



## Killer Apps

By Reid A. Paul • Editor-in-Chief

These days a guest at a typical hotel is far more likely to pick up his or her cell phone in a hotel room than use the guestroom phone. Quickly, the cell phone has become an essential tool, not just for business, but for everything. In nearly every hotel, guests arrive with a phone glued to their ears and leave with the phone still there.

Recognizing the inevitable, hotels are now questioning how to support the increasingly mobile and connected guest. These hotels are latching on to solutions from the immediate to the long-term and strategic. While many hotels have struggled to come to grips with the demise of their telecom systems, the black hole that has become telecommunications has necessarily forced hotels to rethink how they communicate with guests and how guests use their hotel rooms.

As guests come to depend on their cell phones, the strength of the signal within a hotel can become a significant issue. As Bob Bansfield, associate vice president, information technology for Hyatt recently told Hospitality Technology, "Hotels are full of glass and steel and meeting rooms are often below street level. Those all combine to affect the cellular signal."

### Boosting that signal

If a guest's phone does not have a signal, more often than not the guest will blame the hotel, not their cell phone carrier. After all, if your cell phone is an indispensable tool for business would you stay at a hotel that you know does not have coverage in the rooms or common areas?

Not surprisingly, hotel—and restaurant—companies have begun to explore options for boosting the signal inside their properties. A number of companies have emerged recently with cell phone antenna boosters designed for business and enterprise use. These boosters are designed to amplify the signal coming from a base station antenna and provide a stronger signal to the cell phone. In addition to many of the major carriers, companies like Spotwave Wireless ([spotwavewireless.com](http://spotwavewireless.com)), Cell Antenna ([cellantenna.com](http://cellantenna.com)) and others have created systems designed for homes all the way up to 250,000 square foot/40-story buildings.

In addition to a signal boost, antennas may also deliver peace of mind for some users. According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration as well as the American Cancer Society, there is no clear evidence that cell phone use is linked to cancer, but neither is their definitive evidence that it does not. Many experts advise minimizing usage with a weak signal and to use hands-free options that increase the distance between the phone's internal antenna and the user's head. Boosting the cell phone signal does reduce the power emitting from the cell phone itself.

### Business sense

Perched on the top floor of the US Bank Building in St. Louis, Missouri, CKE's corporate office had poor signal quality for its wireless devices: cell phones, BlackBerry devices and data modems. "A lot of the things we do are in real time," explains Tom Lindblom, CKE's chief technology officer, "Because of the nature of our business, e-mail is used for lower priority items and voice mail is used for the higher priority communications. When our operators came to our facility, effectively they were cut off from the outside world."

As Lindblom notes, many of Hardee's restaurants are outside of metropolitan regions, making cell phones a vital tool for communication with regional managers and many operators. CKE automatically sends out alerts for sales data and when deposits are missing to telephone numbers— almost always cell phones. "It even makes our meetings more productive," he adds. "When people know that the voice mail indicator works, they're not rushing out of meetings to check their messages."

While not all restaurant companies want to encourage cell phone use in their units, undoubtedly many will follow CKE's example to ensure coverage in its corporate offices. Regional managers especially are tied to their cell phones and a trip to the home office cannot mean managers will be less efficient. "Also, our management folks are heavily into BlackBerry devices," Lindblom adds.

While the case for boosting cell phone signal strength at a corporate office is obvious, the return for hotels is less immediate and the costs for large properties can be significant. Still, most hotel operators agree that catering to cell phone users makes good sense. A number of hotels, for example, now offer cell-phone chargers for sale in order to cater to their guests' needs.

"Being away from home and suddenly realizing you've forgotten to pack your cell phone charger is one of the biggest frustrations travelers face" Mark Nogal, vice president marketing, explained when Hilton Garden Inn started to offer phone chargers.

Of course, with well connected guests, hotels can potentially take advantage of cell phones as well. As self-service and web check-in take off, a number of hotel companies are already exploring ways to make check-in and check-out by cell phone viable.

Not long ago, the hotel companies viewed the cell phone as the root cause of the demise of the expensive and profitable hotel telecom systems. However, as hotels recognize that the guest and their cell phone will not be separated anytime in the near future, attitudes are changing. As long as guests keep their cell phones close at hand, you can bet that hotels will do what it takes to make sure the signal comes through loud and clear.