

Some Hotel Site Designers, Don't Know... What They Don't Know - By Neil Salerno

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As I review various hotel websites, I am constantly amazed by the number of poorly designed sites which are being developed by some hotel website design companies. To add insult to injury, it is shocking to see the over-priced fees that they are charging to design sites which do not follow acceptable search optimization guidelines or essential hotel sales principles.

Now I know that it is easy to be critical of site design, but I am not referring to the attractiveness of the sites or the way the sites look, instead, I'm referring to the functionality of the sites and their failure to attract generic search and convert visitors into reservations. My criticism is with the lack of necessary search/sales elements and lack of design proficiency utilized by many, even very large, site design companies.

My conclusion is that they don't know, what they don't know, or they just don't get it.

There are even some hotel site design companies which are actually selling stock template designs coupled with 'content management', a lethal combination. Content management gives the hotel the ability to make their own changes to the site, in spite of the negative impact which could be caused by making the wrong changes.

Although it might be attractive to some hoteliers to have the ability to make their own site changes, understand that the text content on your site shapes and determines your search results. A good designer knows how to meld search keywords/phrases into your site content.

Using content management is like going to a doctor, being diagnosed with an illness, and having the doctor hand you a scalpel so you can operate on yourself, the result could be painful. Content is king, the heart of your hotel's web site. Do you really want to control all that essential content yourself? It's best to leave that to a professional.

It wouldn't be fair if I didn't explain what I mean by 'over-priced fees' from some hotel site designers. It's not the total dollars I am referring to, it's what you get for those dollars. Any price charged by a company which produces a dysfunctional web site is far too much. Many of these companies charge huge hourly fees and give the project to a \$20 per hour techie to design.

Many of these companies rely on what I call 'After Thoughts' to cure design flaws. When your site is performing poorly and you are sadly disappointed, their first suggestion is to perform search engine optimization 'after the fact', as if this will cure a poorly designed site. To begin with, the site should have been structured for generic search and SEO when it was originally designed.

Another tactic they use when faced with poor results, many designers suggest that all your site needs is Pay-Per-Click advertising. Now, I am a strong believer in the power of PPC, but only if your site is structured for generic search, first. A good PPC program will always provide a boost to your site's search results, but it is neither a long-term solution nor is it a replacement for natural generic search. Don't fall for quick fixes to poor design work.

Both of these tactics, SEO and PPC advertising, should be supplements to your website marketing, not cures for a poorly designed site. As your site matures and gains PageRank and popularity, generic search will consistently place your site among the top search results, if your site is properly structured and maintained, it will produce the results you need.

Designers Who Know...

Just a few years ago, there were only a handful of web site designers with experience in hotel site design. Today, there are too many to count. Of course, there are many who still don't see the difference between hotel site design and retail site design. These are the techies who think all web sites should simply be attractive.

Designers-who-know are those who realize that the body text content, not image content, is most important for search and sales. Designers-who-know understand that a hotel website must serve two masters: search and sales, not just look nice. Designers-who-know measure the success of your site by how many reservations it produces, not simply by how many visitors your site has.

Designers-who-know recognize that your hotel's location and its natural room night generators must be strongly represented on your site, the absence of this information results in designing a 'hotel online brochure' and not a sales piece. Designers-who-know realize that your website must have good search content, not just be attractive.

Finding a Designer Who Knows: Questions to ask

Who are you talking to? Is this person a salesman or someone who will be actively involved in your site's design? Is the designer experienced in hotel marketing?

Is the representative talking in 'Techno-Babble' or hotel marketing language?

Is this company experienced in hotel copywriting? Content is king.

How many pages will your finished site contain? Even limited service hotels should have upwards of thirty or more pages to capture search. Stronger competition requires stronger site content.

What other hotel sites have they designed? And, how are those sites producing?

Do they employ a logical link strategy? Do they only use 'white hat' link techniques?

Covey states 'Begin with the end in mind' What is their concept of a successful site? Are they after visitors or reservations?

How much will they charge for making changes after the site is published? If they charge by the hour, will they charge you for an hour even though a change only took only 10 minutes?

How much will they charge for web site hosting? If it's more than a few dollars a month, it's too much Will they use a dedicated server to provide strong bandwidth?.

Do they perform an online competition analysis for your market before they begin?

Most Important Hotel Site Design Elements

First and foremost, thoroughly researched key words/phrases.

Keyword-rich text on all site pages, a good balance between text and images.

A good site navigation plan - visitors should not have to learn how to navigate your site.

Researched, unique, and well-written title and description tags

Simple and attractive site design with a limited amount of flash content.

Body-text with an emphasis on the hotel's location, attractions, and other room night generators.

A well-thought-out 'white hat' link strategy

Hotel website design is not rocket science, but it does require an understanding of how and why travelers find and select hotels online. There is a lot more involved than simply designing an attractive website. A beautiful website, with all the bells and whistles, will do nothing unless it can be found and people can visit it. And that means nothing unless the message drives those visitors to your booking page.

Contact:

Neil Salerno, CHME, CHA

Hotel Marketing Coach

www.hotelmarketingcoach.com

NeilS@hotelmarketingcoach.com

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