

Are You an Internet Believer...If Not, Why Not? - By Neil Salerno

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If you are already a believer, your web site is now one of your hotel's most robust revenue producers, in many cases, producing a third or more of total room revenue, with many hotel sites producing much more. If your site is not producing a good level of business, you're probably having difficulty believing in the great power of the Internet. Or worse, you may be a believer, but don't know whether or not your site is producing business as it should.

Don't despair, most times all it takes is some changes in your site's design and a good Internet promotion strategy. The good news is that the return-on-investment from making your site a producer can be overwhelmingly quick. And, it's never too late to become a major Internet player in your marketplace.

In spite of this, it's surprising that there are so many hotel web sites which are still dysfunctional and under-utilized when it takes so little to improve them. You may be one of the many hoteliers that were burned by an incompetent web designer, you probably have a web site, which looks great, but produces poorly. This is not uncommon. All those designers that built online brochures instead of search-compatible and sales-driven web sites are being exposed by their sites' lack of production.

There are differing viewpoints, among web site designers, how best to design a hotel web site. There are those who feel flash elements, jazzy colors, and morphing images are cool, these designers measure a web site's success by how nice it looks (online brochures). Then, there are those who believe that lots of images can replace well-written text content, but that's wrong too. The worst designers believe that search engine optimization and other marketing efforts can compensate for a poorly designed web site, that's dead wrong.

Brochure-style designs, which look good but ignore search engine guidelines and sales content requirements, almost always, fail to produce acceptable levels of business.

The fact is that the basic rules, regarding the design of a hotel web site, are quite different than other types of retail sites. It's amazing that there are so many web site designers that lack the knowledge and experience to build a hotel web site which is search-compatible and sales-driven.

Building a web site is easy, but building an effective site takes knowledge of the subtleties of how search engines work and how people find, select, and book hotel rooms. Hotel and Internet marketing knowledge is crucial. A hotel web site design needs to conform to search engine requirements and it needs to have the necessary sales text content to convert visitors into reservations.

Eliminate Guess-Work & Assumptions

One of the wonderful features of web site design and marketing is the fact that it is almost entirely accountable. Virtually every page and section of your web site can be measured for its effectiveness, this is a marketer's dream. Every page can be measured and adjusted to produce maximum results, that's impossible to do with other forms of marketing.

Don't be satisfied with simply knowing how many visitors your site receives. Who cares about the number of site visitors, if your site is not converting visitors into reservations? If your web master doesn't provide you with data about your site, there is a good, simple, and free measurement tool available through Google. It's called Google Analytics. All you need do is to create a Google account. With Analytics, you can measure many aspects of your web site's effectiveness, such as visitor sources, most popular pages, results of organic search, and how many visitors are converted into reservations. Knowledge is power.

Don't be one of those managers or owners, who have no clue whether or not your site is producing business. Marketing your hotel on the Internet is too important to ignore.

Make Your Web Site Designer Accountable for Results

Designing a site to be compatible with organic search requirements is very important to building your site's long-term productivity and popularity. Ignoring these requirements is one of the more common errors in site design. It's all too common to hear web site designers blame poor site results on the owner's failure to use pay-per-click advertising. That's a lot of smoke, PPC has nothing to do with organic search.

Pay-per-click should be a temporary measure, it's a good kick-start for new or newly revised sites. There can be substantial rewards from using PPC in major markets, but, if a site is properly designed, natural or organic search will take effect in 120 to 180 days. Key words/phrases must be incorporated into the text content of your site, this is the primary difference between creating an online brochure and designing a functional web site.

Getting visitors to your site is essential, but, remember, that this is only half the job of your web site. The second, equally important, role is to convert visitors into reservations.

Site Content Can Work Wonders

'What your site says, and how it says it, is a critical part of hotel web site design'. The majority of hotel searches on the Internet are destination-based. So, why is it then that so many designers place so little information about the hotel's location in their designs? A hotel's location is much more than just the hotel's address. Location information is the most important text on your site.

No one expects visitors to read every word on every page of your site, therefore, information should be written in hierarchy format, most important first and so on. Bulleted lists are helpful, but they should not be over-done. Don't simply describe your hotel, describe what makes your hotel different than others in your competition set and this includes your location.

Review the images on your site, out-dated and poor images should be replaced. Digital photography is not expensive and good images draw the eye and add credibility to the text content. Although images are important and enhance your site, they cannot replace properly written text. Search engines can only see text, this makes properly written text critically important to populate your web site.

Check Your Site's Navigation Theme

Tell your site designer to stay away from navigation buttons which have text within an image. It looks cool, but search engines cannot 'see' text within images. Keep your navigation theme simple, drop-down menus and using non-hotel terminology is poor technique. Visitors should not have to 'learn' how to navigate your web site.

All these flashy attempts to jazz-up your site is often 'smoke & mirrors' to cover-up poor site design techniques and a lack of hotel marketing knowledge.

Don't Let Your Site Designer 'Junk-up' Your Web Site

There is absolutely no good reason to place outbound links on your home page or other such frivolities such as a 'today's weather' or other forms of unnecessary entertainment features. The purpose of your home (landing) page is to generate enough interest to encourage visitors to drill-down to the rest of your site, don't encourage visitors to leave your site.

Designing a functional web site is like sculpting an elephant, just chip-away anything that doesn't look like an elephant. On a web site, eliminate anything which can detract from the hotel information gathering and selection process, there's no room for fluff on your site.

If you are not yet a believer in the enormous sales power of the Internet or if you have been disillusioned by poor results from having a dysfunctional web site, you should educate yourself to the wonders of hotel marketing on the Internet. 2008 promises to be another traffic record-breaker.

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