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**Cut Operating Costs
At the Source**

By: Carol E. Farren

FACILITY MANAGEMENT | WORLD WIDE LTD.



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At many hospitality properties, one of the biggest management issues is cost control, particularly in the cost of financing. However, the industry may be missing out on a significant way to reduce costs – specifically, through the way that their buildings are designed.

Like water draining from a leaky swimming pool, managers see their hard-earned top line erode through design decisions that do not pay enough attention to the cost of maintenance and cleaning.

Consider a hotel lobby that has been remodeled to suit the property's new, upscale image. There are marble tiles at the center of the lobby, a wood reception desk, and a small forest of Ficus trees. It looks wonderful... but that's not the end of the story.

Ultimately, heavily laden luggage carts will soon crack the marble, belt buckles, briefcases, and shoes will scratch the wood reception desk, and the light-loving Ficus trees will wilt and die because they are tucked away in dimly-lit corners.

Without a doubt, it would be better to have installed more durable flooring for high-traffic areas, selected a scratch proof material for the reception desk, and chosen plants that thrive in low-light conditions.

It's your choice

As this initial example shows, one of the best ways to cut maintenance costs is through the right choice of materials. While it may seem obvious to choose materials for easy cleaning and other maintenance, the fact is that many architects and designers do not make this a factor in their decisions. Instead, they are concerned with appearance... but do not realize that this appearance will deteriorate if the material is hard to maintain and clean.

Consider the scenario in which an interior designer wanted to cover a ceiling with a light gray silk fabric festooned with sequins to look like a star-studded sky. It would look beautiful, he thought – until it was pointed out to him that, even if it was flame proofed as well as Scotch Guarded, there would be no way to clean it, and frequent replacement would be costly and disruptive.

Choice of plants is also important. Ficus trees, for example, need considerable levels of light, and they object to being moved. A plant in the wrong place will signal its displeasure by dropping leaves and eventually giving up entirely. Some plants prefer low light levels, however, and it is important to choose species according to their best conditions as well as the plant's decorative appearance.

When choosing materials, consider how easy it is to repair damage. For some countertop surface materials, for example, the only way to deal with scratches and holes is to replace the entire countertop. On other materials, however, the pattern and color go all the way through, and so damage can often be repaired by sanding – and then refinishing – the surface.

The amount of traffic may similarly influence materials choice. While marble tiles may not be the best choice for a high-traffic area, they may be a great way to add tone and atmosphere in lower-traffic parts of a building. Natural-fabric, higher pile carpets may be a good way to raise the level of perceived quality for some parts of a hotel (such as the guestrooms), but the corridors would be better served with heavy-duty, soil-hiding, wear-resistant carpet. Carpet tile may also be appropriate because a stained or worn tile can be easily replaced.

Another factor in maintainability is access. In one situation, the design of an internal stairwell meant that the only way to change the four-foot-long fluorescent light bulbs was to erect scaffolding. Done on a weekend so as not to disrupt work, it was necessary to hire union carpenters and electricians at an overtime rate coming to \$9,000 in total cost.

In some cases, like a high ceiling lobby, one can use a scissor-lift. However, it is important to think through the relamping process. Will a machine big enough to do



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the job be able to fit through the lobby doors and in the elevator to get it from storage to the work area? Has storage space been provided?

To reduce maintenance challenges (and accordingly, reduce costs), it is important to have the right information. In many cases, this means consulting suppliers about the maintainability of their products. As previously noted, regarding plants, be sure to consult a knowledgeable horticulturist about the plant's preferred environment.

Don't Go It Alone

Perhaps one of the most important measures a hotelier can take is to consult with housekeeping and maintenance about design and materials choice. These are the people who will have to deal with the choices made by the designer, architect or landscape architect. They may be able to point out that a scissor-lift cannot climb stairs to a landing, so it may be best to choose reachable wall-mounted lights for a stairwell rather than ceiling fixtures.

For each element of a design, the building's management should ask, "How easy will it be to maintain?" Skylights may be easy to wash from the outside... but think long and hard about how the underside of the skylights will be cleaned.

The result of maintenance-smart design and materials decisions is a better-looking facility that, over time, also costs much less to maintain. Having this kind of cost advantage can free up cash to be used for other purposes, such as marketing and promotion. The result is a better overall operation, as well as a better environment for both guests and staff.

Carol E. Farren, CMC, CFM, IFMA Fellow and MBA, is president of Facility Management World Wide Ltd. in East Durham, NY, can be reached directly via e-mail at fmwww@earthlink.net.

About the author



Carol E. Farren, CMC, CFM, IFMA Fellow
President, Facility Management World Wide Ltd.

Carol Farren is the former director of facilities for AOL Time-Warner Inc. She has more than 30 years of experience in interior project management, has directed many high-profile design and relocation projects, and has led the customized teams on numerous facility and administration consulting projects.

Ms. Farren is the author of "Planning & Managing Interior Projects - Second Edition," a textbook / reference book. She is a respected instructor and speaker and a frequent contributor to professional publications.

She is past president of the Greater New York Chapter of the International Facility Management Association (IFMA). She is President Elect of the Facility Management Consultants Council of IFMA, a Certified Management Consultant (CMC), a Certified Facility Manager (CFM) and an IFMA Fellow. She is a graduate of Cornell University and holds an MBA from New York University's Stern School of Business.

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- Maximize employee productivity and acceptance of change;
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Administrative office
7080 Route 81
East Durham NY 12423-1159
Tel. 518-239-4467

New York City office
Tel. 212-888-2075

e-mail fmww@earthlink.net

Web: www.facilitymanagementconsulting.com