

More Hotel Web Site Myths...Busted! - By Neil Salerno

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How savvy is your Web Site Designer?

It's amazing how easily myths are born. One origin of many myths is the reality that many technical people out there do their best to promulgate confusion about the Internet; making it appear too complicated and too intricate for the average person to fully understand. They even use technical language to describe simple tasks just to stir-up the confusion still more; it's simply not that complicated.

Many web site designers tend to be right-brain directed people who use their creative side to build a visual masterpiece instead of a functioning site to sell visitors and deliver reservations. This has created a gap between marketing people who believe that 'Content is King', that a site must conform to search engine parameters, and techies who feel that all they need do is to make a site visually appealing to the hotel manager or owner, who hired them.

These people have little or no concern about how and why people choose hotel rooms because few of them have any experience in the hotel industry. Hoteliers know that their hotel's location is the primary selection consideration, yet we see site after site, which provide no clue to the hotel's location; please note that your hotel's location is not simply its address.

We still see many independent hotels without a booking engine, leaving site visitors frustrated that they cannot make a real-time reservation online. We see unusual and strange site navigation schemes; visitors should not have to learn how to use your site. We see many sites with far more images than text; yet search engines only see text.

We see more and more use of flash elements where they are not necessary with a lack of well-written text; leaving the site nearly invisible to search engines.

Myth:

We Already Have a Web Site, So All We Need Now is Search Engine Optimization

Many people, including some site designers, share this delusion; the fact is that the site design has everything to do with its ability to be ranked and found by search engines. Search engines have some very specific guidelines to enable web designers to maximize search results; all they need do is follow them.

Your web site needs to be prepared to comply with search engine guidelines; well researched title, description, and search tags; search words/phrases which are incorporated into the sales text on your site; content is king. Submitting a poorly designed web site to search engines is a complete waste of money.

Myth:

Animation Looks Cool and Creates Interest

This is one of my favorites among all hotel web site myths. The danger with this myth is that it appears to make sense to the uninitiated. Techies love flash because it does look cool, but the fact is that there are several problems with this thinking.

First, since a site needs to be found before it can be viewed, search engines can't 'see' flash. Second, for the many people, still on slow Internet connections, flash takes forever to load. The need to double-click navigation links, instead of the traditional single-click, is annoying and confusing to visitors. Morphing photos do absolutely nothing to enhance a commercial web site; if they morph too fast, one cannot properly view the images, too slow, some images are never seen. Do the images simply repeat over and over again or do they stop on the most important image?

Since content is king, why not simply post static images so visitors can focus on those of interest? I won't even comment on hotel web sites designed entirely in flash...rubbish.

Myth:

Search Engines Don't Use Meta Tags Anymore

The fact is that the most popular search engines use Meta Tags, in various ways, to crawl and rank web sites. The description tag is certainly the most important tag, yet we see many sites without one. Key word/phrase Tags set the stage for search key words and phrases to be used within the body of text.

In my opinion, if only one search engine used Meta Tags, that's reason enough to have them; they are free to use and can positively affect the performance of your site.

Myth:

My Hotel Web Site is My Hotel's Online Brochure

The fact is that your hotel's web site should be far more than simply an online brochure; it's your online selling piece which enables visitors to make real-time online reservations. This makes it critical that your site has good selling text with all the necessary who, what, why, when, and where information; capped-off with a call-to-action...to make a reservation.

Designing a web site is like sculpting an elephant out of stone; merely chip-away everything that doesn't look like an elephant. With a hotel web site, chip away everything that doesn't lead the user to make a reservation.

It's important to understand that, with few exceptions, people don't travel to stay at your hotel; they travel to visit an area or attraction, conduct business in an area, attend a meeting, or other such reasons; they merely stay at your hotel. Your site should provide reasons to stay at your hotel when they travel to your area. No matter how beautiful your hotel, that's not a good enough reason to stay at your hotel; provide the reasons why your hotel is the perfect place to stay when they visit the area.

Myth:

People Who Use the Internet Are Only Looking for the Lowest Rates

Any attempt to put all Internet users into one neat market segment is short-sighted and fool-hardy. With the exception of destination resorts, people will shop for the best overall value within a chosen market. This is often falsely interpreted as rate shopping. Few people shop for the lowest rate alone; most people look for the best deal, which includes the location and facilities they want..., at the best rate. This is shopping for value, not rate.

Hotels with the lowest rates within a market area are often viewed as 'poor choices' among shoppers. Low rates are often interpreted as 'unbelievable or too good to be true'. Your web site should 'position' your hotel within the market. If it's available in your market, use Smith Travel Research's STR Report and a good competition analysis to determine your hotel's position in the market; it's worth the time and effort.

Your rates should reflect your position in the market, even if they are the highest. Showing the best overall value, with rates that show demonstrate that value, sells rooms.

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