

Starwood Hotels and Resorts offers an automatic check-in program, designed to appeal to tech-savvy travelers.

By Logan Kugler

May 23, 2011—Generation Y, Millennials, Echo Boomers—whatever you call the approximately 70 million Americans born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s, they're a hip group at home and in love with technology. They're also a large emerging market on which [Starwood Hotels and Resorts](#) has set its sights. To that end, since 2008, Starwood has opened nearly 50 [Aloft](#) hotels worldwide that feature modern designs and promote social atmospheres. And to appeal to tech-savvy travelers, the hotel chain is rolling out an automatic check-in program, courtesy of radio frequency identification.

"We've positioned the Aloft brand as tech-savvy," says Brian McGuinness, Starwood's senior VP of specialty select brands, "and the early adopter is really the target customer we're going for—someone with that mindset of trying new things."



Each day, hotel associates check in arriving guests from a central PC, and send a welcome message to each visitor's mobile device along with that person's room number.

The first automatic check-in program, which works in conjunction with an RFID access-control system,

was introduced in 2008 at the [Aloft Lexington](#) hotel, located in Lexington, Mass. Gen Y'ers and others who are members of the Starwood Preferred Guest (SPG) program no longer need wait in line to check in, as their SPG member card serves double-duty as a contactless room "key." Guests receive a text message on their mobile device containing their room number, along with information regarding when that room will be available. Upon arriving at the hotel, visitors can then go directly to their room and gain entry using their RFID-enabled member card.



Doors can be unlocked in microseconds, after information stored in a chip on a keycard is verified.

The Smart Check-In program, from [VingCard Elsafe](#)—a hospitality and security provider and part of the [Assa Abloy Group](#)—has been working well, McGuinness says. But Starwood is taking a methodical approach to expanding the service—both to ensure there aren't any technology glitches that may lead to guest dissatisfaction, and to monitor guest adoption and acceptance of the technology. "We really need to have this work seamlessly," he states, explaining that the rollout is proceeding at a relatively slow pace to ensure a high success rate. To date, the RFID system has been put in place at five other hotels: [Aloft Harlem](#) and [Aloft Brooklyn](#), in New York; [Aloft Dallas Downtown](#), in Texas; [Aloft Jacksonville Tapestry Park](#), in Florida; and [Aloft Brussels](#), in Belgium. Starwood plans to expand the program first to all Aloft hotels worldwide, and then to its [Element](#) hotels and other properties.

Innovative Strategy

Starwood's interest in RFID began in 2006, when hotel management was deciding whether a contactless access-control system for guest rooms was a good fit for the Aloft brand, and whether VingCard was the best vendor to provide such a solution. The technology was just being introduced in the hotel industry, and Starwood opted to standardize on a VingCard Signature mag-stripe lock set that could be easily upgraded as new technologies and protocols were developed. "Although Smart Check-In was not development at that time," McGuinness says, "we thought the contactless RFID locks would be a strategic next step for us."

Around the same time, McGuinness learned of a realtor in Greenwich, Conn., that used an RFID keycard to access the lock boxes that hold conventional keys for different properties. "We thought, 'What if we could put that power in the hands of our guests?' We were really intrigued by the notion of changing the guest experience," he says, "by allowing guests to control their arrival experience."



Aloft hotels feature modern designs and promote social atmospheres.

When VingCard introduced its VisionLine solution, designed to let hotels manage guest rooms from a central location, Starwood decided it was time to upgrade to RFID technology. The wireless locking system has standalone electronic locks that operate in an online mode through radio frequency, based on a ZigBee high-security open platform. A keycard activates the locking mechanism, which communicates with routers that communicate, in turn, with gateways connected to the hotel's Ethernet network, thereby enabling direct communication with the VisionLine server. Doors can then be unlocked in microseconds, after information stored in a chip on the keycard is verified.



The RFID-enabled keycards are readable through leather or vinyl, so a guest can simply wave his or her wallet across the locking device to gain entry.

At Aloft Lexington and Aloft Dallas, which had the Signature lock system, it took roughly five minutes to upgrade each guest-room door. "Rather than taking out the entire lock," McGuinness explains, "we just popped off the cover and put in a small chip that could read the frequencies." The VisionLine system was installed at Aloft Harlem, as well as at other new constructions.

Each day, hotel associates check in arriving guests from a central PC, and send a welcome message to each visitor's mobile device along with that person's room number. At that time, a signal from the front desk reprograms the guest-room door's locking mechanism.

The RFID-enabled keycards are readable through leather or vinyl, so a guest can simply wave his or her wallet across the locking device to gain entry. Frequent travelers can use the same card to access rooms at all RFID-enabled Starwood hotels.

There have been a few glitches, McGuinness notes, mainly due to inaccurate telephone numbers and credit-card issues. Whether or not these issues are the result of user error—if someone changes his or her phone number and forgets to change it through Starwood, for instance, or enters the incorrect credit-card information—the

impact on the guest is ultimately what matters. "When you come into the hotel and you don't think you have to check in so you go to your room and it doesn't work, then you have to go all the way back down—that's not good," McGuinness says. "We're slowly rolling this out and really fine-tuning things as we go, to make the user experience the best that it can be."



Frequent travelers can use the same card to access rooms at all RFID-enabled Starwood hotels.

Setting the Standard

While Starwood is out in front of what McGuinness believes will be a trend that will inevitably become a standard in the hotel industry, he acknowledges that other hotels are likely to catch up soon, simply to remain competitive. He likens RFID-enabled entry to the "bed wars" of a few years ago that saw hotel chains across the country adopt the "heavenly bed" model popularized by [Westin](#) (a Starwood property) in 1999.

"Some other chains are working very aggressively to catch up with us," McGuinness states, estimating that it will take those companies at least six months to get to the point at which some of the Aloft

properties are now. "The good news for us is that our Aloft and Element properties already have the existing locking mechanisms and just need inserts." Other properties will need to retrofit their locks, he adds, which will require removing the locks and door systems and then installing new ones. While it's cost-effective to build new properties incorporating RFID, he notes, there can be significant expense involved in retrofitting an entire hotel.

As Starwood continues to test and roll out the technology, it remains committed to overall guest satisfaction, and to ensuring a positive experience. "We send a survey each month to the guests that have had an opportunity to experience Smart Check-In," McGuinness says. "Daily, we monitor the operations at the hotel to understand each guest experience and any problems, such as the wrong phone number or credit-card info."



*Brian McGuinness,
Starwood Hotels and
Resorts' senior VP of
specialty select brands*

Guest adoption has been strong, says Daniel Fevre, Aloft Harlem's general manager, noting that responses to date have been very positive. "You kind of feel like you own the place," he says. "It's kind of like having the house key. Usually, people think of check-in as another nightmare of travel. That's over, gone and done with."

McGuinness says he is attuned to the potential "big brother" concerns that may be raised, from a consumer identity and privacy standpoint, by the expanding use of RFID. However, he says, "We really haven't heard those concerns from anyone participating in the pilots."

Once the Aloft and Element brands have been converted, McGuinness states, "we'll go enterprisewide. We're bullish on this—we think it's the next generation for the customer experience at our hotels."

RELATED_ARTICLES