How mAPPs Are Making Hotel Operations Faster, Easier, Cheaper

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Executive Summary

Inspections and checking for compliance with standards is an ongoing job at every hotel, every day. Think about operations like guestroom status update, property maintenance and repairs, and housekeeping inspections, to name just a few.

Now innovative mobile applications (mAPPs) are available to help owners and managers conduct many routine ongoing activities in a faster, smarter way so they can operate their properties more productively and more profitably.

These mAPPs are new. They're now. They're WOW — and my column examines how these software programs can help you increase staff efficiency, heighten guest satisfaction, and improve the bottom line.

A wide variety of mobile applications (mAPPs) have been available from many sources for guests to enhance their hotel experience — from making reservations to ordering room service.

Now innovative mAPPs technology can help hotel owners and managers to increase staff efficiency, to heighten guest satisfaction, and to improve the bottom line.

Inspections and checking for compliance with standards — whether those standards are issued by the brand or by the owner — is an ongoing job at every hotel, every day. For example, think about certain operations like:

- guestroom status update
- property maintenance and repairs
- housekeeping inspections
- personnel reviews
- mystery shopper programs

These activities are not *"once and done"* — they are repeated daily. They are also typically time-consuming and paper-intensive.

Maybe traditional paper reports were perfectly adequate in the past, but *"adequate"* is no longer enough in our hi-tech era of constant connectivity and instant communication. Today, you need *"exceptional."* More accurately, you need *"exc-APP-tional"!*

The Old Way

The typical inspection, regardless of the topic or focus for the inspection, is a four-step procedure:

- *compile the findings manually* as you conduct the inspection — in writing on paper
- *enter the findings digitally* into a data base, spreadsheet, or other electronic record
- *generate a report* — usually on paper — that can be distributed, analyzed, and eventually acted upon
- *provide feedback* to team members about the inspections

For most of us, doing the inspection is the easy part – the hard part is finding time to translate our written notes into electronic record-keeping, then producing a final report in a timely manner so the information in the report is still relevant and useful.

Be honest with yourself: how many times have you accumulated several days of reports so you could input them all together during one *"catch up"* administrative session, rather than interrupting your schedule every day to do a few minutes of data entry?

Of course, the result of waiting means that the reports are outdated by the time they are produced – and the process requires entering the information twice, once manually and again digitally, which doubles the amount of work.

Perhaps worst of all, feedback to employees is delayed dramatically about any corrective action that may be needed to enhance their performance or the property as a result of the original inspection. Unfortunately, delayed feedback is lost feedback because studies show that the sooner people receive feedback about any given behavior, the more likely they are to change and improve that behavior.

In short, our current way of doing inspections in hotels is frustrating for employees and inefficient for both management and guests: managers, as well as their employees, consider inspections to be tedious so they resist doing them. When inspections are finally done, the cumbersome procedures confirm that the process is tedious, which further reinforces employee attitudes about resisting inspections.

The final irony is that any problems identified by the inspection are days old by the time they receive attention. For employees, this further underscores the attitude that inspections have little value while for guests, it means a less desirable hotel experience – which can lower satisfaction scores and reduce return bookings. It's a cycle that's undesirable – and unnecessary.

The New Way

Now mAPPs installed on a smart phone, tablet, or mobile device allow hotel staff to communicate and to coordinate in real time. It's a faster and smarter way to manage routine hotel workflow.

Several manufacturers have developed mAPPs which are specially-designed for operations in the hotel industry. Four proprietary programs from Vertical Systems Inc. (VSi) provide good examples of how owners and managers can use mAPPs:

- *v-Inspect* – which examines and scores the quality of housekeeping work in a guestroom

- *v-Checklist* – which inspects public areas

- *v-Repair* – which identifies and tracks needed repairs, with photo support

- *v-Departure* – which reports the housekeeping and occupancy status of guestrooms scheduled for check-out

The benefits of mAPPs to a hotel's workflow include:

- *Reduced labor costs and improved productivity* – because employees spend less time recording data and more time *"doing"*

- *Enhanced decision-making* – because information is processed in real time without delay, without transcription errors, and without cumbersome paperwork

- *No upfront investment in capital equipment or software development* – because a simple monthly fee for the reporting web portal plus applications makes using this technology more realistic and affordable, especially for smaller properties

It is important to note two additional features of mAPPs:

- *They are important as tools for both feedback and for tracking.* For example, whether the feedback is positive or negative, mAPPs add credibility because they thoroughly confirm and quantify what work was done, when, how, and by whom. Information can also be tagged to photographs, if needed. The entire record then becomes a way to conveniently track tasks and to avoid any confusion or dispute. These benefits can be especially valuable at union hotels — while at all hotels, mAPPs inspections can be an effective basis for timely *"show and tell"* training as well as for tracking reports at team meetings.

- *They are easy to implement.* Like any new tool or procedure, mAPPs require some initial training to ensure that they are properly understood and used, however, this orientation is relatively simple and fast because so many people are already familiar and comfortable with smart devices.

However, not all mAPPs are created equal. For example, currently only one manufacturer — VSi — offers software with inspection forms and report templates that can easily and quickly be customized for your specific brand and your specific property.

Another consideration when evaluating mAPPs is the level of service you can expect to receive. Look for a manufacturer that can provide you with 24/7 toll-free phone support and remote monitoring, with ongoing maintenance and warranty coverage, and with timely software upgrades — because there's no substitute for your peace of mind.

Turning It App A Notch

Since the first quarter of 2011, a major Chicago skyline property has been using mAPPs products and the results have been dramatic. Because inspections are easier, they are conducted more often — for example, increasing from an average of two per day per housekeeping employee to eight per day.

While more data is being generated, management is able to provide feedback more quickly to staff about their performance — and staff can react more quickly to correct problems. The result is more satisfied employees, who no longer dread inspections but rather find themselves wanting to do more inspections.

The process is more enjoyable for everyone. After all, hotel operations are about standards — maintaining the levels of operation that guests expect from the property and from the personnel in a variety of categories such as cleanliness, appearance, and procedure.

However, the reality is that standards slip — whether it is bed corners not being made up to par or tears in hallway wall paper not being repaired quickly enough. That's why we have inspections — we all want feedback and we all want the opportunity to improve our performance.

With traditional inspections, however, a particular problem can go on for days or even weeks before it is properly identified and corrected. Now with inspections by mAPPs, problems can be caught and corrected quickly — while they are still occurring, before they get out of control, and before they affect guest satisfaction.

Another daily concern that often verges on panic for hotel staff is determining the status of checkouts — how many guests have actually checked out and when will those rooms be available for newly arriving guests? This information is essential so the housekeeping department can properly allocate its personnel and so the front desk can properly meet the expectations of inbound travelers, especially early arrivals. The right mobile application provides the way for both housekeeping and the front desk to have an accurate guestroom inventory — instantly in real time.

Real time is real neat and real simple — in fact, as simple as *1-2-3:*

1. Knock on the door of each guestroom on the checked out room list

2. Confirm the occupancy status

3. Press the appropriate APP button to upload the information to the cloud, where all interested departments can view it in real time

Still another issue handled more easily by mAPPs is needed repairs in guestrooms and public areas. Simply send a request for repair, with a photo attached of the existing condition if you wish, to the proper department. Records are kept in the cloud, so they are convenient to retrieve and track — plus it's very easy to determine if items needed for the repair are in inventory or must be ordered.

Paperwork? At hotels using mAPPs, it's becoming a thing of the past!

Give Your Property A Winning APP-titude

Sometimes in life, *"less"* is *"more."* That's certainly true about mAPPs. They deliver less paperwork and less delay — and that means more efficient employees, more satisfied guests, and a more profitable bottom line.

If you're the kind of owner or general manager who is never quite satisfied with the status quo — who believes there's always a better way to do business — then mAPPs are something you should investigate.

After all, aren't there some routine hotel operations that you would be very glad to automate?

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For almost 30 years, Saeed Kazmi has been developing innovative technologies that empower business to move in new directions. Today, he serves as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Vertical Systems, Inc. (VSi), a Silicon Valley-based company he co-founded in 2001 to provide sophisticated solutions for the hospitality industry.

Previously, he co-founded a series of firms that achieved high- tech "firsts" such as the first company in the world to focus on Virtual Private Networks (VPNs); a company that conceived and developed a mobile tablet PC with embedded GPS unit; and a company that was one of the first developers of fabless PC semiconductor products, notably PC chip-sets and microprocessors;

Mr. Kazmi earned an undergraduate degree in electrical engineering at NED Engineering University in Karachi, Pakistan and a master's engineering degree at Oregon State University (OSU). In 2008, he was named to OSU's Academy of Distinguished Engineers.

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