


FROM FRAGMENT -ATION TO FLOW ▶▶▶

How US hotels can turn payments
from **problem to performance**




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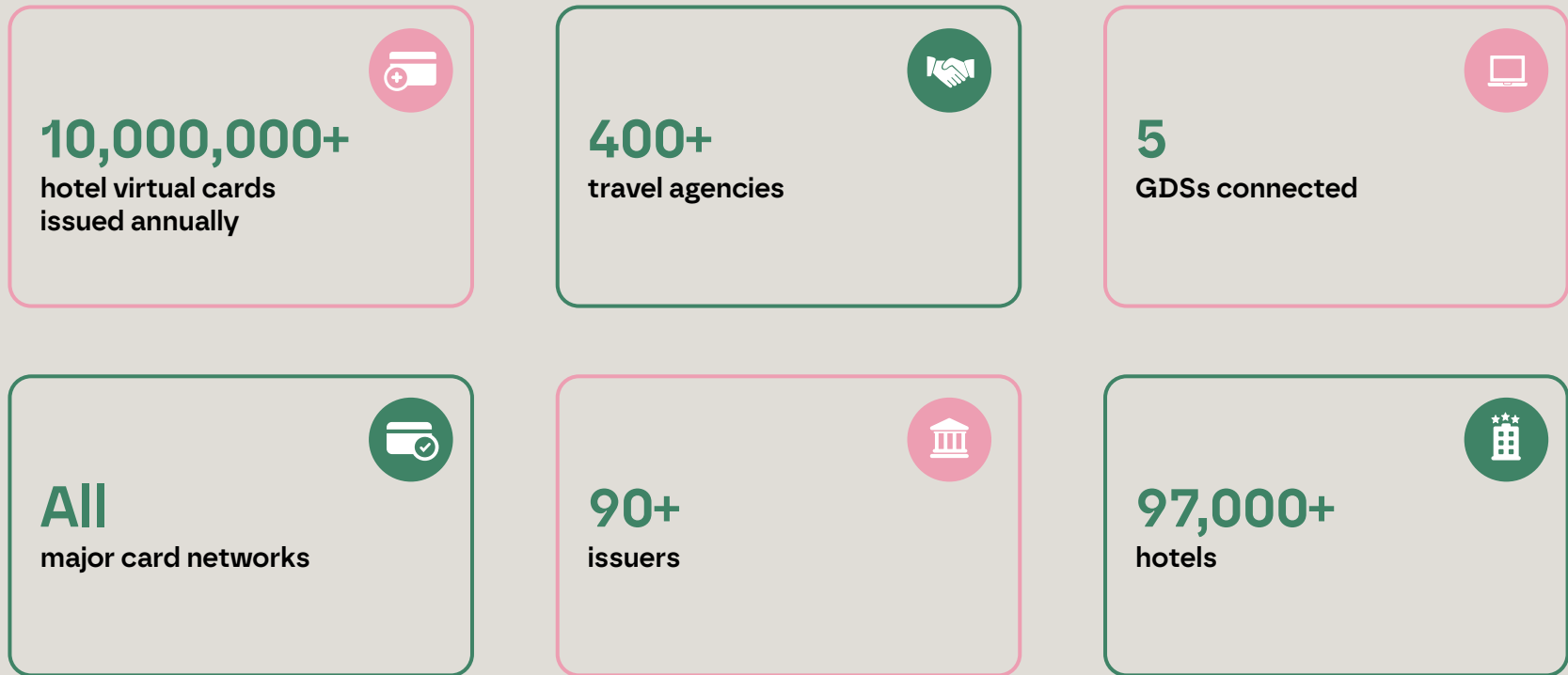
How US hotels can turn payments from problem to performance

Payments, especially corporate virtual card payments, sit where brand promise meets the front desk. Fragmented execution turns that moment into friction, breaking flow at check-in and pushing corporate buyers towards hotels that get it right.

This report shows where payment performance breaks, and what it takes to move from fragmentation to flow, so performance is consistent across every property.



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Overview

From fragmentation to flow

Payments should be the quietest part of a hotel stay. Invisible for travelers. Effortless for properties. Reliable for finance teams.

Across much of the US market, they're not. Fragmented virtual card payment processes turn a routine moment into friction at check-in, putting guests in the middle of internal complexity and undermining confidence at the front desk. The traveler feels it immediately. Corporate buyers respond soon after.

That's why we did this research.

We spoke directly to the industry: 10 in depth interviews with US hotel leaders and a pointed survey of 50 hotel stakeholders involved in virtual card payment acceptance. What came through was strikingly consistent.

60%

of US hotel respondents report inconsistencies in virtual card processing at property level.

- ▶ **Virtual cards are well understood.** 100% of respondents are familiar with them.
- ▶ **The appetite is there.** 90% say they're ready to invest more.
- ▶ **Execution is inconsistent.** Day-to-day operations still wobble; driven by training gaps (30%), reconciliation issues (14%), high front-desk turnover, and policies interpreted differently from property to property.

Fragmented payment processes surface at the worst possible moment: check-in

What looks aligned on paper breaks down at the front desk, forcing teams into reactive problem-solving. And when virtual card payments don't flow cleanly through the PMS, hotels lose trust, confidence, and ultimately share of corporate programs.

The takeaway is simple. Fragmentation creates risk. Flow creates performance. Reliable outcomes depend on consistent execution, especially at property level.

Hotels that move from fragmented processes to repeatable performance rely on strong PMS connectivity. Teams and partners stay aligned, payment logic is embedded upstream, and there's no room for interpretation at the front desk.

This report examines where payment performance breaks and what it takes to move from acceptance to reliability. So hotels can protect corporate revenue and turn payments into a commercial advantage.

The fragmentation effect

Fragmentation: when every property plays by different rules

In the US, fragmentation shows up most clearly in how virtual card payments are handled from booking to check-in. Only **40% of respondents said virtual card acceptance is consistent across properties**, which means for **60% variability is the norm**, not the exception.

In real life,
that looks
like this...



Guests never quite knowing what to expect at check in.



Travel managers losing confidence in specific properties.



Corporate buyers quietly steering volume toward partners who “just get it right” every time.

One buyer described the pattern as “**seamless until it isn’t**”. Another reported “three queries a week” linked to hotel-level confusion. That might not sound huge on paper, but **when it fails, it fails loudly**: 11pm calls to travelers, front desk escalations, personal cards requested at check-in. And because two properties under the same brand can handle the same booking in completely different ways, it’s difficult for travel managers to anticipate where friction will appear.

Buyer perspective

“It doesn’t really matter what the brand says — it comes down to the individual on reception.”



The data backs this up...

30%

of respondents identify training gaps as a barrier to smoother adoption.

66%

rate the impact of staff training issues as moderate-to-high.

A further

14%

explicitly call out reconciliation issues.

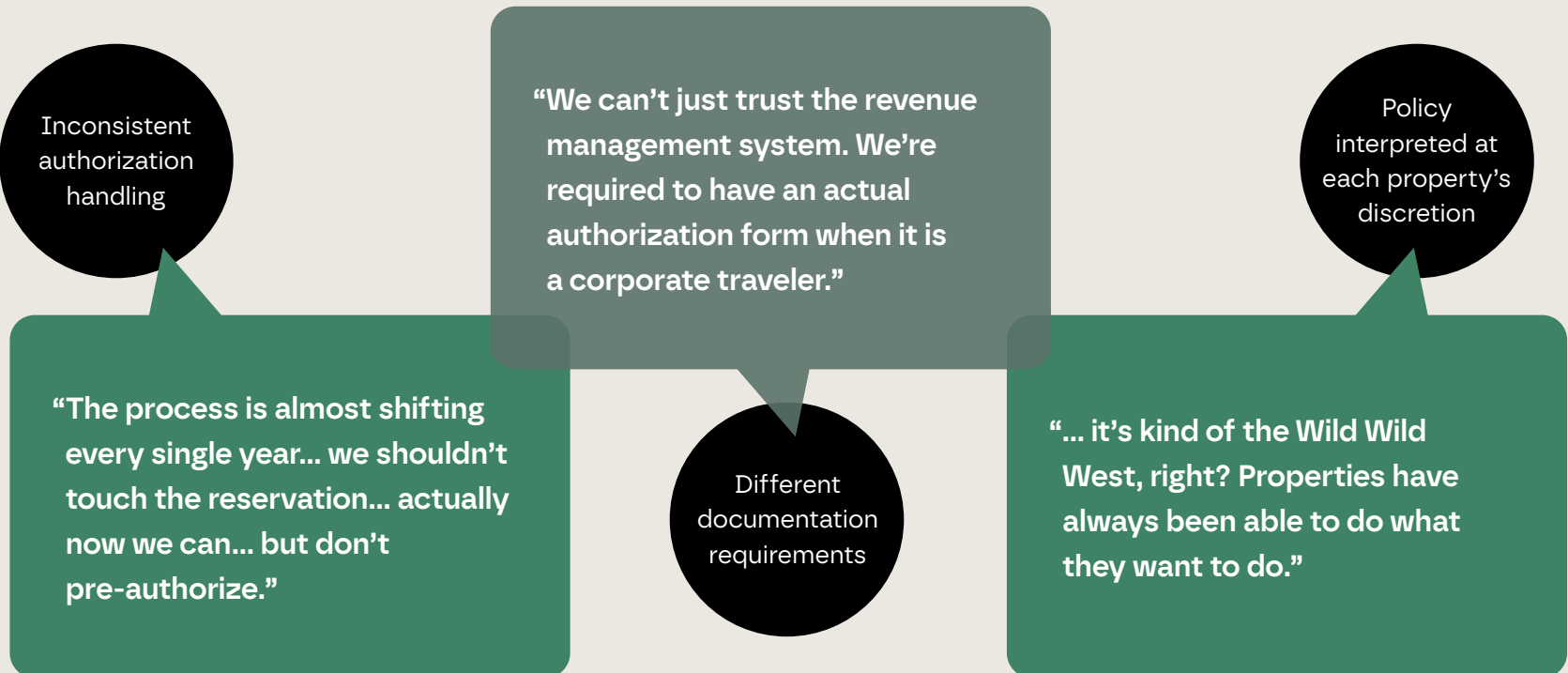
These aren't isolated one-offs.

They're symptoms of the same underlying problem: inconsistency in how policies are understood and applied at property level.

High front-desk turnover means even well-designed processes fade fast. **As one hotel sales leader put it...**

“Buyer frustration often falls squarely at the property level. Hoteliers need to do more training.”

Even when brand-level guidance is clear, virtual card payment acceptance doesn't always land consistently at property level. That's because authorization isn't owned by one team or system. It sits across booking partners, payment technology, brand standards, and front-desk execution. When those parts fall out of step, variability shows up in familiar ways:



This is what fragmentation
looks like in practice

Bottom line — brand-level agreements don't
always translate into front-desk behavior.

This fragmentation erodes confidence for everyone:
the guest at check-in, the travel manager tracking
compliance, and the hotel brand trying to grow
managed corporate volume.

**If 60% of hoteliers experience
inconsistency, it isn't noise in
the system.**

It is the system.

Where fragmentation starts

Why payment flow depends on more than one player

Virtual cards are widely used in corporate travel — yet payment reliability still varies from property to property. Not because hotels don't accept virtual cards, and not because the technology doesn't exist. But because hotel payment flows aren't owned by a single player.

For a virtual card payment to flow smoothly, three parts of the ecosystem need to move in step.



The agency or booking platform must create reservations with clear, accurate payment instructions — and manage changes, cancellations, and card life cycles consistently.

1



The payment technology provider must deliver complete, structured payment data reliably into hotel systems, without introducing ambiguity or manual handling.

2

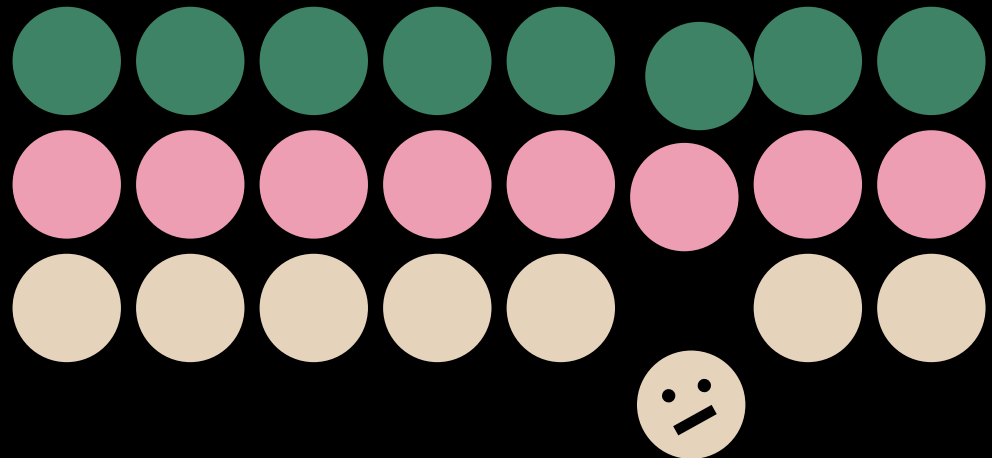


The hotel must be equipped to receive, manage, and process virtual card payments confidently at property level.

3

When all three align, payment becomes predictable over time. When one falls out of step, friction appears — often at the front desk, and often at the worst possible moment.

That's why payment issues persist even in organizations that have invested in modern tools and integrations. Acceptance isn't a single decision or system. It's the result of coordination across the entire flow. Only when that coordination holds consistently does acceptance turn into reliable performance.



The guest experience blind spot

Virtual card payment only matters when it breaks

In hospitality, the front desk sets the tone for everything that follows. It's also the place where payment friction shows up the loudest — and where travelers remember it. On paper, confidence looks high...

86%

of respondents say their teams are comfortable handling virtual cards.

But the interviews tell a different story.

One hotelier called payments “**a net neutral**” in the guest journey: “**When it works, nobody notices. When it fails, it dominates the stay.**” Success is silent. Failure isn't.

And that gap between confidence and reality is wide. Some properties still see virtual cards as operationally inconsistent, or risky. Others simply don't have clear, consistent processes.

As one interviewee put it:

“The moment it gets to the front desk, it breaks.”

The knowledge exists somewhere in the building — it just doesn't always make it to the night shift. By the time a payment issue reaches the front desk, the break often happened much earlier in the pay, report, and reconcile flow.

Fraud fears add more pressure. Chargebacks, card-not-present scenarios, PCI compliance... Many front desk teams still believe, **“If we don’t see the plastic, we carry the liability.”** That perception is understandable — but often wrong. In many cases, virtual cards are more secure than emailed forms or faxed card copies. Yet hotels are still training staff on playbooks built for an era of physical cards.

Digital wallets and embedded payments have transformed consumer travel, but the corporate stay hasn’t fully caught up. As one payments leader told us:

The result? A structural mismatch at the exact moment where guest confidence is most on the line. Corporate travel managers want control and security. Hotels want certainty and simplicity. Those needs aren’t in conflict — but when alignment breaks, the guest feels it first. Behind the scenes, these moments create a trail of follow-up work for hotel teams, TMCs and buyers — hours of effort for an issue the traveler never expected to face.

“The industry has spent years trying to keep bots and fraud out, only to be asked to let automation back in.”



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Why fragmentation persists

Familiarity is not flow

Across the US market, awareness of virtual cards is universal. 100% of respondents say they're familiar with the technology — and brand-level ambition reflects that confidence. One global payments leader described digital transformation as laying “**the groundwork for future payment enhancements**”, with virtual cards clearly positioned as part of that future.

But at property level, reality still lags behind readiness. Familiarity with virtual cards doesn't guarantee capability across pay, report, and reconcile, especially when ownership is split across teams and virtual card payment processes differ across properties.

Knowing what should happen isn't the same as being able to make it happen, consistently, at scale.

“At best today, there is still manual processing required — here's the booking, here's the payment, here are the instructions — and that's different guest to guest.”

“It's very hard to train for something so inconsistent.”

Consistency is a challenge.

When every stay requires a different set of steps, even well-trained teams struggle to deliver a consistent check-in experience. What's often harder is pinpointing exactly where this inconsistency creeps in, especially when the booking journey spans multiple teams, systems, and handoffs.

When responsibility is shared across multiple teams and partners, gaps in execution can be hard to spot — even when everyone believes they're doing the right thing.

Even brands investing in APIs and direct connects acknowledge the human gap.

As one buyer put it:

“There are people who understand it fully during the RFP, but they're not the same people who can make it go right or wrong when my traveler checks in.”

The corporate team may understand the logic, but it's the front desk that brings it to life. And today, that handoff breaks too often.

Technology has modernized; automation is accelerating; digital wallets have become normal. But property level capability hasn't kept pace.

The market knows virtual cards. It just can't **operationalize** them.

Yet.

This gap is where the real opportunity lies.

But closing that gap requires more than delivery success. It requires visibility into how consistently payments are actually processed across properties.

Without that visibility, reliability remains anecdotal. It's felt at the front desk, but impossible to manage across a portfolio.

“We can rely on the operations team to know how to do it manually. That's not something you can run enterprise-wide.”

The power of partnership

Why partnership determines performance

90%

of respondents say they're likely to invest further in virtual payment solutions.

The appetite is there. The intent is there. But appetite doesn't drive scale — alignment does. When technology is no longer the limiting factor, coordination becomes the real battleground.

One brand sales leader captured it perfectly...

“We're the orchestra leader that can't play any of the instruments.”

They know where the market needs to go, but they can't get there unless IT, operations, finance, and payment partners move in step.

And right now, they don't always travel at the same speed.

As payment acceptance depends on coordination across agencies, technology providers, and hotels, progress only accelerates when those parts move together.

The next leap forward for the industry will come from giving every part of that ecosystem a clearer, shared sense of what “good” payment execution looks like.

Buyer perspective

“It’s not good enough just to send guidance to one individual, they need strong, robust process to relay it to front desk, accounting, and operations.”



Budget and resource constraints deepen the challenge. One leader described how a promising partnership stalled simply because “the money and the support to build it out” weren’t there. Priorities shifted. Momentum faded.

Meanwhile, properties are juggling the operational reality: hundreds of same-day bookings, manual virtual card collection, and pressure to keep lines moving.

And yet the research shows something important:

When the ecosystem holds, results follow.

A global leader described a payments partnership that was “very well received in the market.” Customers noticed. Spend increased. The win came from commercial teams, operational teams, and payment partners working together. Alignment did the heavy lifting.

The challenge is that this kind of alignment is often hard to spot until something breaks. When reliability can’t be seen, it can’t be managed — and teams are left reacting instead of improving.

That’s the real power of partnership. Deliberate alignment across the entire payment journey that accelerates adoption.

Lessons from leaders

What leading hotels do differently

The market doesn't need more awareness. Everyone already knows virtual cards. What's missing is alignment. And the interviews make it clear what alignment looks like when it works. One global commercial leader described a recent payments partnership as a **"great step in the right direction of removing friction."**

The goal wasn't new technology. It was removing friction from the technology they already had, starting with stronger PMS connectivity. **Customers noticed. Spend shifted. Confidence followed.**

What sets these organizations apart is not a single system or policy, but how consistently they align teams, partners, and processes around a shared way of working — clarity facilitated the execution.

A buyer echoed the same point:

"I've seen a major chain prove it can work check-in, key, checkout payment, all on the cell phone, no desk interaction — it can work."

When brand, property, and TMC teams communicate clearly and embed payment flows into existing systems, adoption follows naturally. When payments are bolted on, inconsistency spreads quickly, especially at the front desk.

Every interview reinforced the same pattern. Hotels already manage far more complex processes, such as OTA bookings with 20-30% commissions, without hesitation. Yet corporate virtual card payments, which are more secure, lower cost, and policy controlled, still meet resistance when PMS connectivity is weak or unclear.

A luxury sales leader put it plainly:

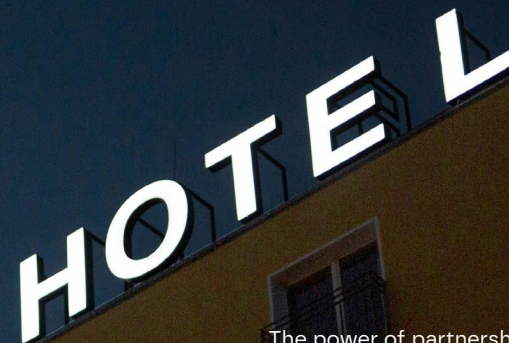
**“Not all third parties
are the same.”**

Standardization is key

For some travelers, virtual cards are not a convenience. They are essential, because they do not carry personal payment methods. When the process breaks at check-in, guests are exposed. When it works, friction disappears.

Leaders who standardize processes, define clear charge rules, and rely on connected PMS workflows see the biggest gains. Communication improves. Reconciliation is automated. Variability drops. Confidence rises.

**Familiarity doesn't change behavior.
Standardization does.**



HOTEL

The four behaviors of high-performing hotels

Hotels that deliver consistently smooth virtual card stays share four behaviors visible across interviews...

1

Standardize relentlessly.

High performers remove interpretation. Authorization rules, documentation requirements, and charge logic are consistent everywhere — not rewritten at each property.

2

Communicate across the chain.

These hotels don't rely on sending guidance to one person. They build processes that reliably reach front desk, accounting, operations, and partners.

3

Embed the payment flow.

Instead of bolting instructions on after the booking, they let payment logic move upstream. That eliminates manual touchpoints and keeps experiences consistent property to property.

4

Treat virtual card payment as part of the guest experience.

They hold virtual cards to the same operational standard they apply to OTA bookings and prepaid vouchers — channels they already process seamlessly.

From fragmentation to flow: what it takes

The US market is ready. Awareness is high, traveler demand is strong, and most hotels plan to increase their use of virtual payments. Direction of travel isn't the challenge.

Reliability is. Especially at scale.

Across the industry, ambition is running ahead of operations. Teams understand the value of virtual cards, but too often that value breaks down between brand standards, property workflows, and finance controls. Familiarity exists. Confidence, and crucially, consistent outcomes across properties do not.


What we heard consistently from hotel leaders is simple: progress isn't waiting for new payment tools — it's building better coordination. In this

context, performance doesn't mean innovation for its own sake. It means reliability: payments that work the same way at every property, every night, without escalation. And where that reliability can be seen, not assumed.

The proof already exists in hotels that have made it work. Where authorization rules are clear and consistent, where payment logic is set early in the booking journey, and where front desks and finance teams follow the same playbook, friction drops quickly. Manual work reduces. Errors fall. Disputes decline. And the guest experience remains smooth and invisible: the clearest sign that payment performance is holding consistently.

Reaching that point doesn't require transformation programs or new layers of complexity. It requires deliberate alignment across everyday hotel operations:

- ✓ **Clear authorization standards**, applied consistently across every property.
- ✓ **Defined ownership** across brand, property, and finance, so decisions made centrally are executable locally.
- ✓ **Payment logic embedded in booking flows**, not handled through exceptions and post-booking instructions.
- ✓ **Reconciliation built in by design**, rather than fixed at month end.



When these elements move together, virtual cards stop feeling like an operational burden and start behaving like dependable infrastructure: stable, repeatable, and scalable across the portfolio. At scale, this is what allows virtual card payments to move quietly through the stay, instead of surfacing as questions, delays, or exceptions at check-in.

Hotels no longer need convincing that virtual cards can work. What's missing is proof that they're working consistently, across every property, not just in pockets.

That means connecting the ecosystem — brands, properties, payment partners — so payment flows are predictable, visible, and repeatable. It also means giving hotel teams a clearer view of where payments run

smoothly and where friction still exists, so reliability can be strengthened deliberately rather than rediscovered through failure.

This is the shift from fragmentation to flow. From reactive fixes to sustained payment performance.

It gives hotels confidence that payments will work as expected, night after night, property after property, and that reliability can be improved over time.

When that reliability is in place, performance follows naturally — not as an abstract model, but as a quieter front desk, cleaner reconciliation, and a better guest experience that holds up across the portfolio.

Methodology

This paper combines qualitative and quantitative research conducted between Q4 2025 and Q1 2026.

We carried out **10 in-depth qualitative interviews** with US hotel leaders, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. Participants included senior payments and commercial leaders at the brand level, as well as front office and property-level operational leaders. These conversations explored payment strategy, operational execution, and real-world friction points.

We also spoke with **two corporate travel buyers** to understand how payment performance is experienced from the demand side, particularly at check-in and reconciliation.

To validate and scale these insights, we conducted a quantitative survey of **50 US hotel-side operational, finance, and commercial stakeholders**. The survey measured familiarity, operational confidence, training maturity, the impact of reconciliation, and future investment intent related to virtual payments.

The findings reflect both portfolio-level strategy and property-level reality, giving a full view of the US hotel payment landscape today.



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About Conferma

Headquartered in Manchester, UK, Conferma is the global leader in virtual payments, connecting businesses, issuers, and suppliers to streamline and secure transactions. Its technology underpins virtual card issuance for banks, travel management companies, and enterprises worldwide.

For more information, visit www.conferma.com

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