

The Greatest Hotel People I Have Never Met...and the lessons I learned from them - By Neil Salerno

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Writing articles, as often as I do, has opened up a completely new world of communication for me. I truly value the wonderful feedback and encouraging comments, I have received, from the many great hoteliers that I have never met.

My writings have allowed me to communicate with hoteliers running every type of hotel, large and small, corporate, convention, and resort, in so many markets throughout the world.

I am thankful to have had so many of my writings published in online and print publications around the world. I truly believe that we all learn and progress through the process of communication and through the expression of our knowledge, experiences, and beliefs. Remember, "Be who you are and say what you feel... for those who mind, don't matter and those who matter, don't mind."

The Internet is the perfect conduit for hoteliers to communicate with each other and with the guests we serve. It gives us the ability to expose our hotels to the global travel marketplace easily and affordably. During the past few years, we all learned that it is necessary to use new marketing methods and practices in order to be effective in this unique online marketplace, many traditional hotel marketing practices do not apply to the Internet.

When looking back, it makes me realize how much our industry has changed since I entered it in the late 60's, it made me realize that the quality of one's experience, and what we learn, is far more meaningful than the length of one's career, many hoteliers just do not accept change. Rapid changes, in the way we do business in the hospitality industry, have forced good hoteliers to embrace the Internet, communicate, and learn new techniques.

I have learned so much from the great people in our industry, lessons learned from reading their articles, getting reader feedback from my articles, and hearing hotelier's concerns. The message here is that our natural ability to learn from one another is essential to our progress.

Lessons Learned

With the increasing speed of connections to the Internet, I find myself changing my view of flash elements on hotel web sites. Download speeds have increased dramatically and it now makes some uses of flash and movement practical for hotel web sites. I still caution about the excessive use of flash, remember, search engines still cannot read flash. Entire sites, made with flash, are still taboo for hotels. It may look cool, but it makes your hotel virtually invisible on the Internet..

I hear from hoteliers, every week, who express frustration and disappointment with their web site and its failure to perform to their expectations. It is all too common to see hotel web sites, which were designed by companies that have no clue about hotel sales and marketing, have a lack of understanding how generic search works, or even worse, over-charge hoteliers for their services.

There are several good hotel Internet marketing firms, which can do an excellent job of developing business for hotels on the Internet. Look for hotel marketing experience, not just with the salesperson representing the company, but also with the person who will do the designing and marketing of your site. The return-on-investment for a well-designed site is quick and certain.

Web 2.0 Dialogue

Perhaps the most notorious topic continues to be the current and future role of Web 2.0 social media in hotel marketing. Many hotel marketers stay mesmerized by the huge numbers, which the Web 2.0 movement has generated, although some experts feel that the popularity of web 2.0 has already peaked. They see news, movies, even political statements wildly viewed by millions of people and they salivate about the marketing possibilities for our industry.

I got into the mix when I wrote a couple of articles, in response to several I read, which featured proposals to "monitor the Web 2.0 social media to see what consumers are saying about your hotel on the Internet". The arrogance of this statement immediately struck me. A service like this might be helpful for hotel brands with national or international implications, but a waste of time for individual hotels.

It is hard to imagine that there would be significant user-generated comments published on general social media sites, targeting an individual hotel, assuming that any significant number of people would ever read them. Hotels may be a primary subject on the minds of hoteliers, but that is hardly true for the public as a whole.

There is no doubt that general social media is a boon to normal retail sales, items or services of interest to the general consumer. Hotels, however, are reactive sales entities, consumers have little interest in our products unless they have a reason to travel and need a place to stay.

On the other hand, every hotel should be monitoring travel social media like TripAdvisor.com, but the most one can do is to post an answer to any negative comment in response. The fact is that the vast majority of consumer comments on TripAdvisor are positive. Checking the few travel social media sites can and should be done by every hotel.

The Internet is Still Evolving

One of the advantages of spending hours on the Internet to analyze hotel web sites is that it gives me the ability to see some of the unique and creative techniques used by knowledgeable designers. Unfortunately, I also get to expose the marketing errors and poor design techniques of web site developers who do not understand online hotel marketing.

As the Internet evolves, we need to adjust and change with it. As hoteliers realized the magic of generic search to populate hotel web sites, we mastered key word search and created link strategies to capture new site visitors. But, search is only half the job. Recently, I proffered a new area of concentration, which I call Hotel Website Design 2.0.

By any name, Design 2.0 places an emphasis on the 'sales' design of hotel web sites to convert more visitors into reservations. This involves the writing of site text and image placement emphasizing the three primary sales factors of location, facilities, and area attractions, what a site says and how it says it. These are the primary selling principles for hotels, online or offline.

Hotel web site designers that simply present the hotel's facilities, amenities, and services, with little mention of the hotel's location and area business/leisure attractions just do not understand hotel marketing. As I have said many times before, with few exceptions, consumers decide to visit an area, then choose a place to stay. It matters little if the hotel is truly amazing if it is not located near to where they want or need to be.

To borrow a technique from web 2.0 social media, we suggest that hotels begin to include guest comments and the means to add comments, to their sites.. At checkout, the front desk can then direct guests to the hotel site to complete a comment card, for management review and later a posting on the web site. Comments, which are posted on TripAdvisor or other social sites, can even be labeled 'as seen on TripAdvisor.com', further satisfying consumer desire for third-party endorsements.

Learn From the Experiences of Others

Communication is the key to progress and innovation. I strongly suggest that every hotelier subscribe to a few of the many great online sites with articles specifically published for hoteliers. Whether or not you agree with the writer, you will benefit from digesting a different viewpoint. Our industry is constantly evolving and changing, we can all learn from each other.

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