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BUSINESS TRAVEL

The Cellphone That Doesn't Work at the Hotel

By CHRISTOPHER ELLIOTT

As a frequent guest at a Salt Lake City Hampton Inn, Murray Trepel often finds himself powering down his cellphone and picking up the house phone.

"My cellphone seldom works anywhere near the hotel," said Mr. Trepel, the senior manager for a call-center service provider in Logan, Utah. "Not just in my room, but in the parking lot as well."

What is going on? Mr. Trepel, like many business travelers who depend on uninterrupted service from their wireless company, has a long list of probable culprits - including the building's architecture, the area's geography and the cellphone industry's erratic coverage.

But another theory is starting to gain traction among business travelers: hotels are blocking the signals.

They would certainly have the motive. Cellphones have taken a huge bite out of their earnings. Thanks largely to the preponderance of portables, the profits from in-room phones dropped 76 percent in four years, sliding from \$644 an available room in 2000 to \$152 last year, according to the hotel consulting firm PKF in San Francisco.

Analysts say the high fixed cost of maintaining in-room phones increased the losses. The downturn accounted for 10 percentage points of the hotel industry's 36 percent decline in profits during the same period. "Hotels are unhappy about that lost profit," said Robert Mandelbaum, PKF's director of research.

But are they so unhappy that they are biting back? No way, say hotel representatives. For starters, they point out, cellphone-blocking devices are illegal in the United States.

"It would also hurt our customers, and it's something we would never do," said Courtnie Widerburg, the general manager of the Salt Lake City Hampton Inn. Besides, her property already offers free local calls and high-speed Internet access, and its franchise agreement limits how much it can bill for long-distance service, she said.

Not only that, but hard evidence is scant that hotels are using jammers - at least in the United States. Last year, a Scottish newspaper reported that phone jammers were being sold to hotels in the United Kingdom as tools for increasing revenue from in-room phones.

"Harassed by mobile phones or hotel phone system not being used?" asked one of the promotional leaflets distributed to the properties. "Then look no further. Purchase a mobile phone jammer for your hotel, restaurant and bar. Small and discreet."

A reporter from the newspaper, The Record, posed as a bed-and-breakfast owner and bought a jammer and a battery pack for about \$135. The man who sold the gadget to him, the reporter said, told him, "I've sold quite a few to hotels and bed and breakfasts."

Loreen Haim-Cayzer, the director of marketing and sales for Netline Communications Technologies in Tel Aviv, acknowledged that her company had sold hundreds of cellphone jammers to hotels around the world. But asked if any of them were in the United States, Ms. Haim-Cayzer said she could not disclose the identity of clients.

Still, suspicions persist. Joseph Palermo, a corporate pilot for a home-improvement company, spent almost a month at a Courtyard property in Secaucus, N.J., recently, and he wondered whether it might be using a jammer.

"While I was there, my cellphone worked terribly," he said. "Sometimes I would have to dial three or four times to place a call. Then I would have to hold my head just right to hear who I was talking to. You would think that being across the river from one of the biggest cities in the world, the phone would work well."

Melissa Thompson, a spokeswoman for Interstate Hotels & Resorts, the hotel-management company that runs the Courtyard, said the hotel was not blocking wireless calls.

"We would never infringe on anyone's rights to use a cellphone for the sake of making a few extra dollars," she said. But she acknowledged that cellphones did not always work on the property, particularly in hard-to-reach areas like the elevator.

"I can understand that some guests would be frustrated," she said. "I can understand that they would be suspicious."

The doubts are not limited to guests. When a recent PricewaterhouseCoopers survey showed the number of calls made from hotel room phones had fallen by 40 percent in the last four years, the firm's lodging consultants wondered whether hotels were fighting back by investing in wireless jamming technology.

An investigation, however, turned up nothing. "It's possible that there are hotels using cellphone

jammers," said Bjorn Hanson, a PricewaterhouseCoopers hotel analyst. "But we couldn't find them."

Then again, it is nearly impossible to prove that jamming technology is being used. "If you turn your phone on and it says 'no service,' then that's the only hint that you're being jammed," said Barry Zellen, editor of Technologyinnovator.com, a Web site that covers wireless security issues. "If you're in an area that has good coverage and you pull into a hotel driveway, and suddenly there's a dead zone, then you can probably speculate that there's something unnatural going on."

Adding to the intrigue is the fact that the Federal Communications Commission, which could easily sniff out a blocker with its direction-finding equipment, has never issued a fine for the use of a cellphone jammer, according to an agency spokesman.

Not everyone sees that as proof that the devices are not in use. "The F.C.C. rule prohibiting cellphone jammers is unenforced," said Howard Melamed, the chief executive of the CellAntenna Corporation, a cellular-communications technology company in Coral Springs, Fla.

At the same time, consumer complaints to the F.C.C. about telecommunications service quality, a catch-all category that includes possible cellular-blocking devices, busy signals and roaming service, surged to 704 in the fourth quarter of last year, the latest period for which numbers were available, from 450 in the first quarter.

"If you do the math, if you connect the dots, it's obvious that these cellphone jammers are catching on," said Mr. Zellen of Technologyinnovator. "Especially in the hotel industry."

The companies that sell the devices are understandably tight-lipped about their clients. Mike Menage, the chief executive of Global Gadget, a Worthing, England, seller of jamming equipment, insists he has no idea whether any hotels have bought his devices.

But he admits the motive is there. "Hotels want them to either cut down on disturbance to the other guests or, more likely, to increase hotel revenue by forcing the guests to use the in-house hotel telephones for external calls," he said.

Practically speaking, jamming an entire hotel would not be easy. Mr. Melamed of CellAntenna, which sells legal jamming devices to the government, says that the cheap hand-held jammers sold by mail order have too short a range to do the trick. He estimates that a small hotel would have to spend at least \$25,000 to block all cellphone transmissions, while a larger operation, like a conference center or a big chain hotel, might be looking at a bill of \$35,000 to \$50,000.

Instead of intentionally interfering with transmissions, Mr. Melamed said, he believes hotels remain conveniently neutral.

"The hotel doesn't have to go to extremes to stop people's calls from going through, because there's

already interference caused by the building or there's just a weak signal," he said. Properties could easily install so-called repeater systems to help a cellular signal penetrate every room in a hotel. But why spend money on something that is going to reduce your revenues?

In the end, most hotel guests shrug off their suspicions and find someone else to blame. Mr. Trepel, the Utah senior manager who could not connect from the Hampton Inn, said he ultimately faulted his wireless carriers. "I walked up and down the street, and I had the same problems," he said.

Whether they think a hotel is tinkering with their wireless transmissions or not, experienced business travelers usually have a contingency plan. "Anybody smarter than a pineapple knows that cellphones do not and never have worked everywhere, and that hotel long-distance charges have always been outrageous," said Ed Barrett, a software upgrade specialist in Flanders, N.J. "So you just go out and buy a phone card, and you carry it everywhere you go. And then you use it when your cellphone doesn't work."

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