

PIRANEL LTD/STRETTON HALL HOTEL

Competition in the hotel trade is intense, particularly out of season, and by implementing e-business processes, including an advanced wireless broadband facility, Stretton Hall has both increased its repeat business and achieved dramatic efficiencies and cost savings.

OBJECTIVES

Situated in the beautiful South Shropshire countryside, Stretton Hall Hotel is a 12 room, rural hotel for tourist and business customers. In the past six years, turnover in this family-run hotel has more than doubled. This was partly because it implemented a highly successful new website that allows prospective clients to view the accommodation, check room availability and make a reservation – all online.

Although very welcome, this increase in business highlighted some of the inefficiencies and stresses in the hotel's operational and management processes. In particular, the increased business created pressures on kitchen, waiting and bar staff to process orders more quickly and with fewer errors. Behind the scenes however, this meant that someone had to log the transactions, add items to bills and adjust stock details. With only a small number of employees, these demands risked taking staff away from face-to-face contact with the residents – the very feature that makes Stretton Hall such an hospitable place to stay. Any increase in billing errors also resulted in more disputed bills, which led to even more time away from guests and damage to customer confidence.

At the same time, Charles Baker, Director of Piranel Ltd, the hotel's operating company, was faced with finding ways to make the venue more attractive to businessmen and conference organisers. Providing broadband access throughout the hotel was an obvious potential benefit but this had to be achieved at minimal cost and disruption, and without the potential damage that would be caused by running cables through the beautiful, old building.

Through discussions with Business Link Lincolnshire, Charles realised that he could hit two birds with one stone – using wireless technologies, he could provide his guests with broadband access and enable his staff to communicate instantly with his back-office systems.

Best practice in:
Mobile, wireless

Sector:
Tourism

Size of firm:
5 full-time, 25 casual and
part-time employees

Location:
Church Stretton, Shropshire

Website:
www.strettonhall.co.uk



“The wireless network has strengthened the loyalty of existing customers, brought new customers who enjoy the easy internet access, and allowed us to introduce a new restaurant and billing system.”

CHARLES BAKER – DIRECTOR OF PIRANEL, WHICH OWNS STRETTON HALL HOTEL

SOLUTION

Working with the assistance of the Business Link, Charles equipped the hotel with a wireless broadband system. This has two parallel components – a secured system which is used to connect the kitchen, bar and waiting staff to the hotel’s ordering and billing system, and an open system which provides guests and conference delegates with high-speed internet access from any room or shared space.

Waiting and bar staff have wireless handheld devices with ordering software. These link to network printers and a central database, so that when an order is made it is instantly recorded against the customer’s bill and passed immediately to the kitchen or bar to be fulfilled.

For guests and delegates, the open system provides instant internet access, with access to printers and fax machines. The hotel has a wireless enabled laptop if guests need to borrow one. There is also a supply of wireless cards for hire and staff will install them onto a guest’s laptop, if requested. Careful positioning of aerials means that the whole of the hotel is covered, even its grounds and the pub over the road! As an added benefit, Stretton Hall chose to provide internet access free of charge to guests and delegates, something that many of its competitors do not do.

RESULTS

The wireless network has been a resounding success. Free high-speed internet access has increased customer loyalty and continues to bring in new business. Three new organisations have booked conferences because of the hotel’s positive attitude to IT and its advanced facilities, while weekday occupancy from repeat business travellers has risen by 8%.

On the operational front, the system has brought a number of benefits. Waiting staff have increased the time they spend with customers from 55% to 95% and for bar staff, this figure has risen from 75% to 85%. Better stock control and detailed reporting means that profits in the kitchen business have tripled, while more accurate charging for wine and extras has increased bar revenues by 10%.

“The wireless implementation of internet access is not unique now but ours is certainly cutting-edge, with high-gain aerials allowing access from all the guest bedrooms, communal areas, the whole garden and even the pub across the road,” says Charles. “The wireless ordering system offers a simple and accurate method of improving efficiency. It has to be seen to be believed!”





CHALLENGES

Stretton Hall is an elegant Georgian building which retains many of its original features – windows, fireplaces, oak panelling and a beautiful staircase. The structure of the building created problems for the establishment of the wireless network, with signals being absorbed by walls and similar materials. It took a lot of experimentation to ensure that the network could be accessed throughout the hotel. This eventually called for the installation of high-gain antennas to boost the signal in some places.

Security was also a significant challenge. Customers' internet access is provided free and is run without passwords but the restaurant and bar billing system, which runs across roughly the same area, must be protected. This required a secured network that could also connect to the handheld PCs used by waiting staff but works in parallel with the open internet access system.

Top tips:

- When building solutions, make sure that you use technologies that will stand the test of time.
- Always consider your customers' needs in order to increase repeat business.
- Most things can be done to a tight budget, given a willingness to learn and to think creatively.

LAST WORD

By introducing wireless systems for both staff and customers, Stretton Hall Hotel has transformed its ability to cope with growth while raising its appeal to an increasingly sophisticated and demanding clientele. "All of our objectives have been met, together with cost savings that were unexpected," says Charles.

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