

Title: Connaught wired for success
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The iconic Connaught Hotel in the heart of London's Mayfair district reopened to great acclaim. Eighteen months of hard work and loving restoration brought the 1897 building into the 21st century while retaining all of its original charm.

The hotel, which is owned by Maybourne Hotel Group, welcomed its guests back following the completion of the first of the building project's two phases, which covered the renovation of 90 of the original rooms. At the heart of the refurbishment was a complete overhaul of the building's infrastructure. Everything from the wiring to the plumbing was upgraded as part of the work to bring the hotel's services up to date.

A critical element of the project was the provision of state-of-the-art in-room entertainment and information services. Rather than simply replacing the existing coaxial analogue cabling that have traditionally been used to support cable television and computer networks, the Connaught moved to Cat 5e which enabled it to offer its guests television over Internet Protocol (IPTV) services for the first time.

Unlike older coaxial cables which only have a bandwidth of between 10 and 100 Mbps, Cat 5e is capable of very high signal intensity with transmission speeds of up to 1000 Mbps. With its greater bandwidth it allows converged networks, with multiple services including telecommunications, internet and digital television, to be run through one cable. Unlike a coaxial analogue network, which is physically limited by the total size of the transmission band,

Cat 5e enables a limitless number of TV and radio channels to be distributed over IPTV.

Having installed the necessary cabling infrastructure, the Connaught's owners were in a position to select the right provider for the IPTV services themselves. After evaluating a number of different IPTV products, the hotel chose VDA to deliver its interactive solution, PowerTV, to all the guest bedrooms.

VDA's PowerTV provides all guests staying in the hotel with a choice of 45 high-quality digital channels, more than 200 on-demand movies, internet radio and both terrestrial and digital radio channels all through the in-room television set.

Whereas a separate coax cable had previously been required for each television in the hotel, the new converged network made it easy to install additional TVs anywhere along the cable line - making it much cheaper to run and maintain than the old networks.

Ralf Balzer, Maybourne's Director of Information Technology, said: "By installing Cat 5e cables and using convergence technologies we can be much more flexible with our in-room services. Running multiple systems through one converged network saves a lot of time and money on maintenance and really improves the efficiency and consistency of the service guests receive."

In addition to the time and money saved on maintenance, the other great benefit of IPTV is the quality of service it delivers. As IPTV relies on digital transmissions via IP from a central server, it is not affected by electromagnetic interference - a common problem with traditional coaxial systems. As a result, the IPTV system offers perfect, consistent picture quality.

"Guests expect more from their in-room entertainment, especially in a hotel of the Connaught's quality, and a fuzzy picture and limited choice of channels is no longer acceptable. By moving away from traditional coaxial TV cables,

IPTV provides much greater choice, superior picture quality and the opportunity for the hotel to promote its services and enhance its brand,” says Gary Francies, Director of VDA.

“What attracted us to VDA was the flexibility of its product design, which is far superior to anything else on the market,” explains Balzer. “Most other providers have a very fixed menu structure, which would have restricted our ability to tailor services to suit our guests. In contrast, VDA’s Power TV menus are completely customisable so we can reflect the unique style and individuality of the Connaught Hotel in the design.”

Although choosing the solution was relatively straightforward, as with any major refurbishment project, the installation was no easy process. “The complete refurbishment of The Connaught meant the whole hotel was closed for six months and a lot of the work carried out by VDA had to be done in a building site. In order to get the hotel ready for a Christmas opening, we would sometimes call the engineers in at a day’s notice to install Power TV in individual rooms as they were finished by the builders,” said Balzer. “The VDA team really rose to the challenge. They were very helpful and considerate, and enabled us to achieve our goal. We would certainly work with them again.”

Following the successful roll out of Power TV in the original 70 bedrooms, and 20 suites in the first phase of work, it will be extended to the remaining rooms in the new, 30-room extension that form the second phase of the renovation. The entire hotel will be converted to IPTV in time for the scheduled completion of the project in June 2009.

Gary Francies, director at VDA, said: “It has been an honour to be involved in bringing such a historic building up to date. We are delighted with how the implementation of PowerTV has gone so far and are looking forward to the opportunity of working with the other prestigious hotels owned by Maybourne Hotel Group in the near future.”