

The Changing Role of Housekeeping Department in Hotels Post COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Housekeeping is an operational department in a hotel which is responsible for cleanliness, maintenance and aesthetic upkeep of rooms, public areas, back areas and the general surroundings within the premises of the hotel. The housekeeping department of the hotel performs a key role in keeping the environment clean and sanitized. In wake of the COVID -19 pandemic, the need for the cleanliness and sanitation has been driven several notches higher as the rate of contracting the virus is faster. Guests are exposed to many areas and the possibility of bringing the infection into a hotel cannot be disregarded. The hotels have to be very conscious of the fact that the safety and sanitation protocols have to be stringent and must be followed as per the standard operating procedures set by the hotel employees, vendors and also by guests alike. As the hotels launch these protocols guest sentiment and awareness of the situation needs to be assessed so that these processes can be planned and executed according to guest expectations. Guests will be more at ease and comfortable checking into a hotel that is compliant with the norms set by the local authorities and the hotel's health partners. There are certain habits that employees, vendors and guests will have to incorporate into their daily routine going forward for the safety of all concerned in this situation. It is mandatory for vendors, employees and guests to use masks and sanitize their hands before entering or touching anything in the hotel. Hand sanitizers should be made available in all the public areas such as lobby and restaurants. Cleanliness and hygiene are of basic importance to any guest and hotel considering this pandemic has

added more responsibility and challenges for the housekeeping department. To overcome these challenges and take over this responsible role involvement of the Housekeeping Department is invaluable.

To achieve that goal it is best that all are sensitized about the situation and cooperate towards the goal to create a safe haven or home away from home for the guests.

Keywords: Housekeeping Department, COVID-19, Changing Role, New trends, Hotels.

Need of the Study

The main aim of this research is to study the changing role of the Housekeeping Department in post-COVID-19 times and how the department deals with this precarious situation going forward. The New normal is going to raise a lot of challenges and expectations from guests regarding safety and security of the guests in present and future. This exploratory study also examines all new trends associated to this aspect of safety and security and how these are being implemented by hotels.

Introduction

The term Housekeeping in hotel parlance means ‘cleanliness and upkeep’, it also refers to the most important department in the hotel responsible for the same. The housekeeping department deals with the cleanliness of the rooms, public areas, back areas, and provides a welcoming atmosphere to the guest. The main functions of housekeeping are bed making, ensuring maintenance of the building and its infrastructure, laundry, linen management, key control, safety and security of the guests as well as the external and interior decoration.

The housekeeping department makes each day fresh and welcoming for the whole hotel and its guests. It maintains a good relationship with other departments required for guest liaison. The housekeeping department ensures a high standard of cleanliness as its primary function which has to be according to guest wants

and needs. It is particularly important as the room the guest stays in is highly priced.

In the housekeeping department, room cleaning is done by room attendants, they clean the room by using new chemicals, change linen of guest room and bathroom, make guestrooms beds and fill up all the supplies daily. Before COVID-19 guestrooms bed sheets, pillow covers were removed and send to the laundry for washing after the guests checked out but now it may be done twice a day.

The role of the housekeeping department has become even more crucial and it has become one of the most important departments in the hotel due to post-COVID to keep the environment clean and sanitized. Staff/employees must use the mask and sanitize their hands before entering or touching anything, even it is compulsory for guest to sanitize their hands before entering the hotel. Everyday sanitising and spraying must be done in the public areas. A sanitizer must be made available in public areas like the lobby, restaurant, bar, etc. Housekeeping staff should give training of using disinfectants correctly and safely. Staff safety is most important because they coordinate with guests directly. The cleaning frequency must be increased by the housekeeping department/staff in public areas. New safety and hygiene protocols must be implemented to receive the guest confidently. The hotel must provide digital key technology through which guests can check-in, choose their room, access their room with a digital room key, and check-out using their mobile device.

Due to this pandemic, many guests will be more insecure about their health and will ask many questions before check-in the hotel. They might ask questions about the solutions and types of equipment being used for cleaning and sanitizing the room. The staff must provide a positive impact on guests and make them feel comfortable. Each room must be quarantined for at least 24 hours after every check-out and only after that staff can be allowed in the room for cleaning and sanitizing.

Due to the post COVID-19, the guest room cleaning process will look very different such as cleaning all soft surfaces; carpets, rugs, drapes, bed runners, and

decorative pillows after each checkout. High touch areas such as door handles, light switches, coffee machines, mini bar refrigerators should regularly be disinfected. The guests too on their part must be sensitised about their part in the scheme of things and maintain all the standard operating procedures required by them.

Thus, cleanliness & hygiene is of basic importance to any guest and hotel, but this pandemic situation has added more responsibility and challenges for the housekeeping department or staff.

Objectives

1. To study the role of the housekeeping department in a hotel post-pandemic.
2. To study the opinion of guests or customers about the changing role of the housekeeping department.
3. To study housekeeping trends in the hotel regarding the safety of guest post-COVID pandemic.

Literature Review

(Giroti, 2020) Food safety and hygiene standards have become an important selling proposition for hotels and restaurants going forward and it would help them to build higher guests in today's scenario. It is important to create the right and proper kind of hospitality facility. There must be a comforting atmosphere to work and the main aim should be to reduce the cost of operation and increase efficiency without compromising the hygiene and food safety standards. Being proactive is the only way to prevent outbreaks before they happen. Success depends on the satisfaction and comfort of every guest.

(Todiwan, 2020) These times have brought focus to the housekeeping department like never before. For showing the importance of good housekeeping, hygiene officers are being appointed by hotels. It's not the 98% hotels do but the 2% that hotels don't has an impact on the guest experiences. Employees need to focus or know what 2% comprises. It is important to create delightful experiences for guests so they will rate the hotel positively and give brownie points. Before providing services to the guest /customer, it is important to know the product

properly. Housekeeping staff are the eyes and ears of the hotel as they get first-hand feedback on the guest experience. It is important to be innovative and create benchmarks that others will want to follow or copy.

(ET Hospitality World, 2020) Diversey, a leading cleaning and hygiene Solutions Company, launched another invaluable kit as a new weapon in the COVID-19. The Diversey Hygienizer, LC Das, Managing Director-India and subcontinent, Diversey India Ltd, said, Diversey Hygienizer has given a personal hygiene kit provided to each employee at his/ her workplace to clean and sanitize their hands and personal desk. Diversey Hygienizer kit is not just introducing the product to the market; instead, they are adding a necessary habit to their staff's daily routine to manage COVID-19 health care challenge.

(Vig, 2020) While hygiene and safety practices are vital for almost all businesses, they are most pertinent for hoteliers. Nowadays ratings can help hotels promote their reliability and earn the trust of customers in the service offered. The ratings can help customers choose hotels based on hygiene/ safety ratings, and encourages hotels to compete with each other to provide the safest environment to their customers and employees. Few organizations carry out hygiene audits in line with the WHO guidelines and provide certifications. To ensure the safety and hygiene in the hospitality sector WHO, FSSAI, FHRAI, MT, MHFW, ICMR, MHA, and others have issued guidelines on best practices.

(Kumar, 2020) Brijesh Rathore said compared to Chinese hotels who didn't get time to prepare fully to face the pandemic, their Indian counterparts have the luxury of a month at least at their disposal to learn, train, and implement the new safety and hygiene protocols to receive the guest confidently. The new guests will be asking too many questions before checking into the hotel and might also ask for the details of equipment and solutions being used for cleaning. As far as possible sharing of rooms has to be discouraged & only alternate rooms can be allocated. There must be at least 72 hours in between to sell the same room after check out to another guest.

(Kumar, 2020) India International Hospitality Expo (IHE) has started an initiative to frame a unified hygiene code and standard for the Indian hospitality industry in

the wake of the global pandemic. At present, each hotel has its own SOPs in place. They want to integrate all those SOP's and convert them into a common standard for the hospitality industry. This common code and certification will help build trust and confidence in the products and services.

(Panwar, 2020) In the post-COVID-19 world, the role of hygiene manager would become even more critical. They will more focus on proactive ideas and measure to make the environment safer and welcoming for the guests. They will work closely with the training team to ensure that they create substantial awareness and understanding of health and hygiene in daily life amongst the associates.

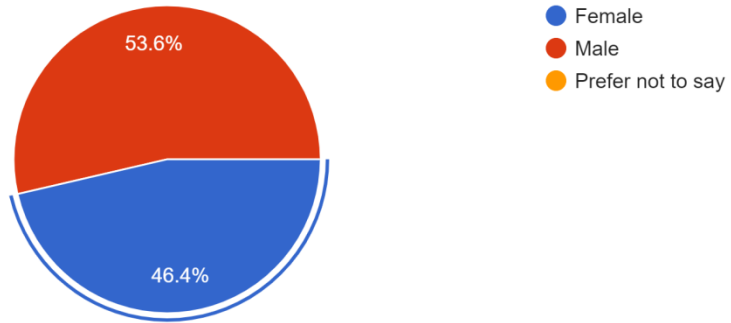
(Ray, 2020) Anmol Ahluwalia, General Manager, North Goa and Head of Centre for Excellence for Accommodations IHCL, opines that the housekeeping staff can be compared to the frontline warriors who have shouldered the responsibility of providing safe surroundings for all the guests who check –in. These IHCL employees have not been allowed to join back duty till they have undergone training. Briefings are a good timing to discuss the ongoing new normal guidelines. A new session called “My commitment to cleanliness” has been introduced to staff to make sure they play their part well. Proper social distancing norms, disinfection programmes, rigorous deep cleaning and ways to reduce the risk factor is the focus of the employees. He reported that guests were uncomfortable about the fact that other guests were faulting the rules and the employees were deployed to make them see reason to follow rules and maintain distance.

Research Methodology

The present paper studies the role of Housekeeping and how it has changed post lockdown. The researchers collected data with a help of a questionnaire forwarded to 70 respondents. Primary data collected from the respondents which we get with the help of a questionnaire. The questionnaire of the research study was sent to a maximum of 70 respondents from which 69 responses were received and recorded. The secondary data was collected through research articles or the internet about this study.

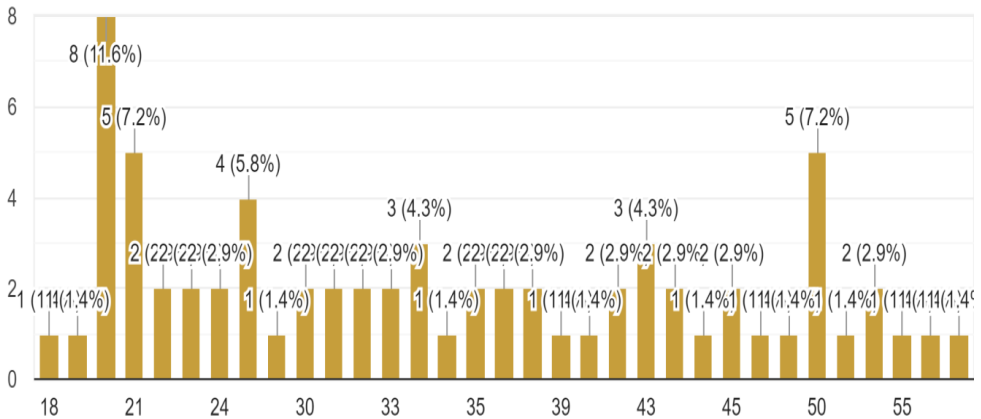
Questionnaire for Customers Respondents

Gender
69 responses



Total responses received are from 69 people from which 37 respondents are male and 32 were female.

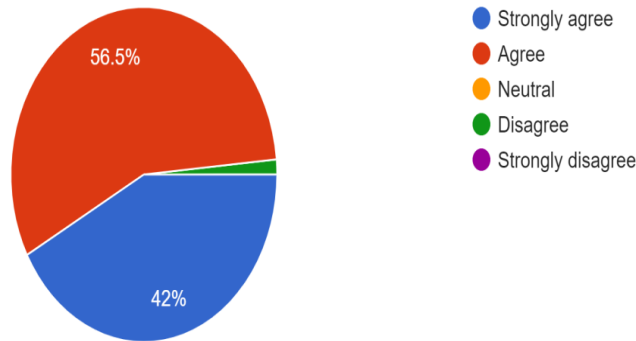
Age
69 responses



Total responses received from the age group are between 28 to 55.

1. Do you agree that the Housekeeping department is responsible for safety and hygiene of the hotel ?

69 responses

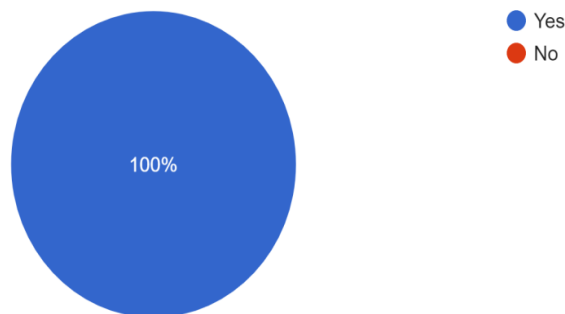


Out of the total responses 29 respondents (42%) strongly agree with the fact that the housekeeping department is responsible for the safety and hygiene of the hotel.

39 (56.5%) respondents agree and 1 person (1.4%) disagrees with this statement.

2. In your opinion the housekeeping must follow all protocols of room cleaning set by the department of health/ ministry of health?

69 responses

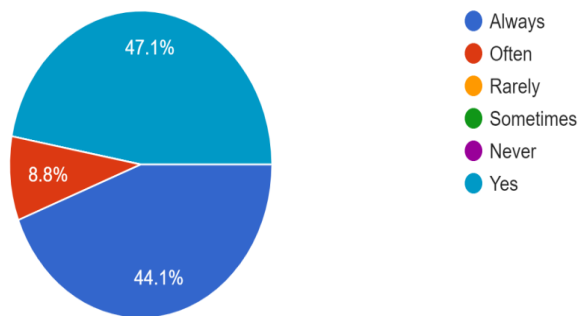


From all the total responses all 100% of respondents are agree to the fact that the housekeeping must follow all protocols of room cleaning set by the department of health/ministry of health. A written advisory on the Government of India Ministry

of health website which gives information about the protocols hotels must follow regarding safety and sanitation of guests. There is a lot of reading material about the COVID-19 available especially published on hotel websites which educate their guests about their status and readiness about tackling this pandemic. This is encouraging for guests who wish to booking their stay with the hotel. Many hotels also have tied up with a health care partner to assure guests that they are indeed following the cleanliness standards. Many hotels have converted their cleanliness efforts into full fledged campaigns to pledge themselves to win the guest's attention, business and loyalty.

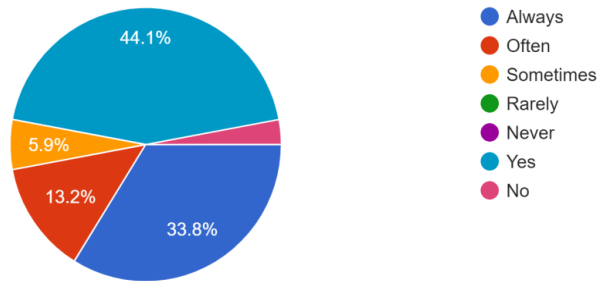
3. Would you feel more comfortable to check in a hotel whose website mentions it has a healthcare partner /certification of safety / has regular safety audits ?

68 responses



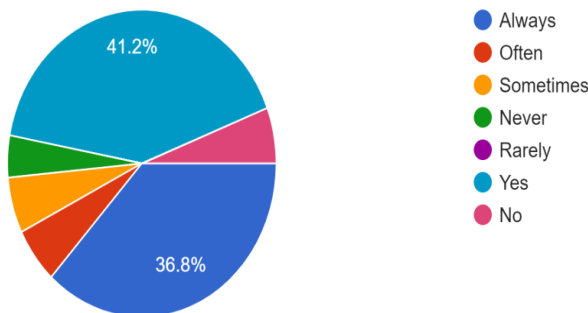
Majority of the respondents 91.2 feel comfortable checking in a hotel whose website mentions it has a healthcare partner/certification of safety/has regular safety audits. There is a sense of relief and solace to know that the hotel one chooses to stay adheres to these rules and the hotel conducts regular audits for the same. A sense of legitimacy develops when a guest sees an established name of a health partner who tests, inspects and provides certification to validate and review the existent safety and hygiene program in the hotel.

4.. Would you fill a self health declaration for guest medical history or travel if asked by the hotel ?
68 responses



From all the total responses 53 (59%) respondents agree to fill a self-health declaration for guest medical history, where 4 (5.9%) respondents say sometimes, other 9 (13.2%) respondents say often and 2 (2.9%) respondents said they would not prefer to fill the same. It is an option a guest cannot refuse as the Government of India tourism and Ministry of Health website makes it mandatory for guests to reveal their medical history while checking in the hotel.

5. Would you be comfortable checking into a hotel with contactless processes ? (e-wallet,online forms, QR code for menu)
68 responses

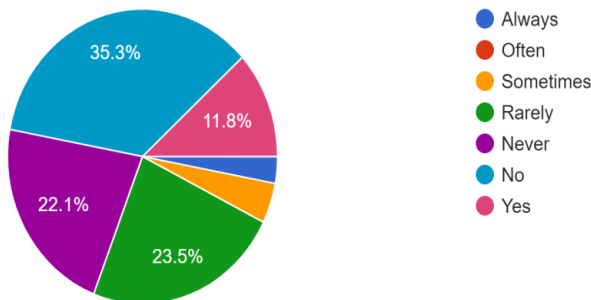


According to all the total responses 53 (71.10%) respondents feel comfortable with these process as this virus is contracted through touch and in the hotel the probability of an area or surface being touched by several people may lead to transmission of the virus The very foundation of the Hospitality Industry is face to

face interaction with guests which has been severely crippled. The smile of an employee at the front desk has been replaced with a mask whose expressions cannot be gauged by the guests. A handshake has been replaced an Indian style greeting of folded palms. To move forward the hospitality industry is taking the help of technology to help guests with contactless processes which would reassure that guests who may be worried about transmission through contact. One can check-in, check-out, pay bills, access menu cards, order room service adjust temperature and lights from the applications on their smart phones giving guests a sense of security. Hotels are heavily investing in the use of artificial intelligence. Robots are slated to replace the human element in this equation.

6. Would you feel comfortable with multiple staff entering your room for cleaning or replenishing the minibar?

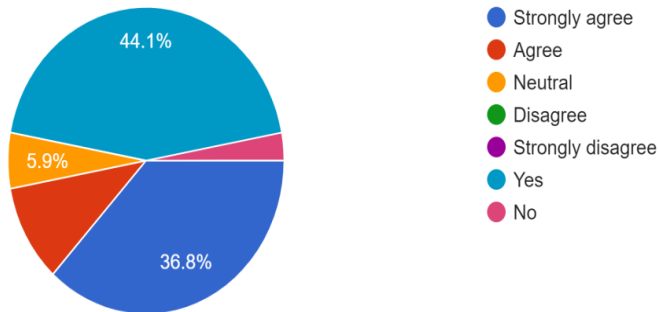
68 responses



From all the total responses received 39 (43.13%) are not comfortable with staff entering their room several times, other 3 (4.4%) respondents say they are comfortable with this arrangement sometimes, and the rest 10 (12%) respondents always feel comfortable with multiple staff entries. The hotels on their own have restricted number of entries in a room for various jobs as the risk of contamination would increase and there is emphasis on contactless service. Chat bots are available in rooms where the guest can speak and give his order or request and it will be left outside the room.

7.Would you insist a hotel to keep a Sani- Kit (mask,disposable gloves,sanitizer)in your room ?

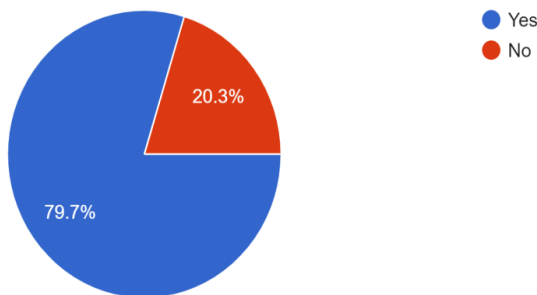
68 responses



Out of all the total responses received majority of the respondents, 62 (85.6%) are of the opinion that a disposable, Sani-kit is a must and would insist a hotel to keep a mask, disposable gloves, sanitizer in their room. The sani-kit in the room must be kept at a prominent place where it is seen and its presence will remind the guests about using it for their own safety.

8.Are you aware of Ozone treatment and would you want it to be included in disinfection of your room ?

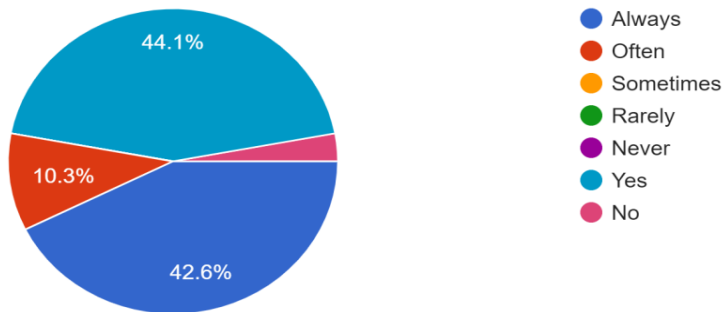
69 responses



Out of all the total responses, 55 (79.7%) respondents are aware of Ozone treatment and would want it to be included in the disinfection of their room. Though 14 (20.3%) respondents are not aware of Ozone treatment given in r

9. Would you appreciate room attendants to follow respiratory etiquettes ?

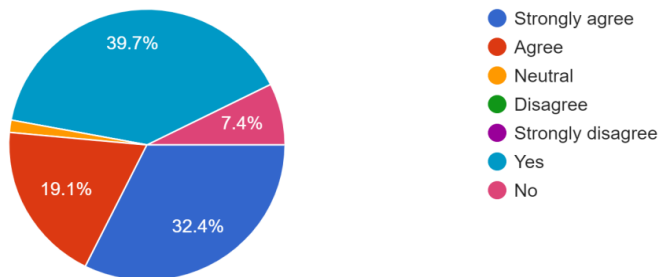
68 responses



As per responses received 64 (86.8%) respondents always and would appreciate room attendants to follow respiratory etiquettes. Guests would be comfortable with employees wearing a pp kit plus have a mask and gloves while servicing the room or use the gear while in guest contact. This will reduce the possibility of an infection.

10. Would you as a guest complain if you see the staff /other guests not following mandatory hygiene precautions?

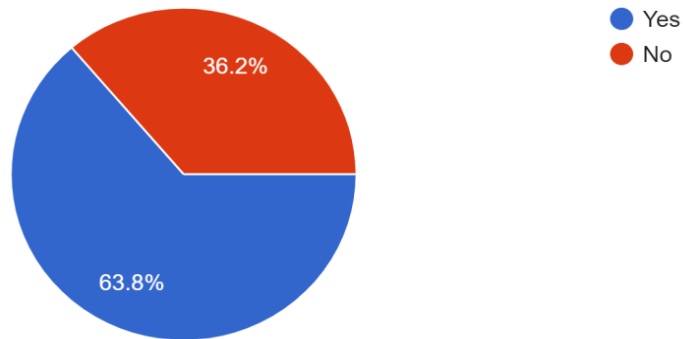
68 responses



From all the responses received 62 (79.6%) respondents said that they would complain about the staff/and other guests who do not follow mandatory hygiene precautions. As this virus is transmittable through the air guests will be extremely cautious about the fact that they have to protect themselves from the disease. It has been proven by the WHO guidelines that wearing a mask and sanitizing one's hands with a hand wash can significantly cut down the transmission.

11. Would you appreciate a robot bringing you supplies or minibar ?

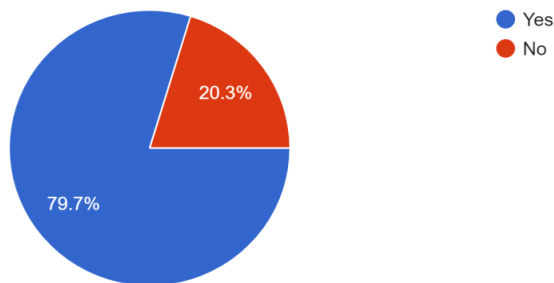
69 responses



Technology is never easy to use but when such dire consequences follow, guests will adapt to the different methods a hotel adopts to provide good service. From all the total responses 25 (36.2%) respondents disagree and rest 44 (63.8%) respondents say yes and would appreciate a robot bringing supplies.

12. Are you aware that it is mandatory to download the Aarogya setu app before check-in at a hotel?

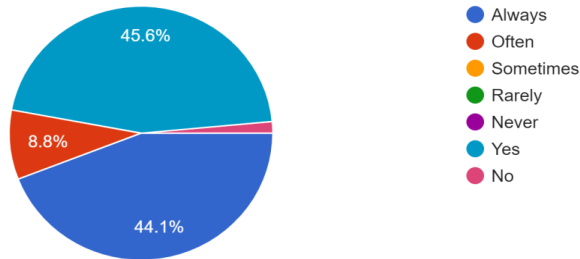
69 responses



Out of all the total responses 14 (20.3%) respondents are not aware that it is mandatory to download the AarogyaSetu app before check-in at a hotel, the rest other 55 (79.7%) respondents are aware of this fact and would download this application on their phones before entering and checking-in the hotel. The Government of India has made it compulsory for guests to do so.

13. Do you think a hotel must display COVID-19 related precautions and care reading material as a part of the guest room supplies?

68 responses



Out of all the total responses received 61 (65.7%) respondents say think that a hotel must display COVID-19 related precautions and care reading material as a part of the guest room supplies. It is proved that what we see we tend to remember more. When this material or warnings are displayed the guests are going to take notice or read leading to more precaution taking for self and others.

14. Please add any suggestions about what care you expect as a guest particularly from the Housekeeping Department post-pandemic

As per all the responses received from respondents, many believe that hotels should maintain proper cleanliness, hygiene in the rooms, and all public areas from time to time. A time frame along with frequency chart has been made to record the number times an area needs to be sanitized in the day. The hotel should follow the rules given by the government and sanitize the hotel thrice a day. Self-care is most important which is important as the safety of employees and guests is of paramount importance. As per respondents, the housekeeping department must use fresh linen for every customer. The department must allow their staff to use PPT kits for their own as well as for guest safety.

Staff should take all precautionary measures with COVID-19. Staff must follow their rules regularly and clean the rooms before and after guests check-in and check-out. There should be less contact between guests and staff. Excellent protocols and SOP should be followed. Guests must be sure about the hotel housekeeping taking utmost care and practicing hygiene. There should be no use

of disposables in the property as that might increase the chances of contamination and transmission.

The check out time of the previous guest, purpose of his stay in the hotel his health details to be maintained in the hotel register (if unwell during his stay), time at which room was sanitized after the previous guest checked out, before the entry of the new guest to avoid the spread of virus/germs.

New Trends in Housekeeping Post COVID-19

After the hotels shut in the lockdown and were not open to the guests, constant contemplation took place about how to make hygiene and sanitation take centre stage post the pandemic. As the Housekeeping Department is responsible for this function, Housekeepers along with the management of the hotel put together many procedures which would be necessary to sanitize the hotel areas when guests would eventually come back to stay. Systematic planning and implementation was the key to win back the confidence and trust of guests.

In doing so, the trends that are seen in hotels post COVID -19 are listed below:

Volatile Organic Compound (VOC) means any compound of carbon, excluding carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, etc. which participates in atmospheric chemical reactions. VOCs are a large group of chemicals that have a particular odor or gases released in the room giving the room an odour or off smell. To mitigate such undesirable smells rooms are treated with Ozone gas or fresheners.

A personal Sani kit in every room containing a small bottle or spray of sanitizer, gloves and 2-3 disposable masks. Separate sanitizer/sanitizer spray in each guest room next to the door which the guest can use will entering and exiting the room.

Amenities like notepads, pens, etc. will be removed after every check-out or will be provided only on guest request.

No touch hand dispenser. The sanitizers will be displayed at high guest traffic /public areas such as the lobby, outside elevators, in food & beverage areas to name a few.

Each staff member must use a mask, gloves, PPE kit while working or coordinating with the guest.

Guest to request hotel services, amenities with the TV remote. They would no longer need to pick up phone/visit front desk.

A mobile tipping app technology allows the guest to tip hotel staff with a swipe of their finger.

A hotel has a disinfecting robot to disinfect high touch or high traffic areas.

Implementation of UV-C disinfection protocols.

I-clean Barrier Plus, protect and surround each fabric fiber specialized manufactured fabrics with this protective layer can be ordered for linen and upholstery.

CIRQ+CLEAN is a touch-less sterilization system that dispenses cleaning fluid through an in-room internet-of-things robot

Automatic in-room aroma diffusers.

Robots clean windows and glass surfaces.

Robots to deliver mini bar/guest requests for housekeeping items.

Premium sanitized rooms at extra cost.

Electrostatic guns to collect fine dust, a small piece of dirt, stain.

UV-C sterilizing hands or a hand held device to reach difficult areas like couch corners.

Self-check-in with codes given on the guest's mobile to open assigned guest rooms.

Guest mobile apps should be able to connect to all buttons and switches in the room to avoid using fingers for touch.

Virtual views on the TV of restaurants, lobby, and bars to see the atmosphere to avoid crowds.

Self-monitoring gadgets for fever.

Information to be posted on the hotel's website about the care being taken post COVID-19 for guests safety.

Tying up with a health partner like a reputed company that can do safety audits for the hotel.

The Housekeeping department always has to be on alert when it comes to cleanliness and upkeep of the hotel. This is true as it is directly related to the reputation of the hotel. This responsibility has increased multifold especially post COVID-19 pandemic period. With guests and business slowly trickling in, it has become necessary to educate staff as well as guests about the precautions and procedures they must follow and co operate with the hotel.

Findings and Observations

As per the primary data collected from the questionnaire, 68 (80.23%) respondents say that the overall housekeeping department is responsible for the safety and hygiene of the hotel and must follow all the rules regarding the safety and hygiene of guests as well as the staff. 69 (100%) respondents feel that the housekeeping must follow all the protocols of room cleaning set by the department of health/ministry of health. From all the responses received from the questionnaire 67% of respondents that they would feel comfortable or they would check in to those hotels whose website mentions it has a healthcare partner. The majority of the respondents will fill the self-health declaration for guest medical history or travel if asked by the hotel.

In today's situation, all agree that it is most important to maintain social distancing and follow all the rules regarding COVID-19. To check-in the hotel now there are contactless processes also followed like (e-wallet, online forms, QR code for menu) as per the questionnaire 53 (71%) respondents feel comfortable to check-in the hotel with the contactless process. The finding in this research

suggests that many respondents say they won't feel comfortable with multiple staff entering their room.

As per the research and post COVID-19 it is important to provide sanitizer in all areas and rooms, 62 (66%) respondents agree that there must be a personal Sanikit in every guest room. As per questionnaire 55 (79.7%), respondents are aware of the ozone treatment and would insist it be included in the disinfection of their room. 59 (62.8%) respondents would also appreciate the room attendant for following all respiratory etiquettes. Many respondents say they will complain about the staff or other guests who will not follow mandatory hygiene precautions. As per the questionnaire research 44 (63.8%), respondents will appreciate a robot bringing supplies. It has become mandatory to download the AarogyaSetu app before check-in at a hotel as per the survey 55 (79.7%) respondents are aware of this fact.

Interpretation

The responsibility of the guest safety and security post-COVID-19 pandemic is an important issue and has been a topic of great discussion. This responsibility lies on the shoulders of the housekeeping department.

The hospitality business was severely affected due to the pandemic. Guest sentiment to return to hotels comes with a very important clause being hotels have to be ready to face the challenges going forward. Hotels have revamped their procedures to keep up with the needs of the guest.

Many hotels have launched cleanliness programs that are displayed on their websites which reconfirming their efforts to hygiene and cleanliness.

Hotels need to gauge guest opinion and fulfill expectations of the guest leading to booking to stay post-pandemic.

Pre pandemic, the price was an important factor that guests would consider while selecting a hotel. Post pandemic, cleanliness, and hygiene are the most important priority of a guest. Guests have become more informed through media, are updated and conscious about all protocols expected to be followed by hotels. The

trust of a guest is fragile and hotels need to win that trust by meeting all the expectations.

Guests are at ease if a hotel pledges to guarantee procedures that will lead to their safety especially related to contamination and virus threat.

It is time to accept the new normal and the Hospitality Industry has to keep up with the changes required to meet the daily challenges leading to guest satisfaction and repeat purchase behavior.

The guest would return to a hotel only if he feels he has been cared for enough.

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