

Travel 2.0 - So Many Sites, So Little Time

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Monitoring the 'Reviewsphere' is overwhelming; focus on key sites is the solution.

A recent survey conducted by Avalon Report (www.avalonreport.com) of 225 three and four diamond hotels showed over 90% of hoteliers think it is important to monitor reviews online, yet the majority of hotels monitor comments less than once every two weeks. Since 87% monitor reviews manually by surfing site to site, time impoverishment seems to play a major role in this lack of research. Many hotel professionals appear overwhelmed by the scope of the issue, commenting they are lost in the prioritization of endless sites and searches.

Gossip is not the challenge. Does Buzz = Buy?

There is no doubt that Web 2.0 has entered into the hotel landscape like a tidal wave of whispers. Hoteliers worry about traveler comments and web photos with unmatched paranoia. The level of anxiety differs from hotel to hotel and brand to brand, but the conclusions are frequently the same: word of mouth may soon trounce marketing dollars in the sales cycle and tuning into the reviewsphere is essential.

It is true that social networking sites as a whole provide endless places to post commentary regarding travel. Essential to an hotelier is whether all the gossip is translated into purchasing behavior. Recent studies indicate up to 88% of Trip Advisor visitors are influenced by content they read. The numbers for Facebook and MySpace are not so impressive.

The uniqueness of Trip Advisor is the relationship the site has forged with the public. It is a trusted research source for travel buyers and is rapidly becoming an essential stop in trip planning. Among networking sites, Trip Advisor holds a coveted place because it has successfully penetrated the buying cycle for consumers. In this sense, it differs from mega-networking sites such as MySpace.com and Facebook.com, sites whose goal is to connect its users. MySpace and Facebook are bridges to other travel sites, sites where purchasing decisions are made.

A 2007 study by ComScore focused on Google searches indicated consumers visit a travel site with surprising frequency before making a purchase on the same site, an average of 2.5 times over 29 days. In fact, the average consumer does 12 searches and visits numerous sites in comparing pricing, destination and other factors. Also true: travel is considered one of the most competitive sectors on the web in terms of comparison shopping. With customers visiting multiple times and taking 29 days on average to make a purchase, reviews on major sites such as Expedia, Priceline, Trip Advisor, Travelocity and Orbitz may be seen multiple times by a visitor in the buying cycle.

This argues for dynamic content, requiring frequent monitoring and encouragement. In this process, one cannot focus on Trip Advisor alone. Added to Trip Advisor should be the monitoring of key revenue generating sites. Revenue dollars produced by these sites are at risk from negative commentary. Each traveler review on a third party site rides the coat tails of the marketing dollars spent by that site, positively or negatively.

Buyers visiting third party sites are more likely to be shopping, not just networking. One might say these visitors become motivated by comments while visitors to social networking sites become interested. Thus, an unflattering comment on Expedia.com has the potential to stop a sale in a way that a negative photo or comment on Facebook may not. Monitoring a reputation online has value, but managing dynamic commentary within the buying cycle is essential to hotel performance.

Work smarter, not harder.

Often, discussion of the new dialogue between guests and hotels in the sphere of Web 2.0 is ruled by misunderstanding. Limiting the search is a start. Begin by knowing which third party sites generate revenue. For most hotels this involves Expedia, Travelocity, Orbitz, and Priceline. Add other sites that penetrate the sales cycle, such as TripAdvisor. Allow booking numbers and e-commerce production goals to determine your search emphasis because sites that produce revenue are critical to performance.

Automating your search may be the next step toward efficiency. Automated searches save hours of web surfing. Subscribe to a Web 2.0 service, making sure key sites are the focus and that all your results are viewed through a competitive lens for a reality check. In the final analysis, customers on key sites are comparing to other hotels, not just reading about your hotel.

Fight back.

Allowing negative comments to dominate any site in the reservations cycle is damaging. Fortunately, a hotel has weapons at its disposal to combat these perceptions.

1 Respond to comments where possible. On TripAdvisor.com, hotels are allowed to respond to customer comments. Hopefully, other sites will follow their lead in the future to create a consumer/supplier dialogue.

2 Use comments to improve service delivery. Obviously, the best way to combat bad comments is to prevent them from happening. This involves educating staff that every unhappy customer now has an Internet megaphone to use at your door. If negative comment cards are a concern, imagine posting all negative comments on the front desk-this is what the Internet allows. Open internal discussion of concerns is essential to prevention.

3 **Encourage guest posting on sites.** Although counter intuitive, encouraging participation liberates the majority of guests who have positive experiences to post on sites. Guests who book on third party sites may post on those sites. Other guests may be encouraged to post on critical open networking sites like TripAdvisor.com. Time after time, hotels that encourage posting find the positive outweighs the negative.

4 **Do not allow stagnant content.** Failing to respond to concerns on a site, where that is allowed, puts the hotel in a negative light. Having old content on a site, whether it is photography of a dated lobby, or a customer comment from 1 year ago as the most recent rating, makes a hotel look far less than dynamic. Updating photography, encouraging comments, and supporting traveler photos will make the hotel look 'fresh' and active.

Being paranoid about customer 'buzz' in the reviewsphere is pointless, like chasing clouds rather than following a clear path. Focusing on revenue generating and sales cycle sites is the key to sanity. Essentially, it is the difference between trying to listen to all the conversations in a crowded restaurant and talking to the person at your table. Bottom line is- monitor where it matters. [Visit Avalon Report](#)

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