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The Environmental Acoustics Magazine

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Premiere Issue
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SOUND SLEEP



ADDRESSING GUESTROOM NOISE



*An interview with
Matt Carter,
Division Lead –
Hotels, MODIO.*

How serious is the noise problem for hotels?

According to surveys conducted by J.D. Power, noise regularly tops the list of complaints, ranking either first or second across all property types. However, research also shows that nearly 60 percent of guests don't complain to staff at the time they experience this problem; instead, they simply decide not to return and also post negative comments online. From there, the problem can escalate, as nearly the same percentage actively seek positive reviews about sleep quality before making a reservation. The property's reputation and financial health suffer. And, of course, if the hotelier attempts to solve this problem using the wrong solutions, they can end up spending a great deal of money, with little to no return on their investment.



What are the main sources of disturbance?

Guests can feel as though noise is coming at them from all directions. Exterior sources include traffic, mechanical equipment, nearby bars and construction projects. Noises are also generated in neighboring rooms, corridors and other floors—doors, elevators, phone calls, TVs, and alarm clocks are just a few examples. While properties tend to focus on the most persistent problems, the reality is that they never know what two guests will end up sharing a wall on a given night. Also, hoteliers sometimes forget about the noises created within the guest room itself, such as by cycling HVAC, plumbing, minibar compressors and, if the room is shared, by another person.

What types of noise control solutions have hotels tried? Are they effective?

For years, hotels have tried various construction, policy and amenity-based tactics; however, noise complaints persist. Many properties have thrown good money after bad by pursuing structural fixes—adding more isolation and absorption—and purchasing quieter equipment, which can cost thousands per room, but doesn't address the root of the problem. Clearly, walls, windows and doors need to provide a suitable level of isolation, equipment should be designed to produce as little noise as possible, and ideally one should locate noise-producing areas away from guest rooms. But, to a large extent, most hotels already perform fairly well on these fronts. A new approach is needed that tackles the problem from a different angle.

We've studied guest rooms around the world and found that most actually suffer from the same issue we've successfully addressed in offices over the last forty years: background sound levels that are far too low. In these 'library-like' or 'pin-drop' conditions, all kinds of sounds are audible and even low-volume noises are sufficient to irritate or awaken occupants. In fact, hoteliers might be surprised to learn that the noise peaks that irritate guests and disturb their sleep are often not much greater than 40 dBA. While one would not usually describe these sounds as 'loud,' they are disruptive in the context of the low ambient levels exhibited by most properties, which are typically only 28 to 32 dBA.

How does MODIO address noise?

MODIO raises the background sound level using a consistent, comfortable sound that's similar to softly blowing air. It covers up many noises and reduces the disruptive impact of others by decreasing the amount of change between baseline and peak volumes in the room. In the past, guests have tried to achieve a similar effect by turning on the fan or a 'white noise' app, but mechanical systems aren't designed for this purpose and mobile phones fall considerably short of what a commercial-grade sound masking product can achieve. With MODIO, guests benefit from the same world-leading technology used by our corporate, healthcare and military clients. The sound is properly generated, produced over a high-quality loudspeaker, and its spectrum finely adjusted in order to provide optimal masking results. Guests can adjust the masking level to their liking, allowing them to control their room's ambience, the same way they would temperature and lighting.

Why did you develop MODIO?

Prior to MODIO's launch, we successfully implemented our commercial sound masking system, LogiSon Acoustic Network, in properties for Hilton, Marriott, Fairmont, The Ritz Carlton, and Dream Hotel, as well as in the Tribeca Grand Hotel and Fogo Island Inn. However, for existing properties, installing this type of 'built in' system was often prohibitive, so we developed MODIO—a 'bolt on' solution that can be attached to the back of a TV, to a wall or furnishing. It's as effective at covering noise as the LogiSon system, but only takes minutes to install, meaning no lost room night.

Are there any barriers to implementing this technology in existing properties?

The only remaining challenge appears to be that hoteliers are sometimes concerned that they're 'acknowledging' noise problems when they take steps to correct them. However, in our experience, guests appreciate tangible efforts to address their concerns. Hundreds of unsolicited and overwhelmingly positive online comments indicate that guests see our technology as a high-end amenity that prevents the annoyance and poor sleep they might otherwise have experienced during their stay.

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