

## Hotel Internet Marketing - Having a Web Site is not enough - By Neil Salerno

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Unfortunately, many hoteliers are content with simply having a web site as the sum-total of their Internet marketing effort. These same people wonder why their fair-share of reservation production is still eluding them. Many hoteliers wonder what more they can do to drive business from the Internet. For the record, just having a web site is not nearly enough.

Even a perfectly designed web site will benefit from a promotional effort to produce business. Promoting your hotel online should be a high priority for every hotel, large and small. The payback is quick and the potential upside is big, Internet marketing makes sense for every hotel.

The statistics and data surrounding the popularity and increasing use of the Internet are real, the Internet can produce a third or more of your total business, some hotel sites are generating much more than that. Why then, are so many hotels devoting so little effort and financial resources to such a potentially lucrative marketing medium?

The return-on-investment for Internet marketing spending is faster than almost any other form of hotel marketing, most hotels see results almost immediately. The bonus is that Internet marketing is almost totally measurable, which allows for quick evaluation and continual adjustments to improve results. If you need to justify marketing spending, there is no better advertising medium.

When one talks about Internet marketing, the first thought is usually Search Engine Optimization. SEO is great, but it is certainly not the only way to populate a web site. Employing SEO on a poorly designed web site is a waste of time and effort. Getting visitors to your site is only half the job.

The problem with many SEO specialists is that they tend to populate hotel sites with unrelated non-travel visitors through the careless use of poorly selected key words/phrases and non-relevant bulk link exchanges. These techies think that we should measure a site's success by the number of visitors, instead of the number of reservations, the site generates.

Pay-per-click advertising is usually the second thought associated with hotel Internet marketing. The sad part is that many site promoters use PPC to replace, not supplement, efforts to improve a web site's ability to earn good organic search results. Organic search should be your goal.

Populating a hotel web site with relevant traffic takes research, experience, and knowledge of the hotel selection and booking process. The number of reservation conversions, not simply the number of site visitors, determines a web site's success.

### **Marketing on the Internet**

Having a web site and marketing on the Internet are two very different things. Anyone who has read my articles knows that I devote a great deal of time towards encouraging hoteliers to make certain that their hotel's web site is correctly designed for search and sales, unfortunately, there are so many sites that are not, but, having a great web site is only the beginning of your online marketing program.

Internet marketing encompasses all the actions you can take to attract the right visitors to your web site and to encourage them to make a reservation. There are literally hundreds of ways to promote new reservations on your website. I will outline just a few of them, here. As your hotel's Internet promotion leader, I suggest that you gather your team and brainstorm, you will uncover many more.

### **Start with Your Competition**

One of your web site's objectives will always be to meet and beat the competition in terms of search engine rankings and web site content. In order to do so, you have to understand exactly what your competition is doing. Take the time to research competitors and compare them on an element-by-element basis, what they feature and what they offer.

You have to understand that your online competition is different from your offline competition. Online you are competing with all the hotels in your area that have an online presence, not just those hotels that match-up with your facilities and services. When doing your competitive analysis online, you want to select "the best of the best" and then, define the value your hotel represents.

What does your competition offer that your hotel does not? What does the competition consider the most important information to promote in the marketplace? Does the content on your site elevate your hotel above the competition and encourage visitors to make a reservation? Getting visitors to make a reservation is the priority.

### **Everyone Loves a Deal**

Consider placing a special promotion section on your web site, but stay away from promotions centered on discounted rates. The most effective special promotions are value-added, not discounted rates. Value-added specials do not compromise or diminish your hotel's position in the marketplace and/or negatively affect rate integrity.

Several years ago, someone had the brilliant idea to include a complimentary breakfast as a value-added feature to improve sales. It worked so well that nearly every hotel now offers it, it is no longer a special feature and could even be a deficit for those who do not offer it.

Create special promotions, which focus on value-added features targeted to the market segment you are seeking. Leisure travelers and corporate travelers have much different sales "hot buttons". Target special promotions towards building incremental new business and not simply to provide your current guests with additional benefits.

The vast majority of travelers make a value judgment when selecting a hotel, simply reducing rates only devalues your product and destroys rate integrity.

### **Use Permission Marketing To Build Repeat Business**

Permission marketing boils down to asking your target market and web site visitors for their permission to send them something. Contests work well, but a regular flow of promotions can work better. A message suggesting a newsletter with new promotions or "early private notification" can be very effective.

One example could be "We provide new specials on a regular basis. Click here to join our emailing list to receive early private notification of our specials before they offered to the general public".

Permission marketing is a great way to build a database of interested visitors to your web site. Data mining is an important process to build future business.

### **Using Signature Files to Increase Web Site Traffic**

A signature file is commonly referred to as an electronic business card. I receive hundreds of emails from hoteliers and only small fractions of them use a signature on their email. A signature file can be a good free method of directing traffic to your web site.

### **Developing a Link Strategy**

With all the talk about search engine optimization, there seems to be little conversation about creating a good link strategy. Having a good link strategy is a very important part of SEO. When ranking your web site, several search engines consider the number and quality of in-bound links to rank your website.

Remember that in-bound quality links to your site are beneficial and out-bound links detract from your site's popularity and site ranking with search engines. Developing an effective link strategy can boost site production considerably, but leave it to the experts, there are many pit-falls and penalties if it is done incorrectly.

### **Take Advantage of Google & Yahoo Local Search**

Participating in local search is easy and free. Local search can help your banqueting and restaurant business. It also keeps your hotel near the top of search engine results.

### **Next Steps**

The bottom-line is that Internet Marketing ties together the creative and technical aspects of the Internet, which includes site design, development, advertising, and sales. Internet marketing methods and strategies include a wide range of services such as: Search Engine Marketing, which includes SEO and pay-per-click advertising, display advertising, behavioral, e-mail, newsletter, and web press release marketing,

Yes, Internet marketing involves more than simply having a web site, but the Internet is still the most effective, least expensive way to expose your hotel to global traffic and new reservations.

### **Contact:**

Neil Salerno, CHME, CHA

Hotel Marketing Coach

[www.hotelmarketingcoach.com](http://www.hotelmarketingcoach.com)

[NeilS@hotelmarketingcoach.com](mailto:NeilS@hotelmarketingcoach.com)

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