

# sleeper

HOTEL DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT & ARCHITECTURE

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# Sound advice

**Rob Wood** of Music Concierge offers some practical, operational tips for creating and maintaining atmosphere through sound in hotels.

**A**s a music consultant I'm lucky enough to visit hotels across the globe. It's a privilege to work with some of the industry's leading people, and to gain an insight into their brands and see their design-led environments firsthand. From boutique properties in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, to the grand hotels of Europe, to underwater nightclubs in the Maldives, to towering F&B concepts in Middle Eastern skyscrapers, to the small and quirky – I'm there to research their interiors and audience, but also to 'look' at that intangible but essential element – atmosphere.

In the last edition of *Sleeper* I explained how music identity and inspiring music content is integral to brand positioning. In this issue we're going to look at the practical, operational and technical factors relating to sound and music that hoteliers need to create and maintain the perfect atmosphere. In other words here's some operational tips for making your hotel sound great, and how to control it so it stays that way.

## CENTRALISE YOUR AUDIO SYSTEM

For newbuilds, or for hotels updating their AV infrastructure, where possible it is best to have a centralised audio system. This is where amplifiers and music player hardware are housed in a back-of-house IT or server room with the music distributed centrally to all hotel zones. Rather than each F&B outlet having its own separate audio system, this centralised method offers significant savings.

It also provides a more seamless guest experience. For instance, if two zones are sharing the same music identity as a guest walks around the hotel the music will be in sequence, and they won't hear the same track being repeated ten minutes later in another zone. Or if a private hire wanted the same music across multiple areas it is easy to deliver with a central audio set up. It gives you flexibility.

## GIVE YOUR HARDWARE A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

Ideally the hardware also needs to be in a temperature controlled, cool and clean environment away from guests and away from dirt. Amplifiers can fail if they get too hot and dirt blocks them up. Give your hardware air con and it will last longer.

## UNDERSTAND THE ACOUSTICS OF THE SPACE

For newbuilds it's worth getting an acoustics specialist to analyse how sound will be travel and be absorbed in each zone. Contemporary hotel design tends to use lots of hard surfaces such as glass and metal all of which affects the sound of the space. An acoustics expert can map out problem areas and work with AV suppliers to make sure speakers are the right type and in the right position to prevent issues such as the effect of echo or 'sound bleed' between different sources of music.

## INVEST IN GOOD QUALITY SOUND

The quality of your atmosphere and the

sound of your hotel is certainly governed by the quality of the music content which needs to be carefully selected to be right for the brand, audience, zone, and time of day. But that is only part of the equation. There are other important factors in the 'pipeline' that delivers music content to people's ears. The tracks ought to be in a high quality audio format – digital files at 192kbps sound thin, whereas 320kbps or less sounds richer and warmer. The sound system itself needs to be to high spec. Investing in good sound quality pays off by creating far warmer atmospheres that guests will want to return to.

The speakers need to be expertly installed in the right locations. Don't let interior designers dictate where speakers are placed, unless they also happen to be an expert on sound!

Chris Gunton from CGA who works with The Dorchester Collection emphasises: "Mount speakers relative to guests' ears and think about where they are and how they move about so that you get a consistent delivery." He advocates using 'full range' speakers where possible saying: "a well-designed sound system can help balance how sound is delivered throughout a room to minimise or completely avoid any 'proximity effects'."

He also suggests getting a system that is capable of delivering more than your maximum power. "The human ear attenuates itself – so what was loud at 8.30pm becomes normal by 9.30pm so you will always need more power than

you think for a good bar system. To get the best sound, get a system that will deliver your target sound at a maximum of 70% so that you have spare capacity."

Likewise in key trading areas such as bars you might need the speakers and audio system to be able to deliver a 'background' sound during the day, but a 'foreground' sound during peak trading times such as the evening. Make sure your AV supplier is aware if that is a requirement.

## LEAVE IT TO THE EXPERTS

Of course I would say it, but use a music consultant to select your content. We all eat food, but we wouldn't dream of designing a menu. The chef should do that. Likewise we all love music, but knowing where to find great music and how each track affects people should be left to experts. Guests are unlikely to appreciate the F&B staff's favourite dance tunes especially at sea time. The music needs to be picked to be perfect for each part of the day. The music should also be tailored to the F&B concept or zone.

## DITCH THE CDS!

CD players, even those with multiple CDs, won't provide enough tracks to keep you sounding inspiring. What's more there will be gaps between each track and a big pause as a CD finishes. It also gives staff an unwelcome opportunity to put on their own music.

The best solution is to use licensed tracks stored on hard disc-based digital music

players. Streaming is not recommended as the stability of your internet connection is likely to be an issue. Use music suppliers with online access to the digital music players on site, so that they can quickly and remotely respond to staff requests, and support and update the content online. You will need regular music updates to keep the hotel sounding relevant and fresh.

## CONTROL YOUR ATMOSPHERE

The lighting, temperature and smell of the hotel's public areas needs to be carefully controlled, and so does your sound and music. Therefore use a music consultant or supplier who has a digital delivery system with playlists timetable to activate automatically without the need for staff involvement. This means staff do not need to change the music, freeing them up to do what they are good at: serving guests. It also means they cannot put their own music as it is controlled to be 'on-brand'.

Ideally there should be cross-fades between tracks to prevent the atmosphere dipping between songs. Playlists should be volume leveled as much as possible to prevent tracks suddenly jumping out at guests.

Think about volume control as well. Train staff to monitor and maintain volume levels. An empty bar will need less volume, compared to a packed bar. Therefore staff need to learn to adjust the volume as each service progresses. This is critical where you use live performers. It's a common mistake not to turn up the volume of the background music

immediately after a singer or pianist finishes their set. Without careful volume control the atmosphere crashes. I've seen bars lose trade because of this as people get up and leave.

You could of course choose to have no music at all! Believe it or not, there are times when I recommend this. At the COMO Shambhala Estate in Bali, the magical sound of the rainforest jungle was the only accompaniment breakfast outdoors needed so that's what I told them. Getting the audio and music right however is key to creating a great ambience and mood. It can create inspiring or exciting areas within the hotel as music is used to enhance the experience. The effect of sound is often subliminal though. Get it wrong, people will vote with their feet. Get it right, and your hotel is all the more likely to be a hit. Atmosphere might be intangible, but don't ignore it. ■

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