Guide to Buying a New Hospitality Communications System

Boost customer experience and streamline your workflows

A guide from Mitel

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Powering connections

Buying a communications system, particularly one as complex as a hospitality communications system, is no small feat. Hospitality communications systems are a long-term investment, and it's important to find a solution that will grow and scale as your needs change. This guide is here not only to help you find the right communications hardware, but also to find a system that will improve your customer experience, boost employee productivity and grow with technology as it changes over time.

FAQs

Not sure if you need a new phone system? Or unsure which system is right for you? We'll help you find the answer.

Everyone uses mobile devices: do I really still need a PBX?

Yes—even with the technological improvements that make integrating with mobile devices a necessity, your hotel requires a telephone system to address (at least) the following:

- *Inbound calls for reservations, business inquiries and guest calls*
- *In-house communications with the front desk and staff*
- *Emergency calls*

I have an older PBX that seems to work well and gets the job done. Do I need to replace it?

You may not need to replace your system immediately, but you should start researching modern options, as older systems increasingly don't support the kinds of functionality needed to stay competitive today. Most older PBX systems use time-division multiplexing (TDM), technology that is used in traditional landline systems. Communications as a whole, however, are moving toward VoIP, unified communications and cloud architectures. IP and cloud communications offer a range of capabilities that will continue to improve the guest and employee experience, which will both increase revenue and reduce costs. As these new technologies become more and more common, older PBX systems are going to start losing support.

While parts may still be available, they are becoming harder to find and there are fewer qualified technicians available to work on these legacy systems.

What about remote employees? How do I keep them connected?

It's important to consider your remote employees as you make any communications decision for your hotel. With team collaboration applications and VoIP extensions, remote workers can be connected to your communications system no matter where they are located. Newer systems with mobility features provide remote staff the full functionality of their desk phones anytime, anywhere, and hotels can also transfer calls to them seamlessly. This allows for real-time responses to guest issues as well, no matter where your staff is located.

STEP 1: GATHER YOUR REQUIREMENTS

Communications between guests and staff are critical and can have a major impact on the overall performance of the hotel. In today's social media- and reviews-driven world, communications are still a vital component of the industry, whether by voice or via data transmission.

The following are some key areas to consider when identifying what your hotel needs from a communications system:

Size of Hotel

Hotel size affects not only the physical capacity and functionality of a system, but also the type of equipment and physical space and provisioning requirements that may be needed.

Targeted Guestroom Requirements

In our mobile-first world, guest room phones have become less high-profile. Once the primary device for interaction between guests and hotel staff, these phones are now used for basic guest communications, such as:

- *Contact/communications with the front desk*
- *Information about the guest's stay*
- *Guest service requests*
- *Room service*
- *Valet service*
- *Bell/baggage service*
- *Concierge*
- *911/emergency calls*

Guest room phones can be also used by hotel staff to communicate room readiness or maintenance issues. In most instances, guest rooms are provided with traditional phones that are either analog or SIP-based, depending on the low-voltage infrastructure and PBX provisioning of your system. In recent years, the industry has seen a reduction from two-line phones to single-line devices. The number of speed-dial options has also been reduced from more than ten to less than five.

System Capacity Requirements

Your system type and size will be dependent on the number of staff and guest users. It is also important to identify any potential remote users or teleworkers that may require access to the system. Many hotels have external reservation centers, sales staff and operational personnel who work offsite.

Key areas of focus typically include the following:

- *Guest rooms*
- *Front office*
- *Back office*
- *Employee areas*
- *Remote workers/telecommuters*
- *Function space (if any)*
- *Life/safety monitoring*

Support Requirements

System support parameters should be identified early on in the process.

These include the following types of users:

- *Reservation attendants*
- *General admin stations*
- *Teleworkers*
- *Guest rooms*
- *Public space area phones*
- *Back of the house*

Provisioning Requirements

With a traditional on-site PBX, your options include either buying individual analog lines, higher-capacity circuits like T1s or PRIs, or next generation SIP trunking. A typical PRI carries 23 voice channels, which may be sufficient for smaller hotels. However, for larger hotels or those with call centers, additional circuits may be required. Additionally, back-up individual POTS lines should be considered for overflow and redundancy purposes. Perform a price comparison of the various trunking options available to determine which is the most cost-effective.

Additional Considerations

- *How many simultaneous calls does your hotel need to facilitate?*
- *Call Center (8 - 10 simultaneous calls per 10 users)*
- *How many circuits do I need to support my call volumes?*

If you need to support 24 or 25 calls at a time, you will need an additional T1, most of which will go unused. With SIP (VoIP) trunks that run over your broadband Internet connection, on the other hand, you can buy the exact number of ports you need. Alternately, you can mix and match PTSN and SIP circuits in a combination that works best for your property. SIP trunks can connect directly to your IP PBX. A few more considerations:

- *How much out-going or incoming faxing is my hotel doing?*
- *Are there peak calling periods throughout the day or the week that must be accounted for?*
- *Can you share bandwidth between a data and a voice circuit or overflow to another unused circuit if necessary?*

Phone Devices

ADMINISTRATIVE PHONES

Most employees that interact with guests are usually provisioned with IP-based phones built with a digital display allowing for caller ID and the guest's name to be displayed. Depending on the position, some phones may require additional programmable keys or display features. Look for a phone display that can connect to room status, maintenance requests and integrate with your major guest management applications.

PBX CONSOLES

These are usually either dedicated devices or PC console-based devices that are used by main hotel operators, dedicated PBX operational departments or reservation staff. However, there is a new generation of hybrid small-form factor phones that allow front desk operations to manage traditional PBX department calls and requests.

GUEST ROOM PHONES

These are usually ether analog or IP-based phones and are limited in functionality. There are different options for the number of phone lines required (usually one or two), but the general trend has been towards single-line phones. Other considerations include the number of speed-dial buttons and whether a cordless phone device is necessary. Some rooms require multiple phones and a few still require a "trimline" phone in the bathroom, although this requirement has for the most part been eliminated.

PUBLIC SPACE AND BACK OF HOUSE PHONES

These are typically used for basic communications, and do not require the complex functionality of a digital display phone. Like guest phones, these are usually provided with custom faceplates and can be programmed with cost-effective options.

Specialty phones

There are also other specialty devices that need to be considered. These include:

- *Conference speaker phones*
- *Outdoor emergency pool phones*
- *Telephone entry systems*
- *Intercoms*
- *Fax machines*

STEP 2: SEPARATE YOUR NEEDS FROM YOUR WANTS

While there are many love-to-haves in the hospitality communications system world, not every hotel needs every function. A key step in your review process should be identifying what key functions your hotel will most benefit from, what key functions are necessary to provide the minimum amount of service and what will help advance your guest experience now and in the future. Here are a few functions you should consider.

Guest Room Phones

It's no secret that the use of guest room phones has been on the decline as the use of mobile devices has risen. But the primary use of guest room phones is still direct communications between guests and hotel staff. The key uses of guest room phones you should consider are:

- *Contacting the front desk*
- *Housekeeping and maintenance requests*
- *Room service*
- *Valet services*
- *Luggage assistance*
- *Concierge requests*
- *Emergency service requests (911 calls)*

While guest room phone functionality itself has not changed much, how your hotel staff engages with guests has. Rather than simply identifying guest names, improve your guest experience by choosing a communications system that will display details about a guest's room and stay at a glance the moment they call.

System Integration

Your hotel property management system (PMS) is carefully tailored to the way your hotel operates. To get the most bang for your buck, your communications system should enhance the most important applications of your PMS. The easiest way to do this is by looking for a communications system with the ability to integrate with the applications you already use. Here are a few examples of integrations you should expect from a communications system:

- *PBX*
- *Voicemail*
- *Call accounting*
- *Staff and guest messaging*
- *Staff workflow optimization*
- *Guest mobile application*
- *Guest engagement*

Other targeted integrations include:

- *IPTV/in-room entertainment*
- *High-speed Internet access (HSIA)*
- *Room automation*
- *Building management system (BMS)*
- *Guest BYOD*

Guest BYOD

Allowing guests to effortlessly communicate with staff via the personal mobile devices they use and love already will make your guest experience much more convenient. Consider whether the communications systems you're evaluating provide this kind of mobile application and integration.

Unified Communications

Keeping each of your devices connected can get cumbersome without the right tools to keep your communications seamless. As you are evaluating your communications options, consider a unified communications platform to consolidate, among other things:

- *Analog phones*
- *Digital SIP phones*
- *DECT phones*
- *Mobile devices*

With the right tools, your hotel can not only streamline your current communications infrastructure but can also prepare for the future. As technology moves towards wireless and mobile communications, a unified communications solution will allow you to add new technologies easily across all platforms.

High-Touch Solutions for Smaller Hotels

In the past, smaller hotels who operate with limited staff and budget have been limited in their communications system options. However, today smaller hotels are able to compete with larger properties with strategic PBX product applications. These include:

Hybrid Phone Consoles

Due to cost and front desk space considerations, in the past smaller hotels have been forced to use small manufacturer's digital display phones to answer and address guest-related calls. New small form-factor console phones offer a larger touch screen display phone with built-in applications and functionality. Front desk staff can now respond more quickly to guest requests, with room management and service functions at their fingertips, when they are equipped with these consoles.

Workflow Scheduling / Rapid Response Systems

While many hotels use a dedicated workflow scheduling or rapid response system, these can be expensive to implement and maintain. A unified hospitality communications system offers a built-in workflow scheduling system that allows agents to easily log requests and ensure that the appropriate staff is notified of the requests in a timely manner. A better guest experience and improved guest ratings starts with an efficient response to guest requests.

Housekeeping Requests

Much like the rest of the workflow scheduling module, specific housekeeping requests can be tracked and acted upon in a timely manner with a unified communications system.

Guest rooms can be readied and small requests handled more efficiently with a real-time response to guest check-in.

Maintenance Requests

With a high-touch solution, maintenance requests can be sent directly to the maintenance team and tracked to ensure that they are completed on time. Additionally, a high-touch system can create reports that will highlight if a particular maintenance request is recurring in specific rooms, giving your maintenance staff a better view on how to prevent problems before they happen. By ensuring that the operational team is notified about the issue in a timely manner the problem can hopefully be resolved before this becomes a major concern for the guest. This can often help to turn a negative guest experience into a positive one, or even prevent a negative guest experience altogether, simply by providing fast and efficient service.

Room Ready / Room Status Notifications

While housekeeping staff has traditionally been able to enter a code via the telephone to change a room ready status in your PMS, this has often proven to be problematic and time-consuming for busy front desk agents to implement. Look for a system that will display room ready status directly on the front desk phone itself. Front desk staff will be able to turn rooms around more quickly by reducing the time it takes to search for room ready statuses.

By improving the personalized communication between guests and staff, your hotel can provide better service which translates into better reviews and better revenue.

Reception Consoles

What is your guest experience like, from the first reservation call to check-in? Your reception console can make the difference between a mediocre hotel experience and a curated guest journey that yields stellar reviews. Look for a reception console that provides intuitive displays with a smaller footprint. Here are a few features to look for when updating your reception console:

- *Intuitive and efficient user interface with multiple language options*
- *Expansion modules for faster operation in larger environments*
- *Easy access to key information such as room occupancy, cleaning status, wake up calls, and emergency call support*
- *Improved overview of room occupancy*
- *Access to detailed guest information*

Web-Based Guest Management Application

To be more proactive about how you manage your communications and operations, look for a web-based management application that allows authorized staff to access key information. In particular, look for applications that allow your management staff to:

- *Access front desk services and requests*
- *Generate and view detailed reports, including in-house guest listings, up-coming check-outs, maintenance lists and call data information*

Staff Mobility

Connect directly with your entire staff through a unified platform by looking for a communications system that integrates with staff mobile phone devices. With the right system, your managers will be able to field most calls, improve overall response time and guest service and maximize productivity. Here are a few functionalities to look for:

- *Allow for calls to ring the staff's desk phone and mobile phone simultaneously. This allows the staff to multi-task and move around the property while staying in communication with their office. This helps prevent managers from spending too much time in their offices, and more time walking the property and meeting with guests and staff.*
- *Can route to a specific phone – desk/mobile or both*
- *No additional server required*
- *Can use a SIP phone or Bluetooth with DECT headset*

Messaging

Reduce your response times to guest and maintenance requests by looking for a communications system with messaging applications built in. Whether you're using an on-site or cloud-based messaging system, look for one that supports comprehensive wake-up call features that integrate with your front desk consoles.

Staff Workflow Optimization & Management

If your property management system doesn't already include a workflow scheduling or rapid response system, one great option to consolidate your applications is to find a PBX system that gives you options to address these issues.

Some features to look for include:

- *Guest requests*
- *Maintenance requests and preventative maintenance scheduling*
- *Multi-property requests*
- *Skills based dispatching*
- *Productivity reports*
- *Real-time dashboard*
- *Android & Apple support*
- *Supports SMS, push notifications, telephone and email to notify and alert staff*

For properties with limited staff for managing guest requests and service-related issues, these types of applications can be a game-changer. Your staff can improve response times through tracking requests in one of these tools, which will in turn make for a seamless guest experience.

Mobile Application

Mobile applications are a way for hotels to interact with guests who are used to managing their travel experiences in a more interactive manner. From booking their hotel reservations to being able to check in and use their phone to access their room, guests want to be in charge of their own experience.

While many hotels utilize industry-developed mobile applications or develop their own, looking for a communications platform that includes access or integration with a mobile application will help your team stay focused on taking your guest experience to the next level. Look for features like:

- *Localized contact information for the guests' hotel & destination*
- *Customizable guest experience before arrival – address special requests such as choice of room location, room-specific requests, alert staff to allergies, etc.*
- *Mobile access – integrations with the door locking system*
- *Integration with PBX – allow phone to be used as a direct room extension*
- *Improved communications with staff – mobile messaging and guest requests*
- *Quick response and updates to guest service requests*
- *Provide for mobile check out and guest experience survey*

Today's guest likes to be connected at all times. Ensure that your guests don't miss any calls, and provide them a direct connection to hotel staff, by connecting a guest's mobile phone to his or her guest room phone extension. Look for a mobile application that will seamlessly connect your guest's smart device to your hotel's telephony solution.

STEP 3: Identify Your Financial Considerations

There are often specific parameters surrounding a hotel's buying decision that can dictate whether and how to purchase a new solution. As you begin searching for a communications system for your property, it's important to take these factors into consideration and build an action plan around them.

Budget

Your hotel's communications system is a critical element of your guest experience, from the time a potential guest is trying to make a reservation, to the time the guest is onsite. The system you choose can mean the difference between a guest who is impressed with the ease and convenience of communicating with your hotel, and a guest who is frustrated with what you have to offer. When setting the budget for the purchase of your new communications system, it's important to fully understand the costs associated with deploying a new system. Start this process early and make sure the budget is an accurate estimate of the true costs of a new system.

Expense Models

There are two basic expense models to consider when selecting a communications system, and each will impact your hotel's finances in different ways.

OpEx

Most hosted solutions are designed to operate under an OpEx model. Like many other hospitality applications, this procurement structure funds systems based on a monthly operational expenditure that typically includes the following:

- Equipment costs
- Installation (in some cases)
- Support
- System updates

OpEx procurements can be preferable for owners and developers looking to limit their up-front expenditures and pay for services out of an operating expense account. The OpEx model does impact your monthly and yearly operational bottom line differently, as opposed to a CapEx model.

CapEx

Typically on-site deployment models are procured with a CapEx expenditure model, and are typically chosen for long-term purchase decisions. Under the CapEx model, your deployment should include:

- Equipment costs
- Installation
- First year support

For owners and developers who prefer a CapEx procurement model, on-site PBX systems typically have a lifespan of many years, and can return a good ROI for owners. However, on-site equipment requires maintenance and upkeep, and will require additional costs to upgrade as guest technology changes over time.

There are benefits and costs to both expenditure models, so it's important to evaluate what makes more sense with your overall financial goals and plans.

Key Decision Maker Buy-in:

Ensure that the key stakeholders in the procurement decision are vested in the project and are committed to seeing its purchase and implementation through. A few stakeholders to consider:

- Ownership
- Developers
- Brand management
- Executive management
- Operators
- Management companies
- Hotel staff

Rip and Replace or Upgrade?

Understanding your hotel's communications infrastructure can play an important role in the type of system that you select. Before investing too much time testing a solution, identify what infrastructure needs you have and look for a communications system that can allow for the specific implementation you need. Here are a few questions to consider as you review your infrastructure:

- *Are you putting in a new property or adapting an existing building?*
- *If you are updating an existing building, what infrastructure is already in place?*
- *If there is legacy cabling in the guest rooms is this "looped" or home-run?*

- *What kind of cabling infrastructure is installed in your building? Specifically, in your guest rooms? Your cabling infrastructure will affect how you are able to deploy a new IP system. If your facility has legacy Category 3 cabling, you may need to look for a more expensive technology that can adapt to this cabling.*

The answers to these questions will help you determine whether you can replace your whole system at once, or if it will be more cost-effective to update in stages. For example, if you are updating an existing older infrastructure, it might be cost-effective to keep analog phones for guest room use, while updating your staff and reception devices with a communications system that can handle both.

STEP 4: CHOOSE A DEPLOYMENT MODEL

Now that you've got a budget, a clear understanding of your existing infrastructure and a general idea of what you need, it's time to consider which deployment model makes the most sense for your hotel. While cloud-based solutions are rising in prominence (and for good reasons), this is not always a straightforward decision. Here are a few factors to consider for your deployment choice.

Infrastructure

Most newer hosted solutions are IP-based. These systems are typically designed to operate on home-run Category 5/6 cables. While most of these systems are designed to work with IP-or SIP phones, they can accommodate the use of analog phones through the use of analog gateways.

OpEx vs CapEx

The budget you selected in Step 3 is going to have an impact on which deployment model works best for your hotel. Traditionally, hosted solutions run on an OpEx model, while on-site solutions run on a CapEx model. If your hotel finances call for one model over the other, that will likely shape which type of system you are able to deploy.

Survivability

One of the key drivers behind the decision of whether to go with a hosted or on-site solution is the question of survivability. Due to the importance of having communications at all times, there is a concern over what happens if a circuit fails or if your phone service is disrupted. For this reason, most cloud-based offerings will provide an element of survivability at the property level, typically in the form of a small switch or node. Further, additional trunk lines or circuits may need to be installed at the property.

Support

While PBXs are getting easier to administer and manage, they are still considered critical systems and need to be effectively supported. To ensure your system operates effectively and that all of your features and functionality are operating at all times, it's important to partner with a reliable vendor. You should also look for a solution with online monitoring capabilities, to keep your system running smoothly.

Of key importance when considering survivability is the need for 911 emergency calling and reporting. Depending on local emergency code requirements, there could be additional systems requirements needed to make them code compliant. You should understand what the local requirements are for your hotel and ensure that they are factored into any system engineering efforts prior to the selection of a system.

STEP 5: CONSIDER SYSTEM RELIABILITY

While some people may consider a hotel PBX as less important given the shift to mobile technology, it's important to note that your PBX is still a vital component of your hotel's technology and communications platform. Many guests still rely on hotel PBX systems, rather than hotel applications, to contact reception and order room service, and your operations staff may still rely on a PBX to communicate vital housekeeping and maintenance information.

Infrastructure

A breakdown or disruption of service associated with these systems could severely impact your hotel's ability to operate, and in extreme cases can actually shut your hotel down. It is critical to keep your communications systems operational, by selecting a reliable and stable system.

Here are a few system reliability concerns to address as you evaluate your options:

Redundancy features

Does the system you are evaluating offer options for redundancy? If so, what do they include?
Some key features to look for:

- *Hardware redundancy*
- *Software redundancy*
- *Circuit failover options*
- *Power redundancy options*
- *Emergency support services*

Disaster Recovery

What options does the system offer for disaster recovery, and what plan, if any, has the vendor developed to address potential catastrophic outages? Key areas of focus include:

- *System backup and restore solutions*
- *Onsite storing of critical spare parts*
- *Development of a disaster recovery program*
- *Emergency support response program*

STEP 6: CHOOSE A VENDOR AND A SYSTEM

The hard part's over: you've done your research, separated your needs from your wants, identified your financial considerations and selected a deployment model. You've got a basic idea in mind of what kind of features you'd like, and what kind of infrastructure and deployment model you'll use. Now it's time to choose a vendor and a system.

Here are a few considerations you'll want to bear in mind as you approach your vendor and device search:

Setup and Support

When choosing a phone system vendor, consider who will install the system and provide support for technical issues. Ask vendors how much experience they have in installing this particular system in hotels of your size and structure. You want to find a reputable vendor who's had years of experience in this industry. Do they offer training and support? Ask for customer references and call them. Visit their website and look for case studies from previous customers. Find out if they charge for installation, and get an itemized list of maintenance and service fees. Finally, be sure you fully understand your vendor's support model.

Aesthetics and Ergonomics

Now comes the part in the communications system shopping process that you may have been tempted to start with—the design of the devices themselves. While you may not be replacing all of your phones in one purchase, it's worth considering the aesthetics of the devices that pair well with the solution you've selected. The design of the user interface is key, too. Are the consoles easy to use?

Reputation

Because your phone system is instrumental to the day-to-day operations of your business, you want to get the best product from a reputable manufacturer. Compare product reviews. A great way to measure reputation is to look for recognition from reputable third parties, like Gartner, in their Magic Quadrant Reports. Frost & Sullivan and Forrester are other industry experts who offer independent research and vendor reviews. Don't rely solely on testimonials; seek out user references from businesses like yours. And ask about warranties, service agreements and costs.

Vendor Outlook

It's important to take the whole picture into account: not just where your vendor sits today. Pick a vendor with a long history of innovation, who can adapt to the way technology is evolving. Digital transformation is affecting all parts of business today, and your hotel communications system is no different. You should look for a vendor who is innovating with the Internet of Things, cloud communications, and mobile-first design. The vendor you want in your corner is looking forward and showing signs of being here to support you in the future.

Don't Forget to Ask About Promotions

Larger vendors, like Mitel, sometimes offer special pricing and promotions. It never hurts to ask about any promotions that might be running, or to subscribe to their communications so you're always in the loop.

Mitel offers communications platforms to fit every strategy.
Whether your business needs an on-site, public cloud or hybrid solution,
Mitel has the flexibility and security you need.

STEP 7: IMPLEMENT!

Now that you've considered all your options, it's time to make a selection and get your new system in place. It may seem as though your work is almost done—and, don't worry, it is—but it's crucial not to rush this last step in the process. Failing to plan the implementation process with care could lead to mistakes that are costly not only in time and resources but also in perception. You could choose the perfect phone system for your hotel, but if it's not implemented well, you'll experience communications problems that can jeopardize your guest experience.

Here's a quick rundown of what you'll need to do when implementing your shiny new system:

1. *Notify staff. Give employees and contractors a heads-up that a new communications system is on its way so they can get used to the idea of change. Assure them that there's no need to worry—they'll get all the training and support they can handle.*

2. *Take inventory of the delivery. Go through all of the equipment, including cables and peripherals, to make sure you received everything you ordered and that you have everything you need to get started.*

3. *Test the system with staff before deploying it hotel-wide to work out any kinks. You may be able to enlist your front desk staff to be your advocates for the new system – they might help other users get comfortable with the system.*

4. *Train staff. Once your vendor installs the system, provide staff with training from a professional. Group training is great for giving an overview of the system and basic features, but it's important to conduct individual training so users can ask questions and get tours of the features and functionality most important to them. Give everyone a cheat sheet with instructions for common actions and settings.*

5. *Relax! It's been a long process but you hung in there. Pat yourself on the back and start optimizing your guest experience.*

Don't feel overwhelmed on your search for a new communications system. Sticking to these steps will keep your search focused and strategic. As an experienced vendor in hospitality communications solutions, Mitel is here to help you find the best communications solution for your hotel.
Visit **mitel.com/hospitality** to learn more.

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