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## Marriott Hotels Ban Smoking In Rooms

By [Michael S. Rosenwald](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer  
Thursday, July 20, 2006; Page A01

[Marriott International Inc.](#), the nation's largest hotel chain, said yesterday that it will ban smoking in its nearly 400,000 hotel rooms in the United States and Canada, casting the decision as less about public health and more about taking care of the bottom line.

Two decades ago, about half the company's rooms were set aside for smokers, but demand has steadily dropped, with only 5 percent of customers now requesting smoking rooms. At the same time, complaints about cigarette odor have increased, and company officials have struggled to address the issue.

Marriott, which will enforce its ban by charging violators \$200 to \$300, follows that of the Westin Hotels & Resorts chain, which late last year announced it was making all 77 of its properties smoke-free. Since then, business has grown stronger, said Sue Brush, a senior vice president with Westin, which is owned by [Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide Inc.](#)

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Marriott International Inc. said the decision was about

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David Webb of Huntsville, Tex., was smoking yesterday outside of a Ritz-Carlton in the District, where he was staying. He said he requests nonsmoking rooms because he "cannot stand the smell of old smoke in rooms." He smokes outside, and said a smoke-free environment was an incentive to stay at a Marriott property.

Airlines banned smoking on their flights only after the federal government passed a law requiring such bans in the 1990s. Restaurants and bars are increasingly becoming smoke-free zones, now that more than 2,200 municipalities have smoking restrictions. Marriott executives said there was no government involvement in their decision to end smoking throughout their more than 2,300 hotels.

The Bethesda firm, which had been reserving 10 percent of its rooms for smokers, said the decision was most closely tied to guest satisfaction.

"Complaints about smoking is one of the biggest complaints we have," said Steve Lampa, the company's senior vice president of rooms operations and quality assurance. "Clearly there will be some guests who smoke that won't agree with this decision and may decide to move elsewhere. We don't think there will be a negative financial impact."

Marriott executives considered Westin's positive experience with its ban when making their decision, the company said. Executives also said they were influenced by the reported dangers of secondhand smoke, including a recent surgeon general's report on the subject.

Several industry observers think there is a good chance other major hotel chains will follow Marriott's move. About 21 percent of the U.S. population

the bottom line. (Pr Newswire)

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smokes.

"This tips the hotel industry so now virtually every hotel will have to go nonsmoking," said Edward Watkins, editor of Lodging Hospitality, a leading trade publication. "Marriott is the leader of the pack. Once they do it, every company will have to do that. They just have so many hotels. It's a matter of competitive pressure."

Public health and anti-smoking advocates cheered the move as a key victory in their attempts to eliminate exposure to secondhand smoke.

Frances Stillman, co-director of the Institute for Global Tobacco Control at Johns Hopkins University, said Marriott's decision was particularly important for public health advocates' efforts to shake off arguments by the tobacco industry that smoking bans are bad for business.

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"This decision is proving that it doesn't hurt business to ban smoking," said Stillman, who is on the faculty of the university's Bloomberg School of Public Health. "Finally, the economic argument and the public health argument are coming together. Companies are realizing that public health is good for business."

Smoking-rights advocates were not pleased.

"We believe it is discrimination, and we are not going to recommend to our members that they stay at a Marriott-branded hotel," said Thomas Briant, executive director of the National Association of Tobacco Outlets, which represents tobacco manufacturers, distributors and retail outlets.

Several dozen hotels, mostly boutiques, followed Westin and banned smoking last year. So did individual owners of about 50

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Marriott International Inc. said the decision was about the bottom line. (Pr Newswire)

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Marriott-branded hotels, factoring into Marriott's sweeping ban.

Executives at the company had been trying to solve smoking complaints for the past couple of years, according to Lampa. The company tried more frequent cleanings. They tried high-tech air-treatment machines, air deodorants and further segmenting the smoking rooms.

"None of which was 100 percent effective," Lampa said. "It's been pretty frustrating. We thought we could crack this nut."

Ultimately, Marriott executives concluded that the only way to eliminate the problem was to eliminate smoking.

"I think this is an appropriate response, and it clearly shows leadership on the part of the company," said Thomas J. Baltimore, the president of Bethesda's RLJ Development LLC, one of the largest franchisees of Marriott hotels. "I think from a customer perspective, it will be widely well received, and I would think it would have minimal impact on demand for them."

Marriott said the ban will begin in September, after the company cleans the smoking rooms. Guests will be informed of the policy -- and potential penalty fee -- during check-in. The ban does not extend to Marriott's approximately 500 other properties outside the United States and Canada.

"I don't know how it will affect Marriott's business," said Steve Morrison of Wheeling, W.Va., who was staying at a Marriott in the District. "It makes me want to stay there more."

*Staff writer Annys Shin contributed to this report.*

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