



# Smart bar

Can minibars change their image? Bartech certainly think so and now their computer controlled fridges are available in Asia

Minibars are overpriced and remain the last refuge of the late night drinker. Unhealthy snacks dominate the menu and sweet fizzy concoctions on the non-alcoholic drinks list. All have prices customers will only pay if they have absolutely no alternative. In fact most guests studiously avoid the minibar unless they are too drunk to care about the financial consequences. To add insult to injury, delays occur at check out when housekeeping staff perform a high-speed inventory to check if anything is unaccounted for. Surely there is a better way of providing good service to guests and, ultimately, of driving F&B sales? Bartech would seem to be the answer – a revolutionary refrigerator with the technological intelligence to monitor its own content and communicate with a hotel's computerised management network.

According to the US-based manufacturer

it can: generate automatic invoicing through a hotel's Property Management System (PMS); provide a visual status readout of each fridge to the front desk, thereby cutting checkout time; offer facilities for promotions and 'happy hour' management; and prompt replenishing of the bar when necessary, allowing for greater guest privacy and reduced labour costs. Hotels which have implemented Bartech report revenue increases of between 20 and 80 per cent per available room.

The hi-tech system can even monitor and report on how long an item has been in the minibar, thus avoiding the expiry of products and consequently bad customer experience, as well as allowing for instant reports on revenue generation, item popularity, consumption peak times and instantaneously stock take. It operates on an easy-to-use Microsoft Windows platform and offers five different language presentations: English,

French, German, Italian and Spanish. There are also plans in hand to translate the system into Asian languages says Bartech's man in Asia, Jan Willem Strijker: "We are currently translating operator screens into Korean as we have started building the business in Korea six months ago with the appointment of a distributor there. Actual translation is no issue and can be done in-country." Strijker adds that: "guests do not interact with the system from a software standpoint."

Bartech has been widely adopted in Europe and the US, with over 100,000 units installed to date. One recently won contract is the implementation in 2,619 rooms at the Paris Casino in Las Vegas – a member of the Caesar's Entertainment, Inc. Staff replenishing the minibar download the requirements into a hand held PDA that communicates with the Bartech server, which relays the information in real time to the accounts department and the front desk. Commenting on the contract Marc Cohen, Bartech's Vice President of Casino Sales said: "We designed the ideal minibar set up for Paris Las Vegas with a combination of top and side dry sections for their premium merchandise. The addition of our 'e-visual' window on the minibar's door will also increase impulse sales and drive revenue for the hotel."

## Tailor made

Bartech can appeal to all sorts of hospitality accommodation operations and the company is capable of fitting a variety of finishes in a range of sizes running from 15 to 75 litres. That means that the company can tailor designs to coordinate with a wide range of interior decoration.

The product is relatively new to the Asia Pacific region but there are currently three hotels in Australia – the Hilton Melbourne, the Hilton Brisbane, and the Best Western Goulburn – and one in Tahiti, the Luxury Collection Bora Bora Resort that have installed it.

One possible new direction for hoteliers is to outsource minibar operations to a separate company. One project at the Hotel Sheraton Diana Majestic in Milan run by Hotel Outsource Management International (HOMI) represents a quantum shift in the minibar concept. In this example HOMI owns and maintains Bartech's minibars. Additionally HOMI hires and manages the minibar staff. The onus is therefore on HOMI to maximise revenue generation and they intend to do that by: providing innovative and interesting products including dry goods, adding flexibility to the pricing, creatively promoting the service, and optimising the data and analysis provided by the automatic Bartech system. HOMI is quick to point out that much of their success will depend upon their ability to provide training and expertise to frontline



employees. According to its publicity material HOMI sees great promise in the fact “statistics show that less than half of occupied rooms record any minibar consumption.” With the HOMI outsourcing concept, hotels have no outgoings and receive a percentage of the revenue.

**The intelligent fridge**

Bartech minibars also run on wireless communication systems that many international hotel groups are announcing will become the norm in their hotels over the coming year. One wireless system that operates with Bartech minibars is already in place at the Willard InterContinental Hotel in Washington DC. The hotel’s Executive Assistant Manager Pascal Forotti says: “As an immediate benefit, the e-fridge will increase our refreshment revenues and enhance guest satisfaction as it streamlines the billing process. In the longer term we now have an infrastructure that we can use to offer complimentary wireless internet in each of our 341 guest rooms instead of the wired high speed access that is currently available.



Bartech sees a much wider set of opportunities presented by the wireless generation. As early as Spring 2002 it had introduced its concept of the ‘intelligent room’ at the Houston InterContinental in Texas. It has added a ‘special microprocessor board’ to its minibars that has the capability to communicate with other electronically controlled elements in the room like the curtains, the lighting system, the air conditioning and the safe. In theory this degree of control should drive down fuel costs because usage can be better regulated to when guests are actually in their rooms. Bartech, and the technological extensions that can be realised through the product, provide an intriguing window onto a future that is rapidly becoming reality. **AHCT**