

Hotel lobbies becoming Wi-Fi magnets

By Barbara De Lollis, USA Today

Travelers may hate paying for Wi-Fi in their guest rooms, but more hotels are getting ready to offer it for free in lobbies.

More than 300 Marriott Hotels & Resorts locations will flip the switch in the coming weeks on free lobby Wi-Fi to please guests and non-guests alike, a senior Marriott executive tells USA TODAY.

Wi-Fi currently is free in the lobbies of about 185 of Marriott's nearly 500 hotels, and it will become standard across all hotels by March 31, says Marriott's Michael Dail.

"We have so many people who don't spend the night but may come for a meeting or happy hours. That's what they want," says Dail, the brand's marketing vice president. "A lot of our hotels already offer (free Wi-Fi), but we want to make it standard."

The move toward free lobby Wi-Fi underscores how hotels have sought to reinvent lifeless lobbies and common areas to lure a new generation of travelers who work and socialize differently. The hotels are adding libraries, lounges, communal tables, desktop computers, ping pong tables and various other conversation starters with the hope that people will linger and work over coffee, cocktails or a \$10 hummus plate.

"Over the past five years, we have renovated (hotel lobbies) and overhauled the menus, so the last piece is opening up the Wi-Fi access," Dail says. "These are great social hubs for meetings, for leisure travelers, for social business. People are congregating there like people do in a house kitchen."

Some owners of upscale hotels predicted this would be the future. Sunstone Hotel Investors, for instance, began making Wi-Fi free in the lobbies of its Marriott-brand hotels starting about three years ago as they were updated, says Marc Hoffman, the company's executive vice president. The company owns Marriott hotels in Boston, Philadelphia, Portland, and Park City.

"We noticed several years ago the trend for travelers to want to enjoy public area, bars, restaurants, lobbies in a new way," he says. People also rely on lobby Wi-Fi to "reduce the frustration" over paying for Internet in their rooms, he says.

As Sunstone revamped each lobby, the spaces were unveiled with free Wi-Fi. As a result, Sunstone has seen a "dramatic increase" in the use of the spaces, food and beverage sales, and guest satisfaction, Hoffman says.

Hyatt behind Marriott

Lagging behind Marriott is Chicago-based Hyatt, which still has several locations where lobby visitors seeking Wi-Fi will be asked to pay a fee, says Hyatt spokeswoman Amy Patti.

Many of Hyatt's full-service hotels in the U.S. have installed two desktop computers that provide 15 minutes' worth of free Internet, she says.

But in today's wired world, travelers get annoyed and may even move when they discover that they have to pay, since Wi-Fi is free in so many other places.

"It's interesting how many of the upper end and luxury hotels want to charge for this service, while at the same time trying to position their public spaces as 'social hubs' that are supposed to be friendly places to informally connect, socialize and relax," says frequent traveler Mark Snyder. "It happened to me recently in NYC, so I went around the corner to a place that truly is a 'social hub' – Starbucks."

Frequent traveler Henry DeLozier also has a strategy to get around Wi-Fi fees in hotels where he doesn't have elite status, such as Fairmont. "I refuse to pay and carry a wireless modem instead," he says.

Hilton, Doubletree, Sheraton: Free lobby Wi-Fi old news

Marriott and Hyatt, however, are exceptions.

Wi-Fi, for instance, has been free in the lobbies of the 300-location Doubletree by Hilton chain since 2005. And last year, the 550-location Hilton chain made it free, says spokeswoman Dasha Ross.

Starwood's Sheraton chain also offers free Wi-Fi in its lobbies.

Does Marriott's move mean that travelers can expect even bigger news: That the chain will make Wi-Fi free in guest rooms?

"We'd love to do the full hotel, but we're not ready," Dail says.

Potential downside?

When large hotels make Wi-Fi free in public spaces, data usage typically soars, says Roger Crellin, president of hotel-Internet provider iBahn.

"We have seen an up to 300 percent increase in data traffic," he says. "From a business perspective it's a great service."