

Best Practices on Monitoring Hotel Review Sites - An Action Plan for Monitoring and Responding to Internet Chatter about Your Hotel - By Max Starkov and Mariana Mechoso

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Hoteliers often ask HeBS how they can monitor the Internet chatter surrounding their hotels and whether or not they should pay for services that offer this type of monitoring. What hotel review websites should you monitor? How often should you check for reviews about your hotel on these websites? Should you provide a rebuttal for reviews? These are just a few of the questions hoteliers ponder on this subject. This article offers a free, quick, and easily implemented action plan for monitoring reviews about your hotel.

Background:

It's common knowledge that the Internet has certainly changed how travel consumers perceive the credibility of information. Any discrepancy between "official" and "unofficial" content should be dealt with immediately. A travel supplier has to stand by its product/service, but cannot ignore the 'popular vote' for its product's quality. HeBS surveys and our own research show that consumer-generated content on social media sites and networks is perceived as more credible by online travelers. And the bigger the disparity between official and unofficial content, the bigger the gap in credibility.

Social Media (Consumer-Generated Media) is online content created by Internet users and made available to other Internet users via Web 2.0 interactive technology applications. Hotel review sites such as TripAdvisor.com are part of the Social Media phenomenon.

Fact:

38% of US Internet users (72 million) use a social media site at least once a month

89% of US Online Buyers read customer reviews before they buy

- 43% most of the time, 22% always

(eMarketer)

So what are the most important hotel-related customer review sites? As part of a brand-defensive strategy, it's unnecessary to monitor hundreds or thousands of review sites, but only the handful that the majority of travel reviewers' visit. These sites are:

TripAdvisor.com: TripAdvisor receives over 30 million visitors every month. The hotel can actively respond to any customer review via the 'Hotel Owner's Page' by using the link located at the bottom of the page with customer reviews and then clicking on the 'Respond to a Review' link.

Expedia.com: Expedia is the largest online travel agency (OTA). Currently the hotel can monitor all of Expedia's customer reviews, but cannot actually respond to a review.

Google.com: Google is the largest search engine with 60% of search traffic in the United States, and more than 75%-80% of traffic in Europe. Google provides a sampling of reviews for each hotel from TripAdvisor and other review sites (type in the hotel name + location, and then click on Reviews under the hotel listing). You can then visit each of the review sites and respond to an actual review there if allowed.

A Word about Web Reputation Monitoring Tools

Several vendors have launched "Web Reputation" monitoring tools for hotels. The cost ranges from the absurd for more enterprise-level applications, to more affordable solutions at a cost of \$150-\$250/month. These new tools supposedly automate the process of monitoring who says what about the hotel on as many as 25 million consumer-generated sites, plus they claim to automate the hotelier's response to such postings. Here is what we think about services like this one:

What these services do for \$150+/month, Google Alerts and Technorati Watchlist do for free. Google is the most comprehensive search engine that now indexes the whole blogosphere and consumer-generated sites as well. Techorati is the most comprehensive blog and consumer-generated media search engine today.

Some of these vendors claim that they monitor 25 million consumer-generated sites out there. Google searches 12 billion web pages. Technorati searches 101.2 million blogs and over 250 million pieces of tagged social media.

There are only a few customer review sites that matter and these are TripAdvisor, Expedia and Google.

Some vendors say they inform you of the negative postings about your hotel and "automatically post your responses" - however the most important sites like TripAdvisor, Yahoo Travel Planner, etc. do not allow such automatic postings.

Action Plan for Monitoring Internet Chatter about Your Hotel

One designated person at the property needs to be responsible for monitoring reviews and comments on a weekly basis about your property on Google, TripAdvisor, and Expedia, so they can immediately address any issues and act appropriately. You must authorize someone specific at the property to respond to reviews (both negative and very positive).

Important Considerations:

Determine who 'owns' the process of monitoring and responding to customer reviews and then issue an internal memo:

- Make a staff member responsible for monitoring customer reviews on TripAdvisor, Expedia and Google on a weekly basis
- Authorize someone at the property to respond to:
 - Extremely positive customer reviews
 - Negative customer reviews that are dead wrong
 - Negative customer reviews that are right on target
- Address the issue of when, and in what cases, the GM should be alerted

Our experience shows that the Front Desk Manager or DOSM can handle this responsibility equally well. This person may simply review these three websites on a weekly basis as well as sign up for both Google Alerts and Technorati Watchlist.

Here are some quick tips for responding to customer reviews:

Thank the customer for taking the time to write a review

Apologize profusely if the customer is right on target with their negative review

Provide a simple, short explanation of what really happened (if such an explanation is possible)

Assure the reviewer and hotel guests in general that every possible step has been taken to address the problem or service in question

Offer a direct line of communication between hotel management and the reviewer (via email, direct phone line, etc.) in order to rectify the situation

To conclude the response, use any elements of the customer's comments that are constructive (e.g. great hotel location, comfortable rooms, etc) to put a positive spin on a negative review.

Conclusion

Hoteliers need to work hard to nurture happy customers and avoid negative postings. They must monitor reviews on hotel review sites, TripAdvisor in particular, and react immediately if an extremely positive or negative review is posted. Designate one person at the hotel to monitor these reviews weekly and to use tools like Google Alerts and Technorati to monitor all online chatter about your hotel.

It's much better to react to these postings and show your current and potential customers that you are 100% committed to serving them by addressing any and all problems, rather than ignoring complaints. You may be under the impression that responding to a negative review is a wasted effort because this customer will probably never return. However, your response should be primarily focused on assuring the traveling public that the issue is being addressed and the hotel is dedicated to customer service. Your response will also speak to future potential customers who might stumble on this review and the hotel's response.

As you evaluate your property's Action Plan for monitoring hotel review sites, seek advice from an experienced and ROI-centric Internet marketing hospitality consultancy to help you adopt industry's best practices and implement the latest trends.

About HeBS

Max Starkov is President & CEO and Jason Price is EVP at Hospitality eBusiness Strategies (HeBS), the industry's leading Internet marketing and distribution strategy consulting firm for the hospitality and travel verticals. Based in New York City, HeBS has pioneered many of the "best practices" in hotel Internet marketing and direct online distribution. HeBS specializes in helping hoteliers build and enhance their direct Internet marketing and distribution strategy, boost the hotel Internet marketing presence, establish interactive relationships with their customers, and significantly increase direct online bookings and ROIs. The firm brings a unique perspective to the industry, gained through working with over 500 hospitality companies including major brands, independent hotels, casinos, convention bureaus and hotel management companies worldwide. Find out more about HeBS at www.hospitalityebusiness.com, or contact HeBS at (212)752-8186 or info@hospitalityebusiness.com.

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