

## Travel Reviews - Consumers Are Changing Your Brand And Reputation Online - By Renier Milan

2007-09-24

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Traveler reviews have become part of the daily dialogue of web travel shoppers. The architecture of participation that is a basic hallmark of web 2.0 has resulted in users adding value to a site each time they write a review or upload a photo. It's no wonder that up to 84% of people visiting a site hosting consumer generated content (CGC) have their hotel choices affected by what they see. Millions of travelers log on daily and may experience a property through hotel generated photos and written text, but they find reviews and candid photography much more believable.

Many in the industry feel review sites are not objective and may be manipulated. They feel the content is not controllable or actionable and reject the opportunity to manage these sites by saying the comments might be inaccurate. However, what matters in the issue of web 2.0 sites is whether guests perceive them to be accurate. So far, customer research indicates they do. Furthermore, the research shows increasing numbers of possible clients are researching on third party sites, even if they are booking on brand sites.

The model has changed from a brand or property image that was controlled by the supplier, to one that is forged in dialogue with consumers. And this image is being debated at the virtual point of purchase. The combination of increasing numbers of web-savvy consumers, the web 2.0 frenzy focusing on social media, and increased travel site volume, have created a 'wild-west' environment where hotels' traditional comment card programs and advertising dollars are being trumped at the point of decision by dialogue in the public square.

The trend of traveler reviews is not going away. TripAdvisor.com's unique visitors grows dramatically monthly, as does consumer generated content on sites such as Expedia, Travelocity, Priceline and others. Given the juggernaut, it is important to know what to do internally when customer comments become the issue.

### 10 Things You Can Do In Response to Traveler Reviews:

10. **READ THEM!** As simple as it is to say, monitoring these sites occasionally may not be enough! It is recommended sites be visited at least weekly for new reviews and photos.

9. **AUDIT THEM!** A friend at a major brand hotel recently told me he found 6 unflattering photos posted by a guest on a site. Fortunately, they were not of his hotel. It seems there was an error in posting the photos. He was able to work it out with the website involved.

8. **STUDY THEM!** Any hotel might have a poor review, but patterns of poor reviews are of particular concern. If you see the same issues arise on a site, or across several sites, one might identify operational deficiencies. These comments should be treated the same as customer comment cards or letters. They may be more anonymous, but an hotelier recently told me that internal public discussion of web commentary usually yields someone that knows the situation and the guest. This enables the hotel to take action by contacting that customer for follow up.

7. **CELEBRATE THEM!** As with any feedback system, the positives must also be rewarded. Posting these comments, offering employee incentives for improvements, and reading positive comments in meetings allows one to focus and enhance strengths, not just see vulnerabilities.

6. **CORRELATE THEM!** Public comments should be married to existing internal comment card scores and not taken as isolated. The issues of one may be illuminated by commentary on the other.

5. **DISTRIBUTE THEM!** Website comments should be shared at all levels, from housekeeper to regional manager. If each is aware of comment card scores, each should be aware of virtual scores (especially since these are seen by many more people).

4. **COMPARE THEM!** A smart hotel analyzes their scores and those of their competitors. It is important to know quality ratings when setting rates, just like it is important to know operational advantages when selling a group against a competitor. The best revenue managers take quality and page placement into account when establishing rates. Likewise, sales teams should use public forum commentary as competitor intelligence.

3. **ANALYZE THEM!** It is critical to know that rate is just one factor in a buying decision. Each set of comments, when compared to rate, creates a competitive ranking in perceived quality and/or possible risk. Perceived quality is the real issue, and perceived quality is affected by public commentary. It is critical to know the nexus between rate and perceived quality, the result of which should be better than your competitive set. Remember, the goal is to be the most attractive to a client, not necessarily the lowest priced.

2. **TRACK THEM!** Trends are more valuable when viewed over longer periods of time. As such, traveler review scores, rankings, and rate strategies should be viewed retrospectively for patterns. Comparing these critical factors will allow an hotelier to see tactical changes by competitors and gauge the effectiveness of hotel specific changes.

1. **RESPOND TO THEM!** TripAdvisor.com allows posted responses from hotels and studies show those who respond are viewed favorably. Other sites will soon follow, but internal discussion of problems will yield the names of disgruntled guests, which, in turn, will allow a hotel to respond. Internal incentives to improve web site scores or rewarding departments for not repeating problems can also be effective. Since most hotels produce positive customer experiences, encouraging web-booking

customers to write about the hotel online can be effective as well.

The big picture of a hotel's reputation includes traveler reviews because there is no insulation from the trend. Consider as proof that buying decisions are now made by balancing brand identity in light of word-of-mouth public feedback. While brand may yield recognition for an individual property, it may not be enough to overcome negative reviews or photos of a run down room. Consumers understand individual property experiences vary and are eager to learn if reputation is reality.

Renier Milan is COO of Avalon Report. Mr. Milan has over 25 years experience in the hotel industry. Avalon Report, the industry's first web auditing service, has been delivering rate and page placement results since 2001. With the advent of Avalon Report's web-enabled version, the energetic company was the first to market with traveler reviews as part of their audit of third party and brand sites. Avalon's current real time deliverables include rates, page placement, traveler reviews, traveler generated photos and video, reporting of competitive rankings and risks, and copies of actual web screens from visited sites so hotel staff may avoid hours of web surfing.

This article comes from Hotel News Resource

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