

Hoteliers, Don't be fooled by the Web 2.0 Hype - By Neil Salerno

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Judging from the articles I've read about Web 2.0, there are some web and hotel marketers making some incredible claims about social media and its impact on our industry. My concern is that all this hype will encourage some hoteliers to shift their focus away from other productive marketing tasks to address social babble in cyberspace.

I think this whole Web 2.0 thing is being stretched way out of proportion. One writer even called Web 2.0 'a seismic shift in the world of hotel sales'. Wow, what a naive statement, if they believe that, they need to go back to learn Hotel Sales 2.0. The people saying this sound like they only just discovered social media on the Internet, now the new term, Web 2.0. Actually, just the term is new, social media has been with us for several years and our hotels are still intact.

There is no dispute with the fact that people are using social media to communicate in growing numbers. The many free social sites are being used to launch and manage the users' entire Internet experience, just as people do with AOL, MSN, and others. The big difference is these new sites are free and much more fun. The vast majority of users have no interest in writing or reading comments about your hotel.

My problem with these Web 2.0 articles is that they are being touted as an essential marketing opportunity for hotels. First-off, the only social media relevant to our industry are travel-related sites. This narrows all the social media down to only a handful of sites. The first and foremost of these is Expedia's TripAdvisor. It's extremely well managed and has a reputation for being equitable to both consumers and hotels.

I'm the first one to admit that, when Trip Advisor first appeared, I was among those hoteliers who feared giving travelers the ability to publish our industry's 'dirty-laundry' to the general public via the Internet. I was wrong, my fears were totally unfounded. In fact, the vast majority of posted comments for all hotels, in their system of 3 million visitors per month, are positive, not negative. We all know our industry's vulnerabilities, who would have predicted that?

There are just a handful of meaningful travel-related social sites and a couple of new sites are being developed. In my opinion, they see the obvious financial advertising opportunities they can garner from the travel industry. It's a money thing. It certainly would be a good idea to advertise on these sites, if you have some left-over dollars in your budget. My choice would be TripAdvisor, it's the biggest and most popular.

Make no mistake that advertising on these sites is general consumer advertising, plain and simple. If you can afford to supplement your marketing program to cover consumer media as well as your target advertising for groups, packages, and the promotion of your web site, it would be beneficial. How could it hurt? It's the difference between advertising in the Wall Street Journal versus AAA travel guide.

But, let's put this whole thing in proper perspective. For the industry as a whole and, possibly, for large chain hotel operations, knowing what is being posted on social media could be useful, if it is associated with and incorporated into their guest service program. For most individual hotels, however, it's nice, but very inconsequential due to the minimal number of negative postings for most hotels.

People are using travel-related sites to both read and post comments about travel. According to PhoCusWright, they believe most users are actually going to travel sites to check-out hotels after making a reservation, as sort of a validation of their decision. Yahoo claims people are using their site to actually make a buying decision, what do you expect them to say?

Another problem I am having with some of the articles written about social media is that they are raising expectations and concern without providing any relevant action for hoteliers. In my opinion, most hoteliers have difficulty finding enough time to work and implement necessary sales and marketing tasks which will have a much greater positive impact on their business. To add social media to this task list amounts to a huge distraction from the many more important, more necessary, marketing responsibilities.

I think we can all agree that there are only two types of postings, good and bad. If you are unfortunate enough to get a bad review, the only thing you can do is to post a positive response. What else can one do? I hope these people are not suggesting that hotels post their own positive comments, that's not too ethical. If not, what do they expect hotels to do about random comments on the Internet?

The real work begins long before a hotel receives comments on social media, it begins with good service and clean rooms. Simply collecting Internet comments on your hotel feels like locking the barn after the horses are gone, it's a distraction from more positive marketing tasks.

Yes, you can learn from good and bad reviews, but I doubt that you will experience shock and awe by any of them. Good managers know their property's strengths and weaknesses. The fact is that well-operated hotels receive very few bad comments, most are good. As far as bad reviews are concerned, poorly-run hotels have a much bigger problem than getting poor reviews on the Internet.

Smart hoteliers are now incorporating a guest comment feed-back section directly on their web sites. I think this is far more relevant and useful for hotels than hand-wringing over comments made randomly on some social media site. Other than the handful of travel-related sites, most comments will have little impact, positive or negative, on any individual hotel, with the

possible exception of large well-known world-class hotels.

The best suggestion I read is the reference to Google Alerts. If you are really concerned about social media comments about your hotel, simply add the name of your hotel to Google Alerts, they will send you an email every time your hotel name appears on the Internet. It's absolutely free, easy to do, and it works. Ironically, it's probably the same technique used by the companies who want you to pay for the information.

The bottom-line is that one day social media may become a major force to be reckoned with by hotels, but, it isn't right now. Remember that your first point of sale for the Internet is now your hotel's web site. Make sure it's well designed for search/sales, and it is well promoted.

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