

More Social Media Chatter...a Hotel Marketing Tool - By Neil Salerno

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After my last article about social media, I heard from many hoteliers who are genuinely interested and excited about the potential use of social media to promote their hotels. There is no question that articles about social media are popping-up everywhere. I agree that the benefits could be enormous, maybe in the not-so-distant future for hotel franchises but, less likely for individual hotels.

I believe that one segment of social media, travel-related sites, holds the most promise for hotels. But, some controversy exists about how the majority of visitors actually use these sites. Some experts feel that the majority of visitors are accessing travel social sites after making a reservation to ratify their hotel selection. This could be significant and it does make common-sense when you think about it.

In any event, the entire field of social media possesses some potential for putting hotels in direct communication with millions of Internet users. The strongest potential lies in the hands of hotel franchises. In a recent article, it was announced that several major hotel franchises will be meeting with social media chiefs to discuss ways to 'monetize' social media. I guess that means finding ways to use social media to promote hotels, that sounds like a good idea.

Social Sites as Advertising Media

The world of social media is huge and getting bigger every day. It's probably the equivalent of what we used to call 'consumer print and broadcast media' before the advent of the Internet. In those days, we were just as excited about the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Time Magazine, Television, and all the rest. They reached millions of people and were obviously a great way to communicate directly to consumers.

Of course it was a one-way communication and the reality was that only franchises and a handful of the largest individual hotels, could afford to sustain a consumer media advertising program, what makes Internet social site media any different? Hopefully, it will be more affordable.

What happened was that hotels, which were fortunate enough to have sufficient advertising dollars, targeted specific travel-related and group print media instead of attempting to participate in cost-prohibitive consumer advertising. Nothing is different today, only the media vehicle has changed. Travel-related social sites could be a good media buy and perhaps the best opportunity for individual hotels.

All-purpose social sites, like MySpace and YouTube could present an advertising opportunity for hotel franchises. This could be a great opportunity for franchises to clear up and define the confusing marketplace of multiple hotel brands under their franchise banner.

For individual hotels, franchise and independent, my advice is to be patient, let the franchises work things out with the social site media, like YouTube, My Space, etc. Let's see what kinds of programs can be developed to utilize this new conversation media. For individual hotels, your opportunity lies in travel-related social sites, like TripAdvisor. This is only a fraction of all social media, but your audience is already tuned into travel and the use of hotels.

Social Sites as a Quality Control Tool

I've read several articles cautioning hoteliers to be concerned about what millions of consumers could be saying about their hotel on social sites. How big does your ego need to be to really believe that? I can assure you that it would be extremely rare to find someone discussing your hotel on YouTube or MySpace. In my first article, I offered the example of the football fan that saw the team huddle and worried about what the players were saying about him, don't succumb to paranoia 101.

This scenario, however, is possible on travel-related social sites, but ok, what are you going to do about it? Smart hoteliers already monitor TripAdvisor and other travel-related social sites. Besides the fact that most posted comments are positive, if your hotel receives many negative comments, you have a much bigger problem than anything social media can do to harm your hotel's public image. How about the majority of guests who do not post a comment?

If you get a negative comment, post a positive comment in return, but be careful and don't be defensive, you could make it worse. Now, there are companies offering to monitor social media for your hotel, 'so you can know what is being said about your hotel within all social sites'. What a colossal exaggeration. Maybe they can wire-tap telephones to catch any comments by phone, too.

If you decide to use travel-related social site comments to manage the quality control for your hotel, you must have missed Quality Control 101. The best quality control is applied before guests leave your hotel, not days or weeks later after they post a comment on the Internet.

Social Sites as a New Way to Conduct Business

A unique feature of the social site trend is its communicative nature. For the first time, we may have an opportunity to create real-time online conversations and direct online postings with consumers. I can understand why so many people are excited about this possibility.

I'm not sure anyone has been able to get their arms completely around how we can take accomplish it. Some franchises are busy developing interactive links on their web sites to facilitate direct online communication. I'm sure they are working on many other ideas as well.

For the life of me, I cannot imagine how individual hotels can take advantage of this on their own web sites. I guess I'll leave that to people smarter than me. Maybe a day-time-only link would work, but then again who would do it?

The opportunity to create a live dialogue with consumers is enticing and presents some exciting future possibilities. In the meantime, learn to cultivate your hotel's web site. Many people don't consider this, but your web site is very much a one-to-one communication between your hotel and the site visitor. Make sure that your site communicates the right message and provides a vehicle for the visitor to communicate with you, albeit, by email.

Many hotels are now including a feed-back form on their web sites to enable guests to post comments on their stay. This is a great idea and easy to manage, caution, however, if you invite comments, you must answer each and every one of them.

For now, let's see what can be developed to take advantage of the social site opportunity. So far, I hear a lot of dialogue, see many articles, and read about many conferences discussing the potential of social media sites, but no practical answers or workable tactics yet. Everyone agrees that the potential is staggering, but it's not here yet for individual hotels.

Consider that this social site awakening came only after the creation of totally free social sites. Many consumers use these sites to communicate, but also as a means to navigate the entire Internet as they did with pay sites like AOL and MSN. In the old days of dial-up, pay sites also provided Internet access that was not otherwise available. With cable and broadband, pay sites are no longer the only game in town.

Can free social sites be financially sustained in the long run? Not likely, revenue will be crucial to their future existence, and believe me, they are working on that. Right now, these sites are largely unorganized, each visitor free to create his/her own online information. Will they need to be more centralized than they are now? Be careful, this could be another bubble to burst in the future just like condo-hotels. This could be a temporary fad.

There are already some articles, flowing through the Internet, about a flattening of membership totals in several of these sites. They cite several reasons for this, among them are a waning of the initial excitement among users, increased junk mail, and a maturation of the users. Many of the social site users initially joined several sites and now find one or two to be more manageable.

Social sites are obviously creating a new generation of online communicators, driven by photographs, text chats and homemade video. Where it will go, we don't know.

Marketing hotels is neither simple nor easy, it gets more complicated each day. For now, concentrate on the basics of a sound sales program within your market and promote your hotel web site. Maximize your site for sales and organic search, pay-per-click should only be a temporary measure. Social sites could eventually be a good tool to promote hotel sales, but not right now.

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