

Where does UGC fit into suppliers' online marketing strategy?

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Social Media Strategies for Travel 2008 Special

Earlier this year, Starwood Hotels & Resorts had introduced the redesigned version of its website for members of Starwood Preferred Guest hotel loyalty programme, SPG.com.

On how the re-designing of SPG.com has shaped up, Philip Charles-Pierre, Director, Interactive Marketing Starwood Preferred Guest, Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide recently told EyeforTravel.com's Ritesh Gupta: "Response has been terrific, customers have commented that the site and in particular the homepage design is more aspirational as it highlights well the SPG programme and our wonderful collection of properties. The site through a number of personalization tools and features can also be very distinctive for each member as we recognize each member based on their membership profile. Ultimately, the new SPG.com provides all of our member with the access to find hotels that best fits for them while exposing in one flow the three payment options available to members - cash, points and the combination of cash and points."

The new SPG.com highlights the synergies between the award winning loyalty programme - Starwood Preferred Guest and Starwood's forward thinking and innovative web strategies.

On key to managing the best result from such synergy, he said, "The key is to focus on the industry leading core products and services of the programme by using innovative web strategies to display and serve them based on each unique member. So the theme of the redesign has been to better serve the members by providing them even greater access to the tools and features they want. Whether it is serving relevant content based on an individual member's membership level or giving members a choice as to Account activity sections they want to view on their homepage."

One of the highlights of the re-designed site is MY SPG - a personal portal that allows members to access their SPG account, customize the information displayed, and search for properties based on their own unique interests and favorite travel destinations.

"My SPG has been great in allowing members to access the areas of the site most important to them. This allows members to engage with the programme on their terms while providing us the ability to continually serve them relevant content and information," said Charles-Pierre.

The new SPG.com offers members an easy way to book a stay, manage their account and access insights and recommendations on great new destinations that cater to their interests and travel persona.

Where do you think such personalization puts hospitality industry vis-a-vis others when it comes to building strong relationship with members? Are hotels are leading the pack in this arena?

On the same, he said, "I think Starwood is a leader in allowing ways for members to find hotels based on their persona and what we call the human truths. Not only have we defined our various brands in that way but we have also built a tool called the Hotel Explorer which allows users who are open to new destination and hotels to pick a one based on a region or activity that may interest them."

A recent Jupiter survey revealed that 69 percent of consumers don't trust social media sites.

But said Charles-Pierre said for the company social media allows it to connect with its core audience and understand what they are looking for.

"We use them to test new ideas and concepts which informs us as we develop new products and services. So in the end social media is a two way communication tool for us and our customers."

On the trend of suppliers integrating user-generated content systems into their websites and booking processes headed in the next year or so, he said, "I think we will see more suppliers creating user generated content and adding it to their "tool belts". However as we have done with Sheraton.com, user generated content such as stories and blog posting on the lobby.com, are well integrated into our overall online marketing channels. For us user generated content is another tool along with things like our great property highlights that will be integrated in places where users and members find it useful to learn about a destination and therefore to drive stay."

Philip Charles-Pierre was one of the speakers during EyeforTravel's Travel Distribution Executive Conference 2007 in Las Vegas in October this year.

EyeforTravel is scheduled to conduct **Social Media Strategies for Travel 2008 Conference** in San Francisco on 5 and 6 March, 2008. For more info, click here:

<http://www.eyefortravel.com/ugc/agenda.asp>

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