

## Hotel eMarketing - Beyond Rooms! - Jitendra Jain

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'We've come a long way, baby' claimed a high-spirited pop idol not so long ago, following up on the claim with an equally upbeat track. And so we have...in the world of Internet Marketing too.

From the age of information (think glorified electronic brochure) on the web to the world of snappy online transactions...we've now moved into the age of an experiential and social Internet, all great leaps in a relatively short space of time. Hotel eMarketers can lay claim to that cheery phrase too, as far as marketing and distributing hotel rooms on the internet is concerned, in spite of the traditional, people-centric nature of the industry. But despite the eMarketer code to boldly go where no other hotel marketers have gone before, very few venture into the fuzzy world of online marketing beyond rooms.

There's lots more to promote beyond rooms in a hotel, of course. The biggest being the exciting range of Food & Beverage outlets that hotels feature today. And then there are ancillary services like Spa, Sports, Recreation and more features, depending on the nature of the hotel and its location. For hotels that are already up to the mark on their rooms eMarketing, perhaps the biggest challenge is the fact that most of these services are very hard to track, since sales conversion usually happens offline. Another challenge is the low tech nature of these services, since most hotels don't feel the need to invest in online reservation and information systems and for restaurants, bars and spas. And then there is the need to portray a strong hotel 'brand image' while still bringing out the unique character and feel of various outlets and signature services.

In most hotels in the Middle East, the Food & Beverage department holds a loftier position than in properties elsewhere. With the vibrant dining and entertainment scene in most developing cities in the region, dining contributes to almost half (in some cases) of hotel revenues, a figure unimagined in North America and Europe. Hence the importance of promoting and selling these other areas of the hotel become even more imperative. While the jury's still out on what comprises a good ancillary eMarketing strategy, here are a few ideas to get the ball rolling:

**Start off on the right foot:** Even though we've moved beyond a purely 'information' age on the web, it is still essential to ensure that customers can find all the relevant, accurate information on your outlets and services on your website. Ensure you've kept your descriptions concise, marketable and search engine friendly. Also avoid going the 'Flash-only' route or building too many microsites and websites for individual outlets unless absolutely necessary - it's usually better to have one site with different sections to promote all the information and special offers you need, so you can promote that one website URL to guests for easy top-of-mind recall (and on outlet collateral pieces plus all offline advertising).

**Reach the right people at the right time and in the right manner:** Customer Relationship Management for overnight guests has evolved considerably, thanks to advances in Property Management Systems and sophisticated tools now employed by hotel properties and chains. Unfortunately CRM for most F&B outlets, Spas and Recreation is still restricted to manual contact collection, Excel spreadsheets and spamming clients when promotions arise. A good CRM strategy is half the job, and then consistently applying it to ensure you're reaching the right audience for the right promotions while respecting privacy is the other. Professional database management and a legal, tech-sound email contact strategy is a good place to start. Packaging hotel rooms with meals and ancillary services is also a wonderful way to upsell and offer exclusive value-additions for online bookers.

**Capture new customers:** Are you ensuring that you reach the maximum number of potential customers for your outlets or services? Utilizing credible 3rd party advertising channels may be a great way to get the word out, from Paid Search Marketing leading to specific promotions / outlet pages to sending Email campaigns to qualified and relevant geographic databases. Search Engine Optimizing your content to ensure customers can find you on natural search results for the right keywords is also key to competing effectively online. Should you have a sizeable eMarketing budget at your disposal, banner advertising on popular guest-frequented portals and sponsored newsletters may also be an option to gain awareness and build your brand name online.

**Create a buzz:** Utilize all that the Web 2.0 revolution has to offer and create a buzz! The range of ideas here is only limited to the eMarketers imagination...but must also be used with caution, given the fickle nature of the Webosphere. Ideas range from blogging and video-blogging about outlets, chefs, dishes, spa treatments and unique features of your product to intelligent viral marketing and even utilizing social networks to build communities driven by loyal patrons.

**Make things interactive:** One of the key charms of the Internet has always been the level of convenience offered by the platform. After all, how else can you sit in one country and order a beer in another, for a thirsty stranger outside a bar, that you've just happened to be watching on a webcam? (gimmicky as it may sound, it's been rumored to have happened!). Adding a level of interactivity always makes things more interesting, whether it is adding yourself to 'local search', going 'mobile' with your website, offering live video feeds, convenient online chats with hotel service agents, online guest feedback / reviews with visible results on operations...or even fun elements like games, contests and just being able to view a restaurant in 3d and make a booking, complete with special requests! Of course, depending on the region and the tech adoption level of potential guests, this may be money well spent for the future (and to stand out from the crowd) rather than directly impacting the bottom line here and now.

**Track right. Refine and repeat.** The most crucial element. How do you measure if your promotions have been successful? Don't let the offline conversions turn you off. While not as detailed or 'accurate' as online conversions, promotions for ancillary services can still be tracked in various ways. Basic tracking includes using coupons, tracking codes, asking guests to print off the promotion for redemption, etc. More advanced techniques employ the use of campaign-specific telephone lines, media-meshing and recently, online site-generated visitor id's that tie in with web analytics packages and interface with live chat applications for live sales conversions! The options are out there for the picking...and are getting more advanced by the day.

So the next time you pass up that tempting F&B promotion in favor of a rooms campaign with a more 'visible' Return on Investment, think again...and get those creative juices flowing!

#### **About the Author**

At work, Jitendra Jain (JJ) is employed with Starwood Hotels & Resorts in Dubai as an E-Commerce Manager and handles hotel online marketing & distribution. At play, he is the founder of various online initiatives and free platforms like [www.thetalentjungle.com](http://www.thetalentjungle.com), [www.younghotelier.com](http://www.younghotelier.com) (among others) that aim to connect, educate and shine the limelight on the true stars of the industry - the people that run it!

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