

Changes In Communication, Social Media, SEO & SEM Expected To Force Rethinking Of Destination,  
Hotel Marketing  
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HSMIAI-CHA Conference Delegates Hear Expert Tips on New Trends

The underlying message that flowed throughout the 3rd annual Caribbean Sales & Marketing Strategy Conference was that changes in communication, the social media revolution, and evolving search engine optimization and search marketing are forcing marketers to rethink how they market destinations and hotels.

Presented by the Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International (HSMIAI - [www.hsmiai.org](http://www.hsmiai.org)) and the Caribbean Hotel Association (CHA), the Caribbean Sales & Marketing Strategy Conference was held at the InterContinental Resort & Casino in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Dec. 13-14, 2007 and featured a series of speeches and seminars on destination marketing and branding, Internet marketing and e-Commerce, integrated marketing communications and managing revenue mix.

Michael Tchong, founder of Ubercool, set the tone for the conference with his observations that focused on the changes that have taken place in society which are impacting how organizations are promoting and selling travel products.

Tchong told delegates: 'There is a change in social dialogue, and target segments are changing due to a number of social habits. Text messaging has taken over as the primary dialogue between individuals.'

He also predicted that a new language is evolving because of the Internet and text messaging, noting: 'While teens and tweens are leading the way in this dialogue revolution, baby boomers are right behind them in their participation.'

Tchong also noted that 'laptops are no longer a tool, but have become a pet as 68% of Americans spend more time with their computers than with their spouse.'

'We are now an on-demand society where everyone is multitasking and time is more valuable than money,' said Tchong, urging the audience to engage and utilize these new ways. 'The consumer has control and if you understand the target consumer better, you can do a better job of marketing,' he added.

Tchong also pointed out that 'experience travel is the new form of vacationing,' and he warned everyone not to be complacent because 'the future is here today.'

Cindy Estis Green, managing director of the Estis Group and author of the just-released HSMIAI Social Media study titled: 'The Travel Marketer's Guide to Social Media and Social Networks,' published by the HSMIAI Foundation and TIA, noted that this is the dawn of customer engagement. 'Technology now allows contact with consumers every point along the process of researching and purchasing travel. If you are not there you will lose the potential traveler to someone else.'

'Engaged customers spend more money and come back more often,' Estis told the audience. In addition to helping brand awareness, social media is beneficial for guerilla and niche marketing to find consumers through a wider reach.

The following sessions were presented during the program:

**1. Intelligent Destinations** - Creating an Executive Marketing Dashboard featured Dr. Ryan Peterson, Dean of the University of Aruba Tourism Management.

The sales paradigm and conventional push approaches to destination marketing that focus on promotions, products, places and prices no longer suffice in a hypercompetitive environment in which crisis, confusion and chaos are the only constants.

The key to success for a destination today includes focusing on hyper-tourism, destination competitiveness, marketing capabilities, business intelligence, performance measurements, integrated scorecards and executive dashboards for destination marketing.

'Traditional photos of an empty beach will not work,' Dr. Peterson said, adding: 'You need to inspire people to your destination.'

Peterson went on to urge: 'Competing on price will not provide you with a sustainable advantage. Consumers are looking to fulfill their dreams and experience more than just the beach. Destination image, experience and values should be measured and researched and the contribution it makes to the economy.'

Destinations must use strategic foresight research to obtain the knowledge and intelligent marketing decisions. He noted that he sees the 'online channels in a steady growth position while the travel agents and tour operator channels are in decline.'

**2. Ensuring Marketing Effectiveness:** Strategies for Destination Website Content featured Eric Brey, Assistant Professor, University of Memphis, who took a look at the 'nuts and bolts' of how to make destination websites more effective. He offered a checklist developed and tested at over 900 destination and national tourism office websites in North America and Europe.

Brey said a website has to work, be informative, and function as a quality marketing tool. 'Before launching a website you should check dead links, make sure your HTML is functioning, ensure your browser is compatible with others than just Internet Explorer, and make sure load time is quick because consumers have little patience for slow sites.'

**3. Accreditation for Destination Marketing Organizations (DMO)** was a discussion lead by Jack Wert, FCDME, Executive Director, Greater Naples, Marco Island & Everglades CVB, along with Ana Maria Viscasillas, President & CEO, Puerto Rico Convention Bureau.

The destination marketing industry has made great progress in elevating the professionalism and relevance of DMO's around the world. The Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI) has been at the forefront of these efforts with its performance reporting and branding initiatives, and most recently with its Destination Marketing Accreditation Program (DMAP).

DMAP lays out a clear path with mandatory and voluntary standards every Ministry of Tourism, Convention and Visitors Bureau, and Tourism Promotion Board should aspire to achieve in order to deliver professional destination marketing services to its constituents.

**4. Demystifying Distribution 2.0: Channeling Business to You** was a panel discussion lead by Cindy Estis Green, managing director of the Estis Group and author of the just-released HSMIAI Social Media study.

Managing your distribution channels continues to require expertise, and hotels and destinations must focus on this to sustain and grow market share from all sources.

Robert Dawson, Chief Technology Officer, E-Site Marketing, said: 'Have a concise plan and make sure it fits in with your overall marketing plan. Make sure to keep your brand integrity in place.'

Steven Paganelli, Vice President, Business Development, TIG Global, added: 'Know what your goals are going in.'

Stephen Wright, General Manager, Grand Case Beach Club, St. Martin, noted that: 'It is a way to reach out to a much larger audience than you might be able to otherwise. It is also a good way to listen to your customers.'

J. Rob Phillips, Vice President Interactive Marketing, Standing Dog Interactive, said: 'I would suggest starting by watching what other people are saying about you. Using photos and videos are a good way to tell your story.'

**5. Fundamentals of Search Engine Marketing & Optimization** offered strategies in online campaign creation and management.

The various channels for marketing were discussed as they relate to consumer content and how to respond step-by-step to make it a powerful ally in online marketing.

Trevor Stuart-Hill, Vice President, Accounts & Revenue Management, SynXis noted that 'Search is evolving beyond the normal Google search with a lot of underlying layers and specifics that can now link to deeper levels of your website.'

He added that 'channel marketing is more diverse and more important than segment marketing.'

Stuart-Hill suggested that marketers find out what the true distribution costs are. 'All channels are desirable, but not equal. Direct onsite reservations have soft costs averaging \$23 per night, plus marketing.'

He added that marketers must 'have an awareness of the opportunities out there that use available strategies and opportunities to maximize revenues.'

**6. What's the Buzz on Buzz Marketing?** Creating Messages That People Want to Share featured Susan Black, Managing Partner, Susan Black Associates.

'Successful word-of-mouth marketing isn't about what you think your brand represents, it's what people choose to talk about,' said Black. 'Buzz marketing is a very effective tool, and can be a big hit if done correctly, but it can also backfire if not executed well,' she said, adding: 'Word-of-mouth hinges on real consumers and brand advocates spreading the word for you. Discover tips on how to find them, as well as what to do once you know who they are.'

**7. Universal Search: A New Dimension to Being Found on the Web** featured a high-level group of technology company executives.

Robert Dawson, Chief Technology Officer for E-site Marketing, noted: 'If content is trapped in a database, it is no good for search engines. It is a spider trap. You need to know the technology behind your site and that the search engines will crawl it. You also need to know the crawl depth.'

'Also make sure that you know where your website is hosted and make sure it is reliable and not hosted by an unscrupulous company that could get their IP address blacklisted, which would impact you as well.'

Jay Hawkinson, Partner, Strategic Internet Marketing Partners, said, 'The most important thing is to absolutely be doing some form of paid search advertising. I suggest to do both SEO and SEM together to improve the website reach. Even with a small budget, this can be beneficial - as low as \$500 for one month.'

J. Rob Phillips, Vice President Interactive Marketing, Standing Dog Interactive, gave the audience a breakdown of how to analyze the costs in doing online marketing. 'How much typical looks brings in and how many visitors come to the site are critical. If I paid X to get a thousand visitors for a conversion rate with a minimum goal of 10 to 1 return, I can then back in my costs.'

He also cautioned the audience that 'It will take a year of experimentation to build a good plan. Start with specific terms and buy branded terms, the island name, and start to narrow it and grow the campaign. Realize that it takes time to build.'

Dawson added: 'Hoteliers and travel professionals need to ensure they are incorporating all aspects of Internet marketing into their overall marketing efforts. SEO, SEM, interactive media and the newly emerging Web 2.0 initiatives should work in unison with each other to form a fully integrated marketing approach.'

**8. Publicity: What Is It and How Do I Get It? --** Terence Gallagher, Executive Vice President, Lou Hammond & Associates, led this discussion stating: 'Public relations is a blend of art and science. A key to success is building relationships with the media. Familiarity breeds understanding.' He offered the following tips:

Don't be self-serving in press releases.

Understand editorial deadlines and timing for different types of publications.

Put yourself in the editor's place and think about what would be newsworthy to you.

Optimize press releases for pick up in web search engines by repeating key words and phrases and including hyperlinks.

Video is becoming more important as a PR tool online.

Identify media that best reaches your audience.

**9. Turbo-Charging Your Co-op Marketing Spend...How to Get More Marketing Bang for Less Cost** featured Susan Black, Managing Partner, Susan Black Associates.

'A list is not a plan when it comes to co-op marketing. You want an integrated co-op plan. As in any marketing budget, develop specific needs, a marketing RFP with as many as 20 specific points.

She gave these tips for how to choose a co-op program that works for you:

Play up your marketing strengths and the marketing strengths of your partner

Don't do it just because it's new, but don't be afraid to try something new

Always ask your partner for tie-ins

Develop a detailed co-op RFP

**10. Resort Marketing in a Mixed Use Environment: How to Juggle the Stakeholders** featured moderator: Tom McCallum, Director, The Reefs, and panelists Dave Callaghan, Vice President, Resort Sales & Service, Interval International, and Alejandra Padin, Project Director, Aquarius Vacation Club

Marketing in an environment with condos, fractionals and timeshares involves a special understanding of customer types, distribution channels, and ownership stakeholders.

**11. Everything You Need to Know About Working with Wholesalers - but were afraid to ask!** was another session that featured Susan Black, Managing Partner, Susan Black Associates.

Online and traditional wholesalers continue to be among the most important distribution partners in the Caribbean. But, like all distribution channels, change is happening at break-neck speed. What keeps wholesalers to the Caribbean up at night? How can hotel and destination partners work closer with both traditional and online wholesalers to sell more product?

'Don't forget about the marketing that wholesaler partners are doing for you and take advantage of their expertise,' Black said.

Hector Arroyave, Senior Destination Manager, Certified Vacations Group Inc., said: 'Rate parity is of utmost importance with the transparency of the Internet today.'

Laura Veglia, Vice President-Sales, Bookit.com, said: 'Each distribution point will bring you something different, which is why it is important to work with a range of companies. But, it is best to look for targeted wholesalers and share information with your marketing manager.'

**12. The Changing Culture of Luxury Travel: An Overview of Today's Markets, Trends and Tools** featured John Fareed, Partner, Fareed/Zapala/Koepke, who noted that 'the word 'luxury' has come to mean different things to different people.'

Fareed urged: 'Matching your offerings to the right market is essential, and understanding how various markets define 'luxury travel' is the key,' adding: 'Customization is key. It is not about the money. People will hack their life for a good luxury experience.'

**13. Converting Eyeballs to Clicks and Cash:** How to Create E-mail Marketing Programs that Deliver Results featured Dwight Sholes, President, Quotient Marketing Inc., who said: 'The e-mail marketing channel is often not done well. It is easy to do badly. The key is to deliver the right message to the right audience at the right time.'

Dwight Sholes, President, Quotient Marketing Inc, presents 'Converting Eyeballs to Clicks and Cash: How to Create E-mail Marketing Programs that Deliver Results'

Sholes offered the following tips:

Ask for permission for e-mail marketing on your website

Capture terms people are searching on your site to use in search engine marketing

Put the call to action at the top of your messages in text

Messages with personalized subject lines get higher open and click through rates

Test, test, test

In his luncheon keynote address, CTO's director general, Vincent Vanderpool-Wallace, discussed 'The Rich Media Revolution in Caribbean Marketing.' Many Caribbean marketers are stuck in a text-based world and have forgotten the old adage of 'a picture tells a thousand words.' From providing information on the aftermath of a hurricane to a new natural spa in Dominica, the most credible path to delivering information is via sights and sounds.

Conference partners included The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Fareed Zapala Koepke, Getty Images, Nimblefish, PinPoint Local, Puerto Rico Convention Bureau, TIG Global, Travelscream Technologies and rezStream.

## **CHA**

The Caribbean Hotel Association (CHA) is dedicated to optimizing the full potential of the Caribbean hotel and tourism industry by serving member needs and building partnerships. The members of CHA represent the entire spectrum of the hospitality industry's private sector, from over 800 member hotels with more than 126,000 hotel rooms in 35 national hotel associations, to allied members including airline executives, tour operators, travel agents, trade and consumer press, hotel and restaurant suppliers, and others. [www.caribbeanhotelassociation.com](http://www.caribbeanhotelassociation.com).

## **HSMAI**

HSMAI is an organization of sales and marketing professionals representing all segments of the hospitality industry. With a strong focus on education, HSMAI has become the industry champion in identifying and communicating trends in the hospitality industry, and bringing together customers and members at annual events, including HSMAI's Affordable Meetings(R). Founded in 1927, HSMAI is an individual membership organization comprising more than 7,000 members worldwide, with 39 chapters in the Americas Region.

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