

Omni Hotels Are Full of Guests After Owner Zaps In-Room Porn Movies

Robert B. Rowling flipped through the channels in a luxurious, squeaky-clean room at one of his hotels one night after he bought the Omni Hotel chain in 1996. Suddenly he was horrified at the pornographic films available on pay-for-view channels.

“I don’t want this in my hotels,” Rowling announced to his staff the next day.

Removing the movies wasn’t easy, however. The change cost him \$4 million, including lost revenue. Rowling had to switch movie-service providers and buy new televisions for every room—a total of 8,700 sets.

Because he inherited existing contracts from the previous owner, he had to wait until each service’s contract expired. He didn’t waver on his commitment to get the porn out, and on Nov. 5, 1999, he announced to the world the adult movies would no longer be available.

“I was uncomfortable with the content being shown in our hotels because it’s not compatible with my beliefs,” Rowling said.

Rowling, who gives very few interviews, is a “very moral Christian who made his money in oil and gas,” said Peter

Strebel, Omni vice president of marketing. Rowling, who lives in Dallas, has a law degree from Southern Methodist University.

Guests had the option of calling the front desk to get the movies blocked, but Rowling said people shouldn't have to be constantly on guard to protect their families. Since the porn movies were yanked, the 47-year-old Rowling has watched occupancy increase at the upscale hotels, with guests filling Omni rooms.

Strebel said it's difficult to determine whether the increased occupancy rate is because of removing the porn, or because of other innovative things the hotel chain is doing.

Rowling invested more than \$1 billion dollars in capital improvements after he purchased the hotels and made them into four-star, four-diamond, upscale properties with luxurious grounds. But just as sweeping were the family-friendly changes that came with Rowling's ownership. The new movie provider, LodgeNet, offers first-run, on-demand movies, Nintendo video games, digital free-to-guest TV and other interactive services.

"We've seen good success in the religious market since the decision [to unplug the porn] was made," said David Oelerich, director of sales and marketing at Omni Interlocken Resort in the Denver area.

"We're broadening our reach in existing markets because of it," Oelerich said. "The decision to drop the adult movies reached out across a broad market and spectrum."

When Betty Vickers booked a National School Conference Institute seminar for 80 school principals at the Interlocken, she didn't know Rowling was going to "clean house" and remove pornographic movies.

"This is a very nice hotel," said Vickers, surveying the grand lobby area of the Interlocken Resort, which rises from a lush green valley at the hem of the glacier-topped Rocky Mountains. "It's a wonderful thing [that they've taken out the X-rated movies]. It adds to the attraction. Teachers, you would hope, don't sit around looking at that type of movie."

By the end of July, Strebel said Omni received 70,000 letters thanking the privately held company for making the bold step to not only remove X-rated films, but also for removing pornographic magazines from its gift shops—which Rowling did when he first purchased the hotels. The company has received 10,000 e-mails in support of the decision.

"The majority of responses were from women," Strebel told Charisma, noting more and more women are among business travelers. "The common thread from men was, 'Thank you for removing the temptation.' We've only had five total negative responses."

Many in the hotel industry said Rowling took a big risk in removing the movies because they are big money makers for hotels.

"We've had our best year as far as business goes," Strebel said. "It says to me that overwhelmingly Americans believe in pro-family values."

Seventy radio stations interviewed Strebel about Rowling's bold decision, and almost every large-circulation newspaper has written a story about it. The increased ink brought Omni Hotels to the attention of millions of Americans.

"We didn't remove the adult movies to capitalize on it [get the publicity]," Strebel said. "We did it because it was the right thing to do," he added, which is how Rowling describes his decision.

—Ada Nicholson Brownell