

Chain hotels lead the way in going green

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Chain hotels are doing a better job of going green than their independent competitors, according to a new analysis by Washington State University researchers.

The study, which started as an undergraduate honors project, found chain hotels are more likely to use energy efficient light bulbs; train staff to turn off lights, heaters and air conditioning in unoccupied rooms; buy in bulk to reduce packaging; use safer cleaners and chemicals; and give guests tips on how to save water and energy.

As a result, independent hotels may be losing a competitive advantage in drawing customers, says Dennis Reynolds, Ivar B. Haglund Endowed Chair in the WSU School of Hospitality Business Management.

"I don't know if independents are as aware of the importance of being green today," he says. "If you have two hotels in a city at the same room rates, but one is green, are you going to pick it because it's green? Is that important to you or not?"

"The preliminary research suggests that it is," he says. "I suspect a lot of independents haven't realized that yet in terms of the marketability, the importance, of attracting customers."

Hotels have the largest [environmental footprint](#) in the hospitality industry, using large amounts of water and cleaning chemicals and, unlike restaurants, keeping lights on through the night. But starting in the '90s, the concept of the "green hotel" began to spread through the

industry, encouraging practices that saved energy and water, managed waste and educated guests about ways to help the environment.

"It's a smart practice for hotels," says Reynolds. "When it started, no one acknowledged that. They said, 'This is a green practice. We're doing it for the environment.' That caught on very quickly because, yes, it's good for the environment but it's also good for the bottom line."

Some hotels found greener building designs alone could cut 30-50 percent of their energy costs, a savings that for a full-service hotel could equate to as much as \$6.75 on the daily room rate.

Similarly, a hotel can save on water and the energy to heat it by encouraging guests to reuse towels and leave a note to make beds without changing sheets. An added benefit is the hotel saves money on housekeeping.

But when it comes to adopting green practices, particularly the low-cost ones, the chains are doing a better job, says the study.

"The main thing we saw for chain hotels was energy management: More efficient lights, using natural lighting versus artificial lighting, energy efficient light bulbs," Reynolds says.

A chain's centralized management and economies of scale make that easier, he says, even if similar steps can save a single, independent hotel as much in percentage terms.

An independent hotel owner might look at a \$20 saving from energy efficient bulbs and say, "\$20, I don't know," says Reynolds. "But if you're in a corporate headquarters overseeing 1,000 hotels, that \$20 times 1,000 becomes a little more critical."

The study, which appears in the *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, began as the undergraduate honors thesis of co-author Stefani Svaren.

"For an undergraduate honors thesis, her effort was above and beyond," says Reynolds, who expanded on her effort with the help of Imran Rahman, a doctoral student in business administration with a concentration in hospitality business management.

In follow-up studies, Reynolds is looking at the more industrious environmental practices of hotels abroad.

"We're finding things in Asia where they're looking at [energy](#) management from hot water heaters to air conditioning units," he says. "They buy the more efficient unit up front.

"We've done the low-hanging fruit," he says. "Now what other practices could/should hotels adopt that will require an upfront investment but will have the return both financially and in terms of protecting the environment?"

Meanwhile, consumers can do their part by looking for greener hotels when they make reservations.

"That then supports the hotel's practices to be green and that spreads and becomes isomorphic - everything becomes the same," Reynolds says.

"We're seeing that in the chain restaurants and chain hotels.

"You start something, like family-style restaurants doing to-go orders," he says. "Applebee's started it and everyone else went, 'Ooh. That's a great idea.'"

Provided by Washington State University

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