

1. Front Office – Introduction

Every multi-departmental physical business needs to have a front office or reception to receive the visitors. Front Office Department is the face and as well as the voice of a business. Regardless of the star rating of the hotel or the hotel type, the hotel has a front office as its most visible department. For a business such as hospitality, the front office department comes with an aspect of elevating customer experience with the business.

Front Office department is a common link between the customers and the business. Let us learn more about it.

What is Front Office Department?

It is the one of the many departments of the hotel business which directly interacts with the customers when they first arrive at the hotel. The staff of this department is very visible to the guests.

Front office staff handles the transactions between the hotel and its guests. The staff receives the guests, handles their requests, and strikes the first impression about the hotel into their minds.



Front office department includes:

- Front Desk
- Uniformed services
- Concierges
- Front Office Accounting System
- Private Branch Exchange (PBX), a private telephone network used within an organization

Basic Responsibilities of Front Office Department

Following are the most basic responsibilities a front office can handle.

- Creating guest database
- Handling guest accounts
- Coordinating guest service
- Trying to sell a service
- Ensuring guest satisfaction
- Handling in-house communication through PBX

Front Office Operations

There are two categories of Front Office Operations:

Front-House Operations

These operations are visible to the guests of the hotel. The guests can interact and see these operations, hence, the name Front-House operations. Few of these operations include:

- Interacting with the guests to handle request for an accommodation.
- Checking accommodation availability and assigning it to the guest.
- Collecting detail information while guest registration.
- Creating a guest's account with the FO accounting system.
- Issuing accommodation keys to the guest.
- Settling guest payment at the time of check-out.

Back-House Operations

Front Office staff conducts these operations in the absence of the guests or when the guest's involvement is not required. These operations involve activities such as:

- Determining the type of guest (fresh/repeat) by checking the database.
- Ensuring preferences of the guest to give a personal touch to the service.
- Maintaining guest's account with the accounting system.

- Preparing the guest's bill.
- Collecting the balance amount of guest bills.
- Generating reports.

Guest Cycle in Hotel

Generally, a guest's interaction with the hotel is divided into the following four sequential phases:

Pre-arrival

It is the stage when the customer is planning to avail an accommodation in the hotel. In this first stage, the customer or the prospective guest enquires about the availability of the desired type of accommodation and its amenities via telephonic call or an e-mail. The customer also tries to find out more information about the hotel by visiting its website.

At the hotel end, the front office accounting system captures the guest's information such as name, age, contact numbers, probable duration of stay for room reservation and so on.

Arrival

The front office reception staff receives the guest in the reception. The porters bring in the guest luggage. For the guest with confirmed reservation, the front office clerk hands over a Guest Registration Card (GRC) to the guest and requests the guest to fill in personal information regarding the stay in the hotel. The clerk then registers the guest in the database thereby creating a guest record and a guest account along with it. Later, the clerk hands over a welcome kit and keys of the accommodation. After the procedure of registration, the guest can start occupying the accommodation.

Occupancy

During occupancy, a front office accounting system is responsible for tracking guest charges against his/her purchases from the hotel restaurants, room service, bar, or any outgoing telephone calls made via the hotel's communication systems. The front office staff is responsible to manage and issue the right keys of the accommodations to the right guests. On guests' request, the staff also makes arrangement for transportation, babysitting, or local touring while the guest is staying in the hotel.

Departure

During guest departure, the front office accounting system ensures payment for goods and services provided. If a guest's bill is not completely paid, the balance is transferred from guest to non-guest records. When this occurs, collection becomes the responsibility of the back office accounting division.

At the time of guest departure, the front office staff thanks the guest for giving an opportunity to serve and arrange for handling luggage. In addition, if the guest requires airport or other drop service, the front office bell desk fulfils it.

2. Front Office – Terminology

Following are some common terms used in relation to the front office department:

Term	Meaning
Account receivables	The amount of money an organization has the right to receive within some specified period (say 30 days) against the delivery of products/services.
Bell desk	An extension of front desk that deals with personalized guest services.
Cancellation charges	They are the charges borne by the guest on cancellation of a confirmed reservation or for not showing-up on confirmed reservation.
Concierge	Information desk that assists guests for transportation, booking of events outside the hotel.
GRC	Guest Registration Card, which the guest needs to fill in with personal formation at the time of registration.
Guest	Customer of the hotel business being served.
IP-PBX	Internet Protocol Private Branch Exchange, where internet protocol is used for call transmission.
MICE	Acronym for Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions.
Non-guest	Customer of a hotel business not being served at the moment.
No-show	A guest who has reserved an accommodation neither turns up nor cancels it.
OHMS	Online Hotel Management System, a software system to manage all back-office operations of a hotel.
PBX	Private Branch Exchange, a private network of telephones within an organization.

Front Office Management

POS	Acronym for Point of Sale. It is the revenue generating place in the hotel where retail transactions are carried out.
Rack rate	The price at which the hotel rooms are sold before applying discount.
SMERF	Acronym for Social, Military, Educational, Religious, and Fraternal.
Trial balance	It is a report of accounts that represents ending balance of each account in the list. It is prepared at the end of an accounting period.
Uniformed services	Personalized services provided to the guests.
Valet	A male attendant to park and clean the car.
Whitney System	An old reservation system for hotel accommodations.
Yield Management	A variable pricing strategy, based on understanding, anticipating and influencing consumer behavior in order to maximize revenue from a fixed, perishable resource.

3. Front Office – Structure

Front office area is commonly termed as 'Reception', as it is the place where the guests are received when they arrive at the hotel. It is the first point of interaction between the hotel and the guests. Being the prime interface between the hotel services and the guests, the front office is located near the main entrance of the hotel.

The front office structure can be viewed in two ways: the physical setup and the operational structure of the department.

Physical Setup of Front Office

The physical setup includes key-hanging boards, bell desk and guest-mail handling register. The front desk is equipped with various compartments, the computerized property management system, and an in-house communication system.

Positioning the Front Desk

The front desk is where the guests temporarily await to find an accommodation or to clear their bill. Hence, it needs to be positioned appropriately such that the staff and the guests can use them conveniently. The front desk needs to be:

- Positioned at an adequate height and reach.
- An adequately lit-up area.
- Aesthetically furnished.
- Preferably near the hotel lobby and lift.
- Preferably near the sitting area.
- Wide enough to make the staff member communicate with the guests across the desk.

Front Office Communication

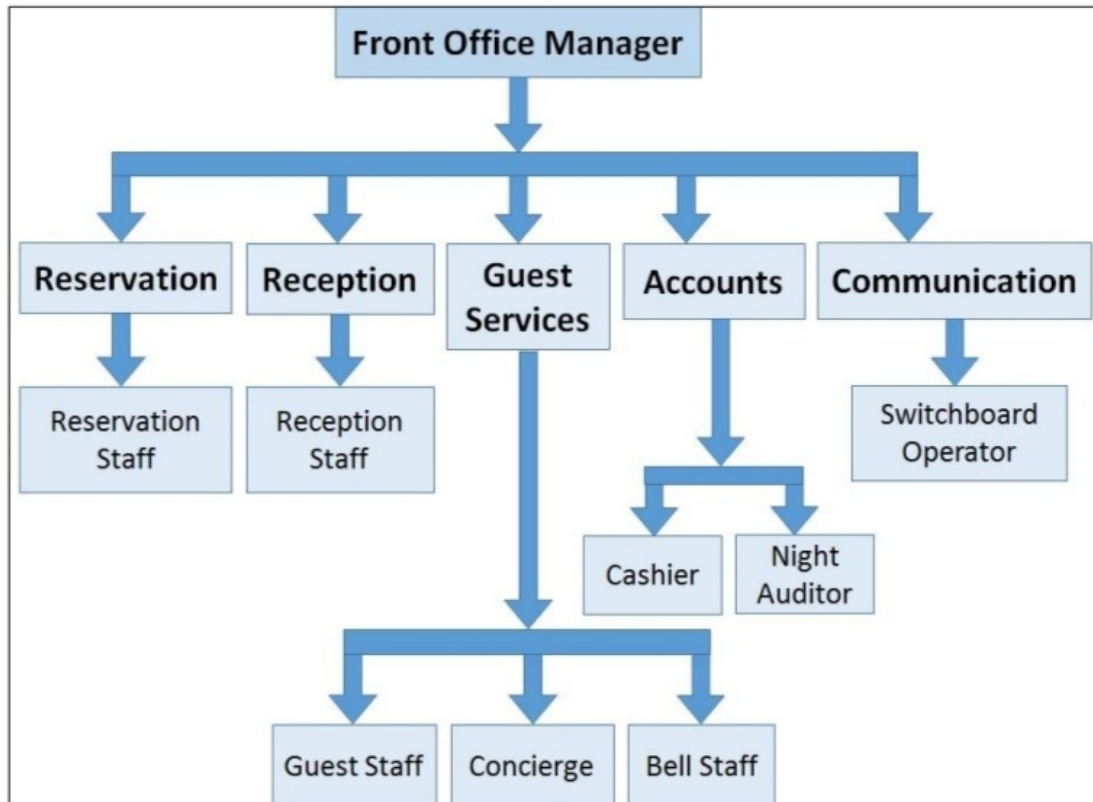
The front office staff needs to communicate with the staff of the same as well as all other departments of the hotel. This is termed as **internal** communication. It mostly relies upon the PBX or IP-PBX system.

When the front office communicates with the potential customers outside the hotel, corporate offices, and other ancillary service providers, then it is an **external** communication.

Any formal communication outside the hotel is mostly carried out using e-mails and phone calls. For sending coupons or other promotional material, renewing agreements with travel agents or airlines, the front office staff may opt for postal mail.

Operational Structure of Front Office

There are lot of staff working under front office manager. The structure of the front office department changes according to the size of the hotel business, physical size of the hotel, and the hotel management policies. Following is the general structure of the front office department:



Hotel Front Office Sections

Front office department manager heads the team of staff working on various activities and responsibilities in the front office department. Few prominent activities that the front office staff is involved in are:

- **Reservation:** It includes handling request of customers for reserving accommodations.
- **Reception:** It includes receiving the guests according to the highest standards and registering them appropriately. It also includes bidding the guests off.
- **Guest Services:** They are also known as Uniformed Services. It includes personalized guest services such as:
 - Handling guest luggage.

- Handling guest mail.
 - Delivering newspapers in accommodations.
 - Paging the guest inside the hotel (locating the guest in the hotel).
 - Arranging for a doctor in emergency.
 - Parking guest's automobiles.
 - Arranging for reservations at the places of entertainment outside the hotel.
- **Accounts:** It mainly includes a front office cashier and a Night Auditor. The cashier is responsible for handling guest payments. He typically reports to the accounts manager rather than the front office manager.

The night auditor performs the duties of front desk reception as well as accounting partly during the night shift. He needs to report to the heads of both departments, front office, and accounting.

- **Communication:** It involves handling communication among various other departments and guests of the hotel.