

The Zoned Hotel Lobby: Meeting Business Travelers' Needs

Today's business travelers prefer to meet and work in public—
changing the way the industry looks at the hotel lobby, bar and restaurant space.



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Today's business travelers are largely Gen X and Gen Y, having grown up in coffee shops and with technology always at their fingertips. Whether they're staying at hotels as individuals or as part of conferences or other group meetings, they prefer to meet and work in public rather than in their rooms. This preference requires space that is different from a hotel's traditional lobby, bar and restaurant public spaces.

The industry is responding, providing lobbies that create a welcoming first impression and improve hotel

functionality." The old hotel lobby was not considered a revenue-generating space," says Carl Ross, president of El Segundo, CA-based Design Group Carl Ross. "It used to hold sofas, side chairs, lounge chairs and the odd ottoman." The evolving needs of contemporary business travelers are transforming lobbies into profitable and flexible work destinations. "Lobbies contain furniture that facilitates people working together in varying degrees of privacy or social use, including sectionals, high-top tables and furniture that rearranges for different-sized groups," he observes.



"Lobbies are being transformed into different kinds of zones to provide travelers sufficient privacy so that they feel they are 'alone together.'"







Dr. Stephani Robson, a senior lecturer for the School of Hotel Administration at Ithaca, NY-based Cornell University



Different Zones for Different Needs

The zones afford business travelers the opportunity to meet, eat, drink, socialize and work (sometimes in two or three combinations of the above) as required with access to power and WiFi to stay connected on their laptops and hand-held devices.

There are six types of lobby zones, each serving a different purpose.

-  ON-THE-GO ZONE
-  QUIET ZONE
-  SOCIAL ZONE
-  DINING ZONE
-  PAY-TO-MEET ZONE
-  THE TECHNOLOGY ZONE



ON-THE-GO ZONE

In this space, travelers check in, take advantage of concierge service, purchase sundries at a gift shop, purchase coffee and snacks at a coffee outlet and use a business center. If the hotel doesn't offer a coffee outlet, coffee and breakfast items can be found in the gift shop or business center. With the grab-and-go food component, this space offers booth and small table seating.



SOCIAL ZONE

This zone uses furniture to accommodate relaxed social meetings and get togethers. For example, “Modular tables are provided to serve different group sizes; they’re light and easy to move,” observes Rick Marencic, IIDA, a principal with Philadelphia-based Daroff Design. “Communal tables are provided to accommodate informal meetings and can be connected for larger gatherings.” Often times community tables are at counter height or bar height, which facilitates social interaction and comfortable eye contact among those groups where some wish to sit and others prefer to stand. There are bar stools around the bar and banquettes line walls with straight chairs on the outsides.

“We do a lot of groupings in social zones,” says Rostenkowski, “but we don’t want it to look like a furniture store, so we’re conscious about variety in both seating types and heights.”

Modular furniture is a good choice in lobbies and pre-function areas, as it allows hotel management to reconfigure based on the type of event. For example, large families attending a wedding have a different set of needs than business travelers attending an insurance convention.



QUIET ZONE

This is a quiet, relaxing zone for travelers waiting for someone, working alone or even people watching. Loud music and low lights are out, but there may be a television and reading material in this well-lit space. Seating includes lounge chairs, like contemporary wing backs, although it could be anything comfortable. The seating is accessorized with lumbar pillows, ottomans and cocktail tables.

There are other tables in this zone. First, continental tables, which are 25- to 26-in. high and are used with lounge chairs for eating and drinking, provide surface space. Second, “A lot of times, we’ll add a work table with power and computers built in,” says Diane Rostenkowski, a designer with Bloomingdale, IL-based Concept Group. “It might be a rectangular table that seats four to six with two permanent computers.”

Overall, there are plenty of electrical outlets in the walls, floors and built into the furniture for charging personal devices.



The freedom of wireless communication



Quick and easy plug in access allows the ability to remain connected to a larger world

DINING ZONE

The dining zone mixes food, work and socializing as one. In the evening, this adaptable space is used for bar overflow. “It’s hard to get people to eat at a hotel,” Rostenkowski indicates. “So hotels are moving restaurant dead space into the lobby to maximize food and drink at the same time. They’re breaking the restaurant itself into zones to close off back spaces when they’re not busy.”

The dining zone is outfitted with tables and chairs that seat two, four, six or eight, with the understanding that they can be moved together to accommodate whatever size group necessary. It’s also outfitted with booths that have walls that extend to the ceiling, which sends a message of comfort and invites guests to stay a little longer. “People like booths because they’re private and intimate, especially if you’re having an interview or a meeting where you don’t want everyone hearing it,” Rostenkowski observes. “The key is giving guests a variety of options via a flexible space,” she sums.

For revenue-generating areas, such as the dining zone, hotels might consider the types of tables and their configurations when designing the layout, as it will impact the guest experience.

According to a study titled *The Impact of Restaurant Table Characteristics on Meal Duration and Spending*, by Sherry Kimes and Stephani Robson of Cornell University, which measured the “spend per minute” at different table configurations, people linger longer in a banquette than at a table. **Depending on the space, this type of seating may be highly desirable.**





PAY-TO-MEET ZONES

There's another trend that hotels are taking with non- or under-performing revenue-generating space (such as lobbies and ballrooms). They're breaking it into multiple reserve-by-the-hour work spaces for both guests and nonguests. The meeting spaces are filled simply with conference tables and chairs, and they usually contain work materials such as whiteboards and flat screens, as well as video conference technology. The benefit is that, when reserved in advance, users are guaranteed both space and privacy.

THE TECHNOLOGY ZONE

Technology is vital enough to business travelers in terms of creating effective work spaces to consider it a zone in and of itself. Here's why.

According to The Business Traveler Market Segmentation Study, released in 2011 by the Alexandria, VA-based Global Business Travel Association Foundation (GBTA) (www.gbta.org/foundation), the research arm of the Global Business Travel Association, business travelers increasingly use technology to make travel more productive and to stay in touch with those at home. Looking across all travelers, 79% noted that they commonly bring technology on their trips. At least two-



thirds bring laptops, portable GPS, smartphones utilizing mobile travel apps and other tools.

Business travelers expect to connect their technology for free. Fifty-five percent of hotel guests use the Internet during their hotel stay — an increase from 20% in 2006 — and 87% use Wi-Fi to connect. Among those who use the Internet, only 11% are charged an additional fee to connect, yet the charge greatly lowers guest satisfaction. This is according to the 2012 North America Hotel Guest Satisfaction Index Study done by Westlake Village, Calif.-based J.D. Power and Associates, a global marketing information services company (www.jdpower.com).

As a result, hotel lobbies now accommodate business travelers who want to plug into everything. For

example, electric outlets are found in floors, walls, banquettes, booths and the bar face. Making power accessible in both standard 15-amp plugs, as well as active USB ports, clearly communicates the intended value of, "Welcome. Please sit, meet, work or recharge."

This is today's hotel lobby, designed to serve the business traveler with comfort and convenience. The different zones, which provide open, semi-private and private spaces with varying degrees of visual and acoustic privacy, are ideal for meetings in spaces that are more relaxed than formal conference rooms or ballrooms with poor acoustics. "It's about giving the guest flexible seating options via the ability to move furniture around a little bit," sums Marencic.



Furniture Roles and Rules

Furniture plays a critical role in creating effective zones. “Furniture defines space by its type, as well as its arrangement,” says Robson. “It sets the overall tone for the space (modern, traditional, hipster, etc.)” Defining space is always the first thing considered when choosing what furniture to purchase. The second thing that must be considered are the rules — details you need to know to purchase products with long duty cycles. Here are some of the rules to take into account.



Furniture should be easy to move and reconfigure (think casters and glides). Choose this type of product carefully so there is no danger of it tipping during reconfiguration



Consider its intended use. For example, is it supposed to serve as both a seat and work surface?



Some furniture is simply not moveable. Take, for example, a 42-in.-high table and 30-in.-high bar stool. To get electric power to either requires running it up through the leg, thus rendering it immovable.



How easy is the surface to clean? The place where you grasp furniture to move it will become dirty after thousands of cycles and will require regular cleaning.



When looking at fabrics, you should consider UV, stain resistance and double-rubs (determined by Wyzenbeek abrasion resistance testing). “Double rub refers to how many times a fabric can be rubbed [in both the warp and weft directions completing a cycle] before it starts to fray,” says Ross. “It’s rare to see fabric that tolerates less than 30,000 double rubs, 50,000 to 60,000 double rubs is normal.”



When evaluating wood products, understand how they are made and be sure the products are designed to perform in a multishift operation.



High-density foam should always be used in the public space, as it is the core component that allows the seating to maintain shape and comfort.



When it comes to color, light-colored fabric and carpet shows stains faster than do dark colors. Choose colors in accordance with your maintenance schedule, which can vary from every night to every three months.

“You have to select furniture fabric and materials that are operationally responsive yet meet guests’ needs and aesthetics. There are a lot of nuances to it.”

Carl Ross of El Segundo, CA-based Design Group Carl Ross



Our thanks for lending their expertise:

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- Carl Ross, president of El Segundo, CA-based Design Group Carl Ross.
- Dr. Stephani Robson, a senior lecturer for the School of Hotel Administration at Ithaca, NY-based Cornell University
- Diane Rostenkowski, a designer with Bloomingdale, IL-based Concept Group
- Rick Marencic, IIDA, a principal with Philadelphia-based Daroff Design

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