

'Social Computing' and Enhanced Rich Content to Shape Future of Hotel Electronic Distribution

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According to industry experts at the 2006 HEDNA Conference in Frankfurt, Germany last week, hotel distribution strategies should take notice - and perhaps even integrate elements - of the hottest trends in 'social computing'.

Speaking at the Conference, Forrester Research Vice President Henry Harteveltdt described social computing as consumers' learning information from each other (through shared photos, product reviews, and recommendations), versus basing purchasing decisions solely on the information provided by corporate supplier marketing. For example, the hospitality industry must now understand that consumer review sites are heavily influencing potential customers. Harteveltdt discussed how hotel distribution professionals can integrate tools such as RSS (Real Simple Syndication) and customer reviews into their distribution and marketing strategy, so they can push out content, thus speaking to customers in their preferred language.

All panelists in the 'Transformation of Distribution and the Customer Experience' session agreed that richer content must be presented to consumers at the time of research and product purchase. Visuals such as virtual tours and photographs are more important to shoppers than brand, star rating, or even customer reviews. Hotels were challenged to enhance and expand the content they provide about their products and services, thus affecting the way hotel properties are presented and distributed to customers.

Closing Keynote Speakers Bill Walshe, Chief Marketing Officer, Jumeirah tied together many of the points shared in the earlier sessions, and then discussed the very deliberate expansion strategy of his own company from a regional hotelier to a well-branded worldwide company. He underscored the importance of establishing a meaningful corporate purpose and then dedicating all resources toward accomplishing those goals. Jumeirah has launched very unique and impressive marketing campaigns; Walshe warned that each company must be ready to handle and capitalize on the success that it seeks.

Esteban Walther, Head of Travel for Google Europe, told HEDNA that the highest online growth rates are in the Asia-Pacific and Latin America regions. Hoteliers should enhance the distribution and marketing of their product through attention to search engine visibility, video, mapping services, and attractive 'landing pages' to greet shoppers when they find your company page. Among the Internet's hottest phenomena, mapping technology Web sites ('mash ups') combine ingredients from different online sources to create intriguing hybrids. Before customers check into a hotel, research can be done ahead of time by clicking on a clever map on the hotel website highlighting nearby attractions such as restaurants and museums.

Other Conference sessions discussed:

œ The need for Internet Distribution Systems (IDS) to face their own growth challenges as the globalize their distribution and reinvent themselves;

œ GDS, the grand dame of distribution, facing new competition in the marketplace that has forced innovation in the traditional systems with enhanced technology and new hotel marketing programs;

œ The impact of GDS deregulation in the EMEA region and the various potential impact on hotel distribution;

œ Compelling insights into credit card and electronic payment initiatives. The industry must come together to deflect fraud and protect its revenues;

œ The improvements to online group and meeting planning such as integrating existing and future booking technologies to create an online group booking community; This community has integrated inventory and instant availability access from the supplier to allow end-consumer, travel agents and meeting planners to shop their properties on a 24/7 basis; HEDNA's newest white paper entitled Online Group and Meeting Planning addresses the key drivers and challenges in moving the group and meeting process to the online world as well as the key success factors and many of the key players in this space.

In addition to the educational program, HEDNA Conference attendees enjoyed time to meet and network with their distribution colleagues. Conference sponsors contributed to these opportunities through their generous support: Cendant Travel Distribution Services, Opodo, AltiusPAR, Hotelzon, Hotel Concepts, Open World, Pegasus Solutions, Sabre Travel Network, VFM Interactive, Lanyon, Leonardo, SynXis, and WORLDHOTELS.

HEDNA President Tiffany Topcik remarked, 'By every measure - the large number of Conference attendees, the quality of program content, the quality of relevant and dynamic speakers, engaged audience participation, or plentiful networking opportunities - this was the most successful HEDNA Conference in our history. Everyone expanded their 'distribution toolbox' and gained new ideas and applications to more effectively and profitably distribute hotel product.'

The next HEDNA Conference will be 3 - 5 December 2006 in Sunny Isles (Ft. Lauderdale), Florida. To receive a complimentary press invitation, please contact Catherine McDonald at cmcdonald@disa.org or phone +1 703 970-2064.

About HEDNA

The Hotel Electronic Distribution Network Association (HEDNA) is a not-for-profit trade association whose worldwide membership includes executives and managers from over 200 of the most influential companies in the hotel distribution industry. Founded in 1991, all of HEDNA's activities are intended to stimulate the booking of hotel rooms through the use of

GDS, the Internet and other electronic means. HEDNA brings all segments of the hotel industry together to evolve systems and services into electronic distribution that is easy and efficient. Additional information on HEDNA is available by calling +1 703 970-2052 or by visiting www.hedna.org.

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