

Hotel Website Design 2.0... Using Travel Social Media To Advance Website Sales - By Neil Salerno

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The Social Media, web 2.0, is causing quite a stir in our industry, the articles keep flowing and many hoteliers are poised to capture their fair share of the millions of social media users. In my opinion, the only social media, which are currently relevant to our industry, are the few travel-related sites like TripAdvisor and VirtualTourist. General social media sites like FaceBook or You Tube are not yet the magic panacea some hoteliers had hoped they would be.

If you are already monitoring travel social media sites for postings about your hotel, that's great. In my opinion, the jury is still out when it comes to whether or not to advertise on these sites, if you have extra money to experiment, try it, it may have some promise.

There is, however, a lesson to learn from the travel media movement, or maybe I should say 'a lesson to be remembered', it's an old lesson. Third-party endorsements have tremendous strength and are monumentally more credible than hotel advertising or typical web site text. Too many hotel web sites overreach with old photography and exaggerated text which thwart any attempt at credibility. Travelers are getting increasingly skeptical of the 'facts' on hotel web sites.

There's no doubt that travel social media sites like TripAdvisor.com are becoming increasingly popular with the traveling public. Travelers read comments, from other travelers, to provide comfort to their choice of hotel. They are comforted by knowing that another traveler enjoyed their stay at a particular hotel and draw on those comments to support their reservation decision.

The owner of a client hotel in Florida recently told me about recent guests from the UK who told him that they found his hotel on the Internet and booked after reading the hotel's many complimentary postings. This seems to be a common pattern. His site receives more than 8,000 visitors per month and it's located in a tertiary city. A small independent hotel, this owner relies on his site to produce the majority of his reservations.

In this new age of online communication, people love having the ability to, not only read guest comments, but love to post comments for others to read. They can avoid those uncomfortable confrontations at the front desk and letters to the Chamber of Commerce, guests can now express their pleasure or displeasure with a few mouse clicks. It's time to incorporate this function into website design.

Hotel Website Design 2.0 represents a new concentration on site sales content, subject matter specifically presented to increase visitor conversion into reservations. There has been so much emphasis on site content for search engine optimization, yet the fact remains that an average of only 3.7%, or less, of these visitors actually makes a reservation on a hotel site, franchise booking portals don't fare much better. Design 2.0 is intended to close the gap between visitors and reservations..

Applying Web 2.0 Lessons to Website Design

Hotel Website Design 2.0 takes the lessons learned from the success of travel social media sites and places guest comments directly on your proprietary website and provides guests with the ability to post new comments, which will later be added to the site. This new design element for hotel websites elevates hotel sites to proactive sales pieces. No longer simply an online brochure, Design 2.0 adds strong sales elements to hotel sites to drive reservations.

If the power of third-party endorsements is the basis of travel media popularity, why not place real guest comments directly on your web site...and give visitors the ability to submit comments of their own?

Adding Credibility to Site Content

Data shows that travelers are getting more and more skeptical of hotel site content. This is fueled by the use of old photography of facilities the way they used to be, exaggerated text, poorly done virtual tours, poor site navigation, and other outdated elements. Website text is important for the search ability of a site, but good photography also sells reservations.

Now that Internet providers offer vastly increased speeds and computer speeds have improved, the time is right to present high density and higher quality images. Design 2.0 focuses on the use of larger, high quality photography on your site. Design 2.0 enhances the images with text descriptions which add search ability to images. What is the point in spending thousands of dollars to have a site designed and not invest in new photography to generate reservations?

Design 2.0 also focuses on the presentation of text content on hotel sites. We understand the need for well-written text content from a search standpoint, but it's time to focus on what we say and how we say it. Most site visitors do not read all the text on a site, which illustrates the need to present hotel features and benefits in a hierarchy format.

As every sales person knows, the 'close' is an important element of any sales presentation. A closing statement is the process of actually asking someone to take action to make a reservation. Many website designers need to learn how to create text which is written to drive visitors to the reservation link. This is the difference between creating an online hotel brochure versus developing a true website sales piece.

Packaging is a Great Tool

Packaging your product can be a very effective way to create interest on your web site. It's also a great way to introduce a closing statement to drive reservations. Highlighting an expiration date for the package, introducing a special holiday package, or creating a package directed to a specific market segment are all good closing stimulants.

Packaging doesn't need to represent deep discounting of any kind to be successful, this is a common misconception. Packaging is simply the process of combining services and/or activities with accommodations. It combines a 'reason for travel' with a place to stay. Remember, in most cases, staying at your hotel is not the reason for travel, your hotel is merely a place to stay while traveling.

Companies like Expedia have been enjoying great success with their package sales combining airfare with hotel accommodations. Well-conceived packages on your website can create interest and a sense of value to close sales.

Balancing Search Content with Sales Content

It is well recognized that keyword-rich text content is important to aid generic search, but one should not lose sight of the fact that this is only half the job of a well-designed hotel website. Once visitors have found the site, the next step is to convert that visitor into a reservation.

The three basics of hotel sales are location, facilities, and entertainment or activities in the area. Many hotel sites do a poor job of communicating these three necessary factors. Simply listing facilities and hotel amenities does not sell your hotel. People stay at your hotel because they are visiting the area, not the other way around.

It's amazing how many hoteliers don't know how many reservations are generated through their website. Sure, we are always looking to increase the number of visitors to a site, but hotels can't bank visitors, that takes reservations. Website sales are still the best investment a hotel can make.

Website Design 2.0 represents a new emphasis on converting hotel site visitors into website reservations. Converting visitors into online reservations is your site's true job.

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