

# Signature Press

## FIVE EFFECTIVE WAYS TO MAKE THE MOST OF A HOTEL RENOVATION



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**By John Ely**  
*Hotel Executive*

I occasionally suffer from migraine headaches. They're brutal, with pain beyond most anything I've experienced, including many broken bones and bumps and bruises from playing sports. Why do I tell you this? Well, my migraines are sometimes brought on by stress, smells, or lack of sleep — of which I experienced all three during a recent stay at a hotel undergoing renovations.

I arrived two days early for my conference because I had a series of big presentations due that week, and I wanted to review them to ensure I was on track. I was told upon arrival that the entire hotel was undergoing a massive renovation. I had my choice of either being awakened early by demolition noise or I could stay in an area of the property that had recently been painted. I opted for the new paint, as noise was not a great option since I was trying to concentrate.

I got to my room and could certainly smell the distinct odor of fresh paint, but there was something else in the air too. With a trip down the hallway, I concluded that there was fresh carpet laid and the overwhelming aroma of glue permeated the place. I tried to stick it out in that room but by 3 a.m., the migraine had taken hold. In the morning, I asked to be moved to the "noisy" section.

Well, as you can imagine, that section was no better. During the first evening, I felt I had made a smart decision, but at 6 a.m., all positive thoughts were shattered when it sounded like someone was breaking through my wall! A bit of detective work uncovered workers removing old wall dividers in the room adjacent to mine. On my short trip

back to my door, I wondered why I couldn't be residing in one of the other rooms at the end of the hallway.

At this point, I'm not sure if I was more frustrated and stressed out by the lack of sleep, the killer migraine, or the total lack of knowledge that I was staying at a construction site prior to my checking in. Had I known about the renovation, would I have still stayed? Yes, probably. But not knowing until the moment I arrived set my mood for the entire week.

This begs the question, "Can a hotel maintain the guest experience during a renovation?" Probably not at the same level as without the renovation, but it is possible to manage it much better than the example shared above! Let's face it — part of the customer's experience is the property and amenities. If they are not all available or exist in a state of disrepair, then the guest's tangible experiences will be lessened. However, there are ways to make the experience much more tolerable.

### **1. Give the guest some warning before arrival.**

First and foremost, alert the guest ahead of time that the property may be undergoing renovations at the time of his or her visit. No one likes to be surprised with this information. Hotels.com even has a humorous commercial about such a surprise. A young couple arrives for what looks to be a romantic getaway that they spent months saving for, only to be greeted by the sounds of jackhammers! It's funny on TV — disastrous in real life. And, it does happen. What if a guest really did save up for

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their visit to your hotel only to find it nearly in ruins? Have you ever saved for a cruise or a once-in-a-lifetime trip? What if you arrived to find your cruise ship in tatters? It makes the sacrifice worthless, and every trip to a hotel or resort involves some level of sacrifice on the guest's part!

Obviously alerting guests during the reservation process is the easiest approach, but you might have to plan in advance to do an e-mail, direct mail or phone call campaign. The necessary contact information could be gathered in the reservation process for a promotional follow-up. You could even get the hotel sales team involved to hype the newly renovated spaces. And, don't forget to update your Web site with the latest information.

### **2. Focus on the future benefits.**

Use some marketing power when alerting your guests. Be sure to position the renovation as an investment in them! Show pictures of what it will look like after the renovation, as well as a list of new amenities. Offer specials to return once the work is completed. You wouldn't want their last impression of you (and it may be) to be a negative one.

### **3. Give options and be flexible.**

Like in the opening story, give your guest options. As humans we like to have a choice in where we stay, especially when it comes to a hotel renovation. And like me, guests may change their mind, so be willing to work with them in any way that might improve their experience. As managers, you'll need to empower your staff to make these types of decisions for the guest. You can decide how much authority to give and work with your staff to determine what alternatives are available. Keep the team updated with regular, preferably daily, shift meetings.

### **4. Renovate in stages.**

Next, plan the renovation. I know it's probably a bit more costly to renovate in stages, but think about the opportunity

costs. If you lose clients for a lifetime, that's a higher cost than some construction savings today. I recently watched a special about a Las Vegas hotel undergoing a complete renovation. They completed each stage by floor and guests had no access to the work areas during the construction. Was it more costly to renovate in this manner? Yes, but they totally took the guest experience into consideration when completing the work. Most guests didn't even realize the hotel was still under construction until the staff alerted them to it.

### **5. Train staff to deliver legendary customer service.**

Finally, use the power of your people. A collection of legendary experiences with the staff may negate the inconvenience of the renovations. All staff should be aware that while they are being inconvenienced by construction, so are the guests — and the guests are paying for it! A dose of empathy goes a long way. Staff interaction with guests is even more important during these projects.

Train the staff to proactively approach guests and thank them for putting up with the work, all while encouraging them to return to see the result of all the dust. Use your staff during the work as a marketing campaign for the grand opening. Make sure they know every detail of the new look and feel of the place, so they can communicate it to each and every guest. Marketing material is useful too. With proper messaging and enticing images, you can turn a guest's disappointment with a renovation into an eagerness to return.

When someone stays or visits your hotel they're looking to leave their headaches behind, not generate new ones like I did. Some planning, marketing, and staff training can ensure that your guests have the most pleasant experience possible.