

Opinions

Keep an eye on where privacy discussions are headed

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Just look to the EU's GDPR and the recent Facebook scandal to get an idea where privacy rights and regulations could go and what that could mean for the U.S. hotel industry.



By **Bryan Wroten**
bwroten@hotelnewsnow.com
@HNN_Bryan

After a decade or so of constant oversharing, a fair amount of people now seem to care about their privacy. The government, surprisingly, appears to care as well.

You've likely read online (possibly by someone who shared it on Facebook) about Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg's more than 10 hours in front of members of Congress, answering their questions about his company and social media network, how Cambridge Analytica was able to scrape the data of 87 million Facebook users and possible regulation to catch up with how fast technology has advanced.

It's kind of a hot mess, and it's one you definitely need to watch. This social media scandal is coming just before the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation goes into effect 25 May. In writing about [how U.S. hoteliers are preparing for this regulation](#) that is not geographically bound to just the EU, I spoke with a hotel GM about how her property is getting ready.

Kim Rittenberry, GM of the SoBro Guest House in Nashville, said her GDPR preparations will be for all guests, not just those who booked their stay while in the EU, because she doesn't see how she can have one set of terms and conditions for one group of guests and a different set of terms and conditions for another. I don't think her hotel is the only one handling it this way. That's one EU regulation that will affect millions of domestic travelers in the U.S.

This is the first time in a long time that I've seen a serious and sustained nationwide discussion on privacy. The last time we had anything like this was after Congress passed the USA Patriot Act in 2001.

It's hard to say where Congress or state governments will go on this (and how far), but the discussion is happening and the hotel industry should take notice. Building guest profiles that follows guests from property to property built on data collected through guest visits, social media, surveys, etc., is something the hotel industry has been talking about quite a bit over the years, especially since the hotel industry has increasingly become more interested in the capabilities of artificial intelligence.

It might look something like the GDPR, or it could be something completely different. It could be nothing at all. It's difficult to say at this point in time, but you don't want to be caught unaware.

Be mindful of how (and why) you collect your guests' data. Yes, you can argue that your guests are willingly sharing their information with you when they stay at your properties, sign up for your rewards programs and engage with you on social media. People consented to share their data with Facebook, but I don't think many people fully understood the meaning and scope of that.

Facebook started when I was in college. At the student newspaper there, we wrote about how college students needed to be aware that when they posted pictures of themselves drinking and partying, they could get in trouble with their resident assistants if they were underage and drinking in the dorms. We also wrote about the dangers of oversharing those same kinds of pictures because prospective employers were becoming savvier with social media and wanted to research applicants.

We've come a long way since then, but we also haven't. People still share things online that they shouldn't, and while that's not necessarily the fault of whichever social medium they post to, I think most people don't realize how much of their personal data gets shared by social media companies in other ways and how lax security can be, even at a tech company.

My point is, your guests are willingly sharing their information with you. They're placing their trust in you, so handle it responsibly. Yes, more data potentially means more money for you, but that doesn't mean chase every opportunity that opens up because it could bring in more profit. Take precaution with it. You don't want to see representatives of the hotel industry answering questions before a congressional committee about how it was careless with guests' private information.

Do you think the GDPR and Facebook scandal could have further reaching effects regarding privacy laws and regulations on handling personal information? What would you like to see, if anything? Leave a comment below or reach out to me at bwroten@hotelnewsnow.com and [@HNN_Bryan](https://twitter.com/HNN_Bryan).

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