

Hotels Try New Features With Test Rooms

By CLAIRES ATKINSON
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It is known simply as the X-room.

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Jessica Kourkounis for The New York Times
William Sullivan, managing director of the Courtyard by Marriott in Newark, Del., in a test guest room.

Set up last November at the Courtyard by Marriott in partnership with the [University of Delaware](#) in Newark, it is a test guest room. It is equipped with everything from waterproof mattresses to the experimental technology of wireless electricity (no plugs) to a specially designed [Nintendo Wii](#) game console for travelers. There is also a digital door display that lets guests see who is in the corridor.

Nor is Marriott the only chain with what the lodging industry calls test rooms or room labs. From a hotelier's perspective, a test room helps demonstrate what is working and what is not, before huge amounts of money are spent on the latest technology or new light bulbs are acquired.

"In the last five years there's been more research on what the consumer wants than at any time during my 40 years in the industry," said Joseph McInerney, chief executive

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and president of the American Hotel and Lodging Association.

Mike Jannini, executive vice president for brand management at Marriott, agreed that research had gained much more prominence in the business. Hotels, he said, are moving away from segmenting travelers by price point and are instead grouping people by attitude and lifestyle.

Marriott is already introducing some of the concepts in its hotels. William Sullivan, managing director of the hotel in Newark, Del., that houses the X-room, says the company has made some interesting findings: "Everyone is interested in the Nintendo Wii. All hotels see that has potential." A waterproof mattress is also being tried out across a pilot group of hotels while a Marriott in Las Vegas is testing the digital door display.

The X-room was adapted from an exhibit at the Hospitality Financial and Technology Professionals trade show. Each year, the group solicits state-of-the-art products for the exhibit, called Guestroom 2010, which are then demonstrated at a convention in June. Last year's exhibit included a digital control panel that would allow travelers to use a single device to change the music, lighting, heat levels and hanging artworks depending on their moods.

Westin Hotels and Resorts opened its first test room, known as the Lab, in January 2007. In Room 1627 at the Westin Chicago River North, the test room is open to travelers who have crossed two time zones.

According to Sue Brush, senior vice president of Westin, 52 percent of guests said they felt unwell on arrival. Using that information, the company incorporated multiple calming elements like a tea menu and blackout curtains into the test room. Among the new products in the room are an oscillating fan that enables guests to direct their own airflow and even out noise, and Sleep TV, a meditation show that deactivates on completion. Ms. Brush said the company learned from the test room that guests did not like the sound machine with bird and rain noises because it was too fake.

Alison Kal, vice president for marketing at the Hyatt Corporation, said last year's

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introduction of a new brand, Hyatt Place, resulted from an effort involving more research than any other concept in the company's history. Not only did the company build a test room, it also built a test hotel in Scottsdale, Ariz.

Hyatt Place rooms are equipped with flat-panel HDTV sets and a "plug panel," which recognizes different electronic devices and allows computer presentations to be displayed on the television screen. "People wanted a place to sit that wasn't the bed with a surface they could wipe down," Ms. Kal said. "We have a sectional sofa and a leather top on the ottoman. Women drove the feedback, but we executed gender neutral."

Two boutique hotel companies, the James Hotel Group and Kimpton Hotels, have their test rooms off site. James Hotel has two guest rooms in a warehouse in Long Island City, Queens. Major clients, individual customers and staff members give their opinions on everything from linens to seating.

"If you go back to the old chains, they had prototype rooms, and before design became important it was a cookie-cutter room," said Brad Wilson, the executive vice president of the Denihan Hospitality Group, which recently acquired James Hotel. "What's in it today is the opposite. We use the prototype as a research lab, as a way to break away from the mold."

Customers told James Hotel executives to make their desk space bigger, so it could accommodate food and a laptop.

The Kimpton Hotels and Restaurant Group uses the general managers' evening wine hours to supplement research on what guests want. Niki Leondakis, Kimpton's chief operating officer, said compact fluorescent light bulbs initially did not emit enough light and had a tendency to flicker, a problem the company worked to fix.

Mr. Sullivan of Marriott noted that too much technology can be a problem and that after 12 hours on the road, few guests wanted to read manuals. "We've noticed as we put in technology, we're sitting there with 10 remote controls. We need to address that. How do you simplify that process? Every one of them takes a battery."

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Mr. McNerney recently tested the X-room, but found a few problems. While praising the “bells and whistles,” he said he could not figure out the alarm clock or how to turn on the television. “All I wanted to do was watch CNN,” he said.



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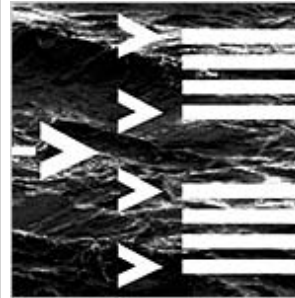
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