

Lodging News

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Wireless systems fulfill dreams of vandal-free vending

KINGSTON – Two years ago, Venicio Rebelo had a problem many hoteliers can relate to. The general manager of Kingston's Ambassador Conference Resort, a relatively large property spread out across a large chunk of land, had what could be called a 'target rich environment' for vandals – the nine vending machines situated around the resort.

"We used to, in good years, have three or four machines vandalized every year, and that's a good year," says Rebelo. The machines, as many in Rebelo's job can attest, are irresistible to vandals, since they generally aren't near the front desk and are often full of coins.

Setting aside the inconvenience of broken machines and the lost revenues, Rebelo worried more about the affect on his guests, particularly female travellers.

"It's the non-tangible things, like how secure my guests feel. If you've got a broken machine out there, vandalized, how safe are they going to feel," he asked.

The solution came when he was upgrading the resort's wiring to provide internet access to all guestrooms, in the form of Toronto-based cStar Technologies' Vending Genie system.

cStar, which specializes in two-way wireless data communication systems, had devised cashless vending machines that employed wireless routers. Instead of requiring cash, guests only needed to insert their guestroom card into the vending machine, with the charge appearing on the guest's bill.

Vending Genie is one of many wireless applications that are changing the way businesses perform crucial tasks. Wireless technology allows different computer-controlled operations to stay linked, offering businesses unparalleled control of operations. In the Ambassador's case, that meant linking up the vending machines to the computer servers that also held the guest information and folios.

Faster than you could say 'Alakazaam,' life got a lot easier for Rebelo.

"Vandalism is gone. It's completely gone," he said.

Some guests were initially reluctant to use the machines, but quickly warmed to the technology.

"Guest response has been fantastic," said Rebelo.



Two years ago, Kingston resort operator Venicio Rebelo, seen here with cStar Technologies founder and president Stella Yoon installed nine cashless vending machines at his property in an effort to combat vandalism. What was a three-month pilot project has grown to include installation of the cStar's Vending Genie system at another Kingston property. "Vandalism is gone. It's completely gone," says Rebelo, while revenues from the machines have seen double-digit jumps each year they have been in operation.

What's more, by employing a wireless solution that tracked all purchases, he was able to obtain a more accurate accounting of how much soda and toothpaste his guests were buying, rather than relying on the vending machine contractor to tell him.

Initially, Rebelo agreed to use the machines for a three-month trial period, but the advantages were too great. Now, the early adopter has another 5 machines at another Kingston property, and "worst problem I have now is a machine running out of product."

In the first year of operation, his revenues from vending machines rose 67 per cent, and the figures continued to climb another 17 per cent in the second year.

"Prices haven't gone up, either," said Rebelo.

The initial cash outlay to install the system was negligible, as it was done while Rebelo was already setting up wireless internet in the hotel. "Whether you do it now or do them later, you're always upgrading your property anyways," he said.