WEBREZPRO™

Mobile Property Management

A WebRezPro White Paper

FROM FRONT DESK TO FRONT DOOR

THE BENEFITS OF MOBILE HOTEL PROPERTY MANAGEMENT
GO BEYOND OPERATIONAL CONVENIENCE AND EFFICIENCY TO
GREATER GUEST SATISFACTION AND MORE REVENUE.

The mobile trend in hospitality is growing at an impressive rate. More travelers rely on mobile devices to research travel information now than ever before; 57 percent of business travelers (up from 40 percent in 2010) and 38 percent of leisure travelers (up from 11 percent in 2010) researched travel information via mobile devices in 2012.[1] It goes without saying then, that mobile websites and mobile booking engines now play a fundamental role in ensuring hotels remain competitive among peers and accessible to customers. But it doesn't stop there; beyond mobile websites and booking engines and even custom property apps, hoteliers are fast beginning to realize that the benefits of mobile accessibility also extend to the front- and back-office of the hotel. From mobile guest check-in to mobile housekeeping reports, a mobile-enabled property management system frees staff from the front desk, improving efficiency and customer service and, in turn, increasing revenue — and a growing number of PMS vendors are answering the call to keep up with the mobile movement.

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1   The 2012 Traveler, Google and Ipsos MediaCT, U.S., August 2012, p. 16

This paper will describe the current climate for mobile hotel property management systems. We will look at the differences between native mobile applications and mobile Web applications, and the advantages and disadvantages of both. Finally, this paper will explore the mobile advantages of cloud-based PMS systems, which have a head start over legacy systems when it comes to mobile framework.

ON CALL: TODAY'S MOBILE PMS IN ACTION

Hoteliers are exceptionally busy people. Constantly on their feet, managers are focused on prompt customer service as well as operational tasks, from overseeing housekeeping schedules to analyzing booking reports. When you need to be in at least two places at once, being tied to the front desk is inefficient and detrimental to good service. A mobile property management system essentially allows hotel personnel to take the front desk with them wherever they go, providing a new level of convenience, efficiency and customer service.

From reservations to accounting information, property management systems contain volumes of data. Presenting data-heavy features on a smart phone screen is no easy feat; entire user interfaces need to be redesigned. Although progress in mobile app development is rapid, vendors are currently focusing resources on mobile-enabling those features of a PMS that are most in demand by hoteliers (and guests) on the go: online bookings, check-in and out, housekeeping and maintenance reports, and guest profiles/requests. To illustrate how these features work on the go, let's follow a guest through her hotel experience…

Mobile Bookings

Our traveler has made a reservation at a hotel through its mobile-optimized online booking engine. She was motivated to make the booking because the property's mobile website and booking engine made the process quick and easy via her smart phone. Fully integrated with the PMS, a mobile booking engine automatically sends reservation data to the PMS and availability is adjusted accordingly in real time, eliminating the need for manual input by front desk personnel, who are free to direct their attention to the guests on site.

Mobile booking engines are nothing new and are playing an increasingly vital role in online hotel bookings; according to a July 2012 study by Google/Ipsos MediaCT, 32 percent of business travelers and 24 percent of personal travelers booked overnight accommodations on a mobile device.[2]

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2   The Role of Mobile for the 2012 Traveler, Google and Ipsos OTX MediaCT, U.S., July 2012, p. 14

Mobile Housekeeping & Room Maintenance

On the day of the guest's arrival at the hotel, her room has been spotlessly cleaned by the efficient housekeeping staff — who are even more efficient with a mobile housekeeping application. A mobile housekeeping app gives housekeepers direct access to their personal housekeeping schedules via their smart phones or tablets as they work. The ability to update room statuses and enter housekeeping notes directly into the PMS through the housekeeper's mobile device in real time not only speeds up the room cleaning process but affords front desk staff up-to-the-minute knowledge of which rooms are ready for guests and which rooms require maintenance.
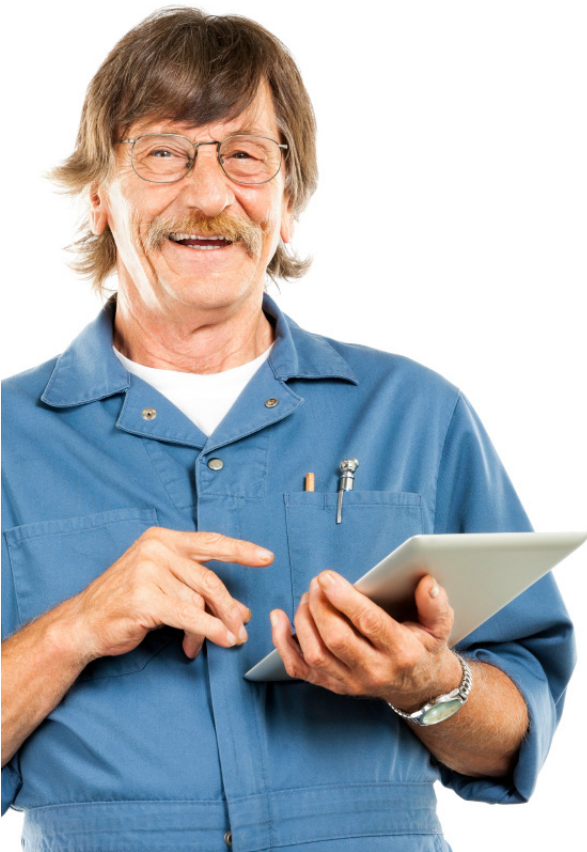
On the topic of room maintenance, a mobile maintenance app allows housekeepers to enter maintenance requests directly into the PMS via their smart phones or tablets, too. Not only can a housekeeper enter a description of the damage and parts required, but a photo of the offending fixture can be taken with the mobile device's inbuilt camera and attached to the report.

Logically, PMS vendors are beginning to incorporate the ability to send automated text messages and alerts in response to room status updates and maintenance requests submitted to the system. The intention is that the PMS can be set up so that, for example, when a departing guest checks out, the system automatically sends a text message or alert to the appropriate housekeeper, informing them that the guest has checked out and the room is ready for cleaning; rooms can be attended to sooner, enabling housekeepers to get through their rounds faster and the next guest to check in earlier. Here's another scenario: imagine the guest's appreciation upon receiving an automated (yet personalized) text message generated by the PMS, letting her know that her room is ready and that the hotel is looking forward to her arrival — the feature is not only reassuring to the guest who is arriving a little ahead of check-in time, but it gives the hotel a competitive advantage, providing an opportunity to connect with the guest prior to arrival and to set the tone of personalized service that can be expected at the property.

In regard to mobile maintenance reports, the PMS — upon receiving a maintenance request submitted by a housekeeper or other staff member — sends an automated text message or alert to maintenance personnel, complete with the description of the problem and a photo. Immediate

and direct notification of work orders (and even the parts and tools required) enables maintenance staff to attend to issues promptly and to save time running back and forth between front desk, the guestroom, and maintenance supplies.

Paperless Mobile Check-in

Our guest arrives at the hotel a little travel weary but immediately grateful for the pleasant greeting she receives right at the front door. She's invited to put down her bags and take a comfortable seat — a welcome alternative to waiting in line at the front desk. Armed with an iPad or other mobile device of choice, the check-in clerk approaches the guest and accesses the PMS to locate the guest's reservation, collect guest details, and check her in, all while our guest remains comfortably seated. It's even more convenient, and much more personable, than a self-service check-in kiosk.

The mobile-optimized check-in process can be paperless, too. Electronic signature capture is a feature that allows guests to sign registration cards and check-in/out receipts digitally on a tablet, while photo ID capture enables check-in clerks to take a photo of a guest's driver's license with the inbuilt camera of a mobile device, eliminating the need for ID scanning hardware. Not only does paperless check-in speed up the check-in process and cut paper costs, but it makes locating past registration cards easier, has a positive environmental impact, and makes a good first impression with guests.

At this stage, credit card readers and key card encoders still bind some part of the check-in process to the front desk; conventional credit card readers and key card encoders are not designed (and are just too cumbersome) to be attached to a tablet, so far impeding a fully mobile check-in process at most hotels. However, technology is rapidly advancing in these areas. Mobile credit card readers that plug into mobile devices are currently available and will become increasingly mainstream along with mobile PMS and POS (Point of Sale) systems. As for room key cards, NFC (Near Field Communications) technology will soon allow guests to skip the front desk entirely. Hotels will be able to send digital key codes to NFC-enabled smart phones, essentially turning guests' phones into digital room keys. Much like touchless key cards or proximity cards, a guest's smart phone will be able to unlock the hotel room simply by being held close to the door lock. These types of mobile (or digital) keys are currently in testing at a handful of properties within major chains like InterContinental Hotels Group.

Guest Requests

Self-service mobile apps for guests are becoming a popular investment for both chain and independent hotels. These directly guest-facing mobile apps are designed to engage guests more effectively with the hotel by providing on-demand access to such services as housekeeping requests, room service, on-site spa and restaurant reservations, loyalty programs, specials and deals, self check-in/out, and local information — all at the touch of a screen.

Many of these guest-facing mobile apps can be interfaced with the property's PMS, and, in most cases, it's advantageous to do so. Guest service requests for housekeeping and maintenance, and self check-in or out, for example, comprise fundamental data stored in a property management system — information that can be automatically updated to the PMS via an interface with the app, eliminating the need for front desk personnel to enter the data into the system manually. In addition to facilitating more timely attendance to guest requests, self-service mobile apps that are integrated with the PMS free up hotel personnel to use their time more efficiently.

Let's go back to our guest. She has settled comfortably in her hotel room and is wondering where to have dinner. She picks up her smart phone, opens the hotel's free app and finds the on-site restaurant's menu at her fingertips. A quick scan over the menu confirms her decision to eat at the hotel tonight and she makes a reservation with a couple of swift taps on the screen. In the meantime, she'd like to do some shopping, so, with another touch of the screen, she accesses a list of the hotel's recommended shopping hotspots. While she's out, she begins to think about tomorrow morning's high-pressure business meeting and decides to make an afternoon appointment at the hotel's on-site spa. She takes her phone out of her bag, opens the hotel app with a single touch, and after another couple of screen taps it's done. She momentarily reflects on the exceptionally convenient service provided at this hotel and wonders if it offers a loyalty program… seconds later, she's a member.

Back at the hotel, the PMS has been automatically updated (via an interface with the hotel's mobile custom app) with all the relevant information: her guest profile and reservation have been updated with loyalty program membership; the spa treatment has been included on her reservation; and notes have been added to her profile indicating she dines on site and likes to shop. Because the front desk clerk was not required to enter any of this data manually, he was free to focus his attention on more pressing matters.

Not only do self-service mobile apps boost guest satisfaction and loyalty, encourage guests to utilize hotel amenities and services, and improve staff efficiency, they also offer the potential to gather more guest data than ever before, allowing a hotel to provide increasingly customized service, target marketing more effectively, and make strategic business decisions.

Even at this early stage of PMS mobilization, the benefits of mobile property management are clear; providing on-the-go convenience and improved efficiency, a mobile PMS can take your standard of customer service to new heights along with revenue as repeat business increases.

NATIVE APPS VS WEB APPS

Property management systems can be mobilized two ways: through native mobile applications or mobile-optimized Web pages (Web apps). Both options provide access to the PMS from a mobile device such as a tablet or smart phone, but, depending on your existing or future PMS and your mobility requirements, one option may be more suited to your property than the other.

What is a Native Mobile App?

A native mobile app must be designed for a device-specific operating system, for example, Apple iOS, Android or Blackberry, and is installed directly on the device (usually via an app store) in order to operate.

Advantages of a Native Mobile App

- Because native apps are built specifically for the mobile device operating systems on which they will be deployed, they tend to be faster and can offer a better user experience than Web apps.

- Installed directly on the device, native apps can utilize the device's hardware: camera, microphone, GPS etc, and send alarms and notifications.

Disadvantages of a Native Mobile App

- Because native apps must be designed for specific operating systems, different versions need to be created for different devices. In other words, if the app is required to work on both Android and iPhone devices, two editions of software code need to be written for the same app.

- Due to the intensely tailored nature of native app design (and the resulting top-quality user experience), native mobile apps are typically costlier to produce than Web apps.

- Data integration between a native mobile app and a hotel PMS is complex.

A native mobile app communicates with the PMS server (on premise or in the cloud) via a wireless/data plan connection and API (Application Programming Interface).

Due to the costs involved in developing native mobile apps and integrating them with on-premise systems, mobile offerings from small vendors are limited. Some of the major legacy PMS vendors, however, are focusing significant resources on mobilizing their systems. In fact, an increasing number of major legacy PMS vendors now provide cloud-hosted versions of their software, facilitating easy adoption of mobile features via mobile Web apps.

What is a Mobile Web App?

A mobile Web app is a website optimized for mobile devices. Residing on a Web server (rather than on the mobile device itself), a mobile Web app is accessed via the device's mobile browser. A Web app — or mobile website — is essentially a modified version of a standard website and is typically built using an HTML5 responsive Web design approach. This means that the mobile site/app auto-detects the screen size of the device accessing it and adjusts content and layout accordingly.

Advantages of a Mobile Web App

- Built with a responsive Web design approach, a Web app works across all mobile devices, regardless of the operating system or screen size.

- A Web app and its upgrades are instantly accessible simply by accessing the app via your mobile browser. No installation or download is needed.

- Because Web apps are created with standardized web development tools, app development is usually inexpensive. Mobile Web apps for cloud-based property management systems are often available to hotels at no cost.

- Data integration between a mobile Web app and cloud-based PMS is seamless and effortless.

Disadvantages of a Mobile Web App

- Cross-device design and current limitations of Web technologies mean that Web apps can provide an inferior user experience compared to native mobile apps. However, when it comes to mobilization of core PMS features, native apps do not offer significant advantages over Web apps at this stage. Furthermore, with the evolution of responsive Web design, Web apps are proving to be an increasingly effective alternative to native apps across all industries.

- Web apps cannot utilize mobile device hardware (camera, microphone, GPS, etc.) and cannot send push notifications.

Mobile Web apps are the logical choice for mobile-optimizing a cloud-based PMS. In most cases, mobile Web apps are simply a mobile-optimized user interface to the same PMS back end. When a user accesses the PMS (for example, guest check-in or the housekeeping report) from a smart phone or tablet, the PMS simply detects that the system is being accessed from a mobile device and displays the mobile-optimized page accordingly.

As such a natural extension of cloud-based property management systems, mobile Web apps are emerging as the preferred route to mobile property management. Despite current limitations in performance due to limited or no access to device hardware, data volume and Internet connectivity, Web apps provide ample functionality for those PMS features that are most beneficial on the go. Apparently, travelers see it the same way; research conducted by Google and Ipsos OTX MediaCT last year revealed that travelers prefer to book hotels via mobile websites over native mobile apps (40 percent of leisure travelers prefer booking accommodation via a mobile website versus 12 percent via a native mobile app, while 36 percent of business travelers prefer mobile websites versus 17 percent for native mobile apps).[3]

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3   The Hotel Traveler's Road to Decision, Google/Ipsos OTX MediaCT, U.S., July 2012, p. 13

For properties that demand a Web-hosted app with device hardware access, hybrid apps may provide a viable middle ground. The hybrid approach wraps a Web app in a native app shell, creating a powerful application that can be hosted on a Web server, pull content from the Web, offer cross-device accessibility, and utilize device hardware.

THE CLOUD ADVANTAGE

Anywhere access has always been cloud software's distinguishing feature so it's easy to see how mobile technology and cloud technology go hand in hand. As browser-based software, property management systems that reside in the cloud have essentially been mobile since the advent of Web-enabled mobile devices (think laptop computers). This is not to say, however, that accessing cloud property management systems with a mobile device has always been effective; the small screen sizes of smart phones previously thwarted any real use of accessing many PMS features from the palm of your hand.

Tablets, however, largely overcome small-screen limitations and have facilitated the mobilization of cloud property management systems for years already. With significantly more screen space, tablets effectively display user interfaces to many PMS features in a user-friendly way, and have done so even prior to mobile optimization.

Developments in mobile device technology have inherently influenced developments in cloud technology. As more websites and SaaS (Software as a Service) products are accessed via smart phones and tablets, Web development tools like HTML5 and CSS3 have evolved to combat the small-screen issue and provide the best possible user experience on a variety of devices. Now, thanks to these responsive Web design techniques, Web pages can detect the screen size of the device accessing it and auto-adjust layout to optimize page presentation for the specific device, making tablets very capable workstations for a cloud PMS, and improving cloud PMS functionality on smart phones, too.

As previously mentioned, mobile Web apps are essentially mobile-optimized Web pages built with a responsive Web design approach and are a natural extension of cloud-based software. The relative ease (and low cost) of mobile-optimizing a cloud PMS contributes to the rapidly growing

trend of implementing cloud-based systems hotel wide — a trend fueled by cost savings and ease of deployment, upgrades and data integration. Cloud technology not only streamlines data integration between mobile apps and core hotel systems, but between core hotel systems themselves, from PMS to POS. According to Ryan Day, founding partner of The Portal Live, LLC, "apps, content, and guests' unique personal preferences will all live in the cloud, instantly accessible from all Web-enabled devices. The future of our unified digital world revolves around the maturation of a few key Web technologies: the cloud, mobile web standards (HTML5, CSS3, JavaScript), back-end server-side technology, and advances in mobile browsers."[4] Uniting and mobilizing hotel systems through the cloud improves operational efficiency and frees hospitality professionals to focus on what really counts: being hospitable to guests.

SUMMARY

Along with the rest of the world, the hospitality industry is going mobile. For hotels, the mobile movement started with directly guest-facing applications like mobile booking engines, but it is now sweeping the mobilization of core hotel systems along with it. And hoteliers are reaping the benefits.

Today's mobile PMS functionality frees hotel personnel from the constraints of the front desk and put them at the front door, or wherever they need to be. Although small screens continue to be one of the main challenges to completely mobilizing property management systems, more and more functions are being designed to fit in your pocket and core functionality is already on the go. Mobile paperless check-in, mobile housekeeping and maintenance, and mobile requests all directly impact operational efficiency, customer service and even the environment, which in turn positively influences guest satisfaction, repeat business and revenue.

Due to the relative ease and low cost of mobile optimizing cloud-based systems via mobile Web pages, Web applications are the increasingly popular choice over native mobile apps (and legacy systems), especially among small to mid-size properties.

Cloud property management systems have always had mobile potential but were previously limited by the availability of mobile devices and then by the limitations of Web development tools designed for desktop presentation. Now, thanks to the rapid development of mobile Web standards like HTML5, cloud systems are taking the lead in mobile property management. As Web technology continues to progress, mobile PMS functionality is only going to improve — until one day soon, your entire property could be run from the palm of your hand.

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4   Ryan Day, Merging the Existing System into a Single Platform, Hotel Business Review

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WebRezPro™ is a cloud property management system designed to meet all front- and back-office needs of independent hotels, hotel groups and chains, vacation rental management, and inns. Serving hundreds of clients in 20 countries, WebRezPro is a product of World Web Technologies Inc., a pioneering Internet marketing and software company for the tourism and hospitality industries since 1994.

Visit www.webrezpro.com or call 1-800-221-3429 for more information and a free demonstration.