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Pacific Magazine Ad

STAY COSTA RICA, STAY CONNECTED

"When I go on a holiday I not only want to relax, but I want to have access to all the services I take for granted at home; Internet, Phone, Entertainment and Security."

Sound familiar? The hospitality industry is full of demanding clients that will not tolerate substandard voice & data services or lack of entertainment and security systems. These people are paying a premium to live and stay in Costa Rica. They are going to expect amenities they take for granted in their home countries.

Imagine paying \$750,000 for a two bedroom condominium only to find out that there is no data or voice connectivity on the property. OUCH!!! You, the hotelier or developer, will end up being the loser. You will forfeit potential clients to those properties that offer these managed services. *It is no longer just about 4 walls and a roof.*

How are you going to provide your guests and unit-owners with a safe and memorable experience while they are on your property? Read on, and we will explain what technologies you should be evaluating for your property and why. We will also explain the best way to deploy these technologies and how to maximize your return on investment. All while ensuring "outstanding" user-experience for your guests.

How many times have you had to change the locks or replace keys because a guest left with it or lost it? How many times have you wondered 'did the employee we recently terminate make unauthorized copies of our keys?

'Access Control Systems' allow you to control and monitor access to any area within your property. The primary benefit of Access Control is that you will know who, when, and where each of your staff/guests have been. An added benefit of Access Control is that you can now manage your staff's workflow by providing them access to specific doors at specific times, therefore providing an extra level of security for your guests. The bottom line is that you improve "access" accountability.

Access Control can be a costly investment. Like video surveillance it is not a profit centre in and of itself. Its return on investment (ROI) is measured in improvements in staff efficiency, and reduced maintenance costs. Gone are the days when you will have to pay a locksmith to replace locks when your guests or employees leave your Hotel with a key!

Access control is available in two fundamental flavours: Standalone and Networked. Each has its pros and cons. Standalone Access Control typically requires staff to visit the physical door to interrogate the door and program access, while Network Access Control allows doors to be monitored and programmed remotely. Standalone 'Access Control' systems are well suited for free standing residential properties that are not communal in nature. While Networked Access Controls are better suited for Hotels and Condominiums.

As a developer, be sure to choose a provider that offers/supports Networked Access Control systems that allow for doors to be monitored remotely. Additionally, consider the possibilities of integrating your access control with your alarm/security and life systems. There are solutions available that integrate seamlessly, allowing doors to be opened by "authorized" users via a simple web interface or even a phone system. Your chosen solution should be adaptable to your specific business needs and allow access rights to only those with the privilege. It should also act as a notifier when those privileges are abused or attempted to be used without authorisation. Most important, make sure you select a vendor and product that you know will be around for years to come to provide support.

How many times have you waited, for what seemed like an eternity, for your restaurant bill? Or "felt the pain" of one of your clients or guests as they waited impatiently for the room folio to be tallied?

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Your customers will remember these unfavourable events over the more pleasurable ones. Your brand will become tarnished and repeat business diminished. Efficient customer service, timely and correct, is the name of the game in the hospitality industry. In order to ensure staff efficiencies, you need to move from manual cash handling systems to automated systems. These systems will automate mundane and repetitive processes that are prone to human error, while making it easier to manage and account for your cash and inventory.

Another issue you will resolve by moving to automated cash handling systems is 'training'. With manual 'cash handling' training costs will be steep. Churn (employee turn over) in the hospitality industry is higher than almost any other industry, this only exacerbates training expenses. So how can you avoid these issues?

A cash register is good, but it doesn't meet all of Costa Rica's "point of sale" quirks. A cash register cannot handle dual currencies or be set in multiple languages. Cash registers do not typically provide extensive reports either. Luckily there are Point of Sale (POS) systems available to you that are designed specifically around the unique requirements found only in Costa Rica.

As with all your technology implementations, select a POS vendor that you know will be around to support you. Make sure the selected solution can be installed on generic PC hardware. You do not want to be tied to proprietary hardware solutions that are difficult to service. If possible, find POS systems that support web interfaces to allow admin/reporting from any type of PC. Do not overlook the importance of handling multiple currencies as one homogenous currency. And of course, ensure that the system allows for multiple languages for staff that are monolingual. It is important for your POS to be self explanatory and straight forward for the Server and Manager to use. Properly designed workflow and interfaces make your staff much more efficient while substantially reducing training costs. Consider a POS that tracks 'time and attendance' thus allowing you to see when staff have clocked in and out. Do not forget to make sure that the POS has extensive reporting capability that will let you know how many products a server has sold, or how much should be in their cash drawer, or what discounts have been applied, etc... These reports are what will help you 'fine tune' your operation. And finally, the system should have links to popular accounting programs like QuickBooks. The versatility of your selected POS will determine its longevity.

Certainly you haven't been naive enough to expect your Unit Owners to develop and maintain a relationship with ICE for Voice Services? How are you, the hotel/developer, going to manage these services relative to your transient guests if these services are in the name of the unit owner? How are you going control these services that will help drive your "managed property" business?

It is difficult enough dealing with ICE even if you are Costa Rican, but requiring your unit owners to contract with ICE for voice or data is just madness and unreal. Furthermore, if you make it incumbent on the unit owner to contract with ICE for voice and data services you will not be able to pass control to your designated 'property management' group.

The only solution is for you, the hotelier or developer, to contract with ICE directly for all voice services to your property and to terminate these services into a premise based phone system. A central phone system will enhance the guest and unit-owner experience while at the same time making the service manageable, and presenting a source of revenue.

When selecting a Phone System, ensure that it is capable of consolidating voice services throughout your property. Specifically, check that your PBX (central phone system) is capable of supporting both the ICE copper voice services and the newer VOIP technologies. Ensure that the phone system has proper reporting features that will allow you to know who is calling where, and how to charge back for these services. And of course, the phone system needs to be user friendly to your guests and cost effective for you!

Look for a phone system that offers your unit owners, guests and operational staff a unified voice service that helps keep them connected. Unified voice services include voicemail, voicemail to email, remote extension support (for work at home staff) and web interfaces for easy management. Optionally, your phone system should be able to tariff calls, thus turning your investment into a profit centre while minimizing Home Owners

Association (HOA) fees.

Of course you're managing your Internet aren't you? You are not leaving it up to your unit owner to contract with ICE for internet services? Your guests are not contending with 'wireless leeches' for internet bandwidth are they?

So you spend the money setting up a wireless network on your property, but your guests are still complaining. "It's slow, and it keeps dropping." Your guests will not be tolerant of bad internet connections. Rodolfo Salgado, GM for Villa Montana, once said "... my guests will be more tolerant of water and AC outages than they will be of data connectivity issues."

Unfortunately, there is no way around ICE as they are the sole provider of data services in Costa Rica. This means it's up to you, the Hotel or Developer to optimize your data connection for your guests. Simply installing consumer wireless network equipment does not solve the problem:

1. Consumer products like Linksys, Belkin and Netgear are designed for household applications. They are not designed for the outdoor or commercial applications.
2. Wireless radios alone do not allow you to manage who can and cannot use YOUR internet. *a non guest could easily connect and start consuming all the available internet thus degrading the experience for your guests*

You will need a Vendor who can offer professional services that will help you to:

- extend your wireless network's reach
- ensure strong signal to remote locations
- design a network solution that will adjust automatically when issues do arise

A properly designed system will incorporate measures to protect the wireless connection and make it ubiquitous throughout the property while ensuring that only your guests and staff are able to access the internet

How can I leverage my current investments in Big Screen Displays without degrading their entertainment value?

The last thing you want to do is impede a customer while he is watching a sporting event. At the same time you realize the advertising potential that is being wasted on these large screens... You should be using these screens to cross sell and up sell without interrupting the entertainment value. Digital Signage is the next step after purchasing your Displays. Generate revenue by cross selling your own services, or create an additional profit center by selling advertising space to third parties.

When selecting a Digital Signage solution be sure that it supports your capital investment. Your Screens! Consider ease of use in changing advertising content. This means web interfaces for managing content. Furthermore, consider digital signage solutions that can integrate with your current network.

How many times has your "heart dropped into your stomach" as you listen to your guest tell the story of how their Laptop, Camera and Cell Phone were stolen from their car that was parked in a parking area for which you are responsible.

Nobody wants to hear these stories, especially if somehow it makes you feel responsible. What can you do to deter theft on your property? As an hotelier or developer, you must provide security systems that will make your guests feel comfortable and their possessions safe.

A Video Surveillance system with ubiquitous coverage is a necessary expense in Costa Rica. These systems not only deter theft but will allow you to visually rebuild an incident. There are many solutions ranging from

inexpensive analog cameras to the more expensive IP cameras. Costa Rica's humidity and constant power fluctuations should play a significant role in your camera selection.

Try and find a vendor with Video solutions that combine the best of both analog and IP camera technologies. Selecting a blended system will protect your initial investment from obsolescence the minute it is installed. Your vendor should also spend time pinpointing target areas. Finally do not let the vendor "push" a specific camera. Each target location has various characteristics that will dictate the camera technology (IR, lens, etc) deployed.

How many times have you had to turn away business due to power interruptions? How much time/energy/money have you lost due to employee work "stoppage" when the power goes out?

You cannot afford to go 60 seconds without mission critical systems. Imagine how frustrated your guests are going to be if they're in a hurry to check out but the Property Management system is not accessible due to a power outage. Imagine how annoyed your guests will be when there is no internet or lights because ICE's grid cannot handle the load of a growing town? Employees become unproductive and guests will go elsewhere if you can't provide them with what they came for and what they need.

Power augmentation systems are necessary in Costa Rica. These augmentation systems come in the form of UPS, Inverter Chargers or even Generators. Power backup is necessary! However, not everything in your establishment needs to be backed up. Only mission critical systems such as Point of Sale, Lighting, Music, Voice and Data services.

You must understand the importance of staying operational even when the rest of the town is not. Your vendor should offer uniquely engineered power augmentation systems tailored for you. Do not let the vendor talk you into using consumer grade UPS. If you are considering a generator be sure to evaluate Propane or Diesel solutions. If you cannot afford a generator you should look for a power augmentation system that uses commercially available deep cycle batteries that are easy to obtain and service in country.

How are you going to minimise recurring operational expenses such as electricity? What steps are you taking to help minimize the high ICE kilowatt rate? What measures are you taking to help make ongoing HOA fees manageable relative to these operational costs?

Energy costs in Costa Rica are typically 2-3 times that of what we are accustomed to in the US. This means you, as developer or hotelier, need be aware of "green" lighting technologies that can help minimize energy consumption.

Traditional incandescent bulbs are energy "hogs". Yes, they provide soft light, and can be dimmed, but they drive your lighting bill through the roof. Compound high energy consumption with a short life cycle that is exacerbated by ICE's power surges, will create support costs that are unimaginable.

CFL (compact fluorescent) are the order of magnitude and cheaper to operate. Secondly they have a much longer life cycle than the aforementioned incandescent bulbs and are not as susceptible to ICE's power surges. However, they normally throw a harsh white light that is not conducive to the relaxing atmosphere you hope to create both indoor and outdoor on your property.

The importance of solving the above issues means that your vendor should be working with the newest lighting technology known as "Cold Cathode". Unlike CFL, Cold Cathode emits a warm light similar to incandescent and are dimmable. Equally important, Cold Cathode solutions last even longer than CFL and only need to be changed every 7 to 10 years. This dramatically reduces maintenance costs. Most impressive is the ROI: the power savings alone will pay for the cost of this lighting in 6 to 7 months.

When considering alternative lighting solutions, look for a vendor that is not tied to a specific product line. Keep your options open by evaluating many different "packages".

How are you going to differentiate yourself from every other developer here in Costa Rica? What lifestyle amenities are you going to offer your potential unit buyers? How are you going to both entertain your guests and profit from it?

Imagine arriving home to your beautiful Costa Rican condo and at the press of a single button on your "home automation control panel", the lights come up, your favorite music starts playing on the living room stereo, the temperature adjusts accordingly and your flat screen TV shows real-time views of the property pool and/or beach entrance. Overly satisfied with the ease and comfort of your personalized home, you head towards the veranda to watch the sunset, with another touch of the control panel, the floor lights on the patio come up slightly and the patio speakers start playing a different music mix. Later that same evening, another push of a single button on the control panel's touch-screen will activate your "home-theatre" settings: the lights dim, the music that was playing turns off, the hidden surround sound system turns on and the movie begins. Ah. . . modern perfection within the natural paradise of Costa Rica. Welcome to the home of the future.

Home Automation (HA) and Home Entertainment (HE) systems are quickly becoming the latest "utility" in multi-dwelling units in the U.S., and buyers won't look back once they experience how these systems can streamline their lives. Most developers in Costa Rica are overlooking the "value-add" of these advanced and customizable amenities for their units. Be among the first developers in order to stand apart from your competition. With the right help and expertise, you can offer a better quality of life to your prospective buyers/guests. These systems not only add tremendous value to your residence, but they will allow your residents to maintain their standard of living.

With music in every room from hidden speakers, surround sound systems, plasma or LCD TV's on the wall, game systems, even complete HA systems with touchscreen controls, your clients will be telling their friends and family about how great it is to live in your wonderful and fully-equipped community!

Home Automation and Home Entertainment systems represent a multi-billion dollar industry in the United States. These types of systems are not readily available in Costa Rica. Offering these solutions to your development will definitely put your product at the "front of the pack" in terms of amenities.

When evaluating a provider of HE or HA systems, look for a complete, full-service electronic solutions provider. As with all other technologies, align yourself with a vendor that offers a wide range of solutions. Do not let the vendor try to pigeon hole you into his specific offering. The vendor should offer professional installation that is seamless and fully integrated into each units floor plan. Be sure to select a system that is intuitive and easy enough for transient guests to operate. In the US, condos with these advanced technologies sell up to 50% faster than those without.

Summary

The key to a successful development/hotel/restaurant is planning for proper applications of technology. Being aware of the technological difficulties you will face and being prepared for the hurdles will increase your "bottom line". Costa Rica is a beautiful country and as a business owner, you chose to do business here for a reason, so providing top quality voice/data services and customer care will ensure that you have satisfied and happy guests that will return.