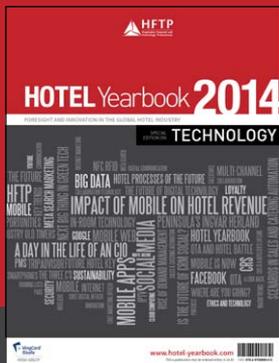
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