

Why the Design of Your Hotel Web Site Matters - By Neil Salerno

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It's more than just Personal Taste

With so many hotels relying on the Internet to help fill their rooms, it amazes me that there are still so many hotel web sites that are not designed to produce room reservations. After-all isn't that the primary reason why hotel sites are published to the Internet to begin with? It's also shocking that so many web site designers don't have a clue about search engines, how they work, nor how and why people select a hotel in which to stay.

So much of the planning and designing of a productive hotel web site starts with the intent of the designer, when the site is being designed. Does the designer understand the purpose of a hotel site? Stephen Covey, in his best seller 'Seven Habits of Highly Effective People', teaches us to 'Begin with the end in mind'.

With hotel web sites, the 'end' to keep in mind is that a hotel web site must be designed to 'sell' reservations; not simply to be an online brochure. Many people have asked me why I feel so strongly that it takes knowledge of hotel marketing to design a productive hotel web site. It's because an effective hotel web site must incorporate the basic hotel marketing principles of location, facilities, and attractions (both business and leisure); and, most importantly, the site must include dominant well-written sales text.

While a hotel brochure is designed to describe facilities and services, it is not relied upon to 'close' sales. The purpose of a web site is far more complex. It must be designed to create search engine popularity, so the site can be found using many different search terms; it must create interest in the hotel's location, facilities, and services; and, most importantly, its text must be written to convert 'lookers into bookers'.

It's Location, Location, and Location...

With few exceptions, people visit an area but stay at a hotel because of its location, nearby attractions and facilities. Knowing this, it makes pure common-sense to highlight your hotel's location. It is always amazing to me to see so many hotel web sites which give no clue where the hotel is located; some even without a posted address.

Your location is a very special place. Your location has its own special attributes which attract visitors from all over the World. Your web site should prominently highlight your location's special attributes and provide a reason to visit that location. Simply listing your hotel's address is not enough; generating new visitors to your hotel's location is most important; sell destination first, your hotel second.

Having a Web Presence

In the beginning of the Internet's popularity, only ten or so years ago, many hotels had the foresight to take advantage of the opportunity to have a presence on this radically new marketing medium. But the Internet has changed a lot since then; we learned that merely having a presence on the Internet does not necessarily generate reservations.

Many of these early sites were designed by pure technicians, or in some cases the owner's nephew, with a flair for design and some techno-knowledge of how to publish a web site on the Internet. Some sites were good; many were terrible, but in those days, few hoteliers knew how much the Internet would impact our industry and they knew even less about how to design a hotel web site to sell reservations.

During its maturation process, the number of web sites on the Internet has grown exponentially and search engines (the heart of the Internet) have been refined and improved; and are constantly being improved today. If a site cannot be found easily, it's useless.

The Internet's explosive growth has been unprecedented in our lifetime. Google, one of the Internet's most popular search engines indexes more than 6.8 billion web sites. World population is 6.6 billion people; that's more than one site for each and every one of us! Without search engines, navigating the net would be nearly impossible.

At this point you may be wondering what web site design has to do with search engines; the answer is everything. Search engine requirements must be built into the site's design. Keep in mind that search engines, at the present time, read text; images and graphics are, for the most part, invisible to them. Search engines seek-out sites which contain the words contained in the search term.

Many web site designers do an excellent job of making web sites look attractive, but fail miserably to comply with search engine and hotel sales and marketing needs. It's what your site 'says' and 'how it says it' that creates popularity with search engines and converts visitors into reservations.

Some Web Site Common-Sense

Hotel site designers, even those with hotel marketing experience, tend to be very right-brained creative types. Don't assume that they always know all those key factors which make your hotel's location unique and popular. When you select a designer for your site, either new or replacement site, make a list of sales features and keep them in priority order.

A good designer knows the prime web site real estate to occupy those most important details of your location and hotel. Remember, it's not just what you say; it's how you say it. Begin with the end in mind; the 'end' is to generate reservations not just increase the number of visitors to your site.

I know it's tempting to let your designer create a work of art; after-all you have all those beautiful images of your hotel, but it's often their lack of hotel sales knowledge which will doom your site to obscurity and mediocre performance.

Good simple navigation of your site is also essential. Basic rule; don't make users learn how to navigate your web site. Understanding how and why people choose a hotel is the first ingredient in designing a hotel web site. It is not a matter of simply describing all your hotel's attributes; it is how they are presented that really counts.

Take an Objective Look at Your Site

If your site is not producing a good volume of reservations, it's probably time to have a marketing analysis done of your site. A site analysis can reveal why your site is performing poorly; often some minor adjustments can make a substantial difference in your sales results. It can also reveal a need to scrap your current site in favor of a new, properly designed, one.

Are you measuring your site's conversion rate? If not, why not? Don't be fooled by simply measuring the number of visitors to your site. Most hotel web sites only convert less than four percent of visitors into reservations; increasing that ratio is the ultimate goal. Properly written and placed sales text can make a huge difference.

A web site is a living breathing sales tool which needs to be adjusted constantly to keep up with changes in your market, your hotel, and the ever-changing search engine parameters. Your web site is generating data and statistics, which you can use to improve your web site and its performance. Ask your web master to produce and evaluate this data. Sometimes there may be a small additional fee, but it is very worthwhile.

Your web site is capable of producing 30% to 70% of your total reservations; get it to work for you.

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