



Pranksters and Vandalism — How to Protect Hotel Property

Several years ago, a Nebraska¹ national brand name hotel sustained more than \$100,000 in damages when a telephone prankster, posing as a hotel employee, persuaded a guest to set off the sprinkler system. The guest, who was told that an employee had accidentally broken a gas line and that an explosion was inevitable if the sprinkler system was not activated, complied with the prankster's instructions. The result was that approximately 5,000 gallons of water flooded the hotel, damaging several guest rooms and the hotel's only meeting space, which took weeks to repair, and resulted in a loss of revenue due to the loss of use of these facilities.

Although this unusual act of vandalism involved a phone call rather than a physical act by the vandal, vandalism in general is a risk that all hotels face and must take steps to avoid or minimize. Installing and maintaining reasonable prevention techniques will not only minimize the risk of vandalism, but other crimes as well. A single criminal act can seriously damage the hotel, so emphasizing prevention can promote the safety of its clientele and minimize the risk of loss to hotel property and to its reputation.

Here are some suggestions²:

- Install adequate outdoor lighting and remove "hiding places." Brighten up parking lots, sidewalks, and hallways. Keep bushes and shrubs trimmed; install fencing where necessary.
- Control and monitor building entrances. The fewer building entrances, the easier they are to monitor. (Codes requirements should always be considered.)



- Control traffic flow and access to the property. Consider blocking some parking exits, adding fencing, and rerouting traffic so that all automobile and foot traffic must pass within the view of the office.
- Install a video-monitoring system that, at minimum, covers the registration area. Admittedly, some of these systems are expensive, but there are many systems appropriate for the needs and price ranges of smaller hotels and motels.
- Keep the exterior looking clean and fresh.
- Remove graffiti. Graffiti serves as an invitation for more problems. Repair vandalism. As with graffiti, an important part of discouraging vandalism is to repair the problem quickly.
- Watch for physical and/or behavioral signs that may indicate significant intoxication or drug influence on guests or visitors.

¹See www.thesmokinggun.com/documents/crime/hotel-prank-causes-115,000-damages.

²A *Guide to Crime Prevention in Overnight Lodging*, the City of Portland, Oregon, Police Bureau. Developed by Campbell DeLong Resources, Inc. Second Edition, October, 1996.



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- Examine your phone system to ensure that callers cannot be directly connected to rooms without knowing the names of guests. The phone pranksters mentioned in the lead paragraph targeted this particular hotel because, at the time, callers could be directly connected to rooms without giving the guest's name.

Insurance Considerations

Like virtually all businesses, hotels need *property* and *liability* insurance. Property insurance covers vandalism damage to the building and the contents of the hotel. It also protects the hotel from a variety of other perils such as fire, windstorm, explosion, or water damage from plumbing, etc. The insurance policy should also cover business interruption in the event vandalism or another peril causes a temporary shutdown while the damage is being repaired. Liability insurance protects the hotel against claims and lawsuits due to injuries sustained on the premises.

Hotels have other specialized insurance needs such as innkeepers' liability (covers loss to guests' property), business



auto (if autos are used, say for shuttle services), workers' compensation, power interruption, etc.).

Since the hotel business is a specialized business, its insurance program requires the attention of a professional insurance agent or broker who understands the business and its insurance needs.