

Hotel websites must work harder

Ex-hotelier and managing director of apt marketing & pr, Angie Petkovic, explains why websites hold the key to claiming a healthy stake in a competitive marketplace.

Consumers have fallen in love with 'info-on-demand', and online security fears have all but disappeared. Web interaction is ingrained in our culture, and hoteliers need to respond. In fact, some are doing so, but the maze of options and the pace of changing technologies can seem daunting, particularly to independent hoteliers who often lack resources.

Gone are the days when hotel websites simply mimicked brochures and were almost an afterthought. These days, most booking decisions are based on the strength of online content; last year, Merrill Lynch announced that over 60% of UK bookings were either generated online or directly influenced by the web. So, for hoteliers, an effective website is crucial to sustaining a profitable business.

Although the likes of Expedia, Lastminute and Laterooms make their fortunes by funnelling consumers into the 'right' hotels through a set of preferences, the current trend is for customers to access hotel websites direct. Great news for hoteliers, as it eliminates commission and increases the degree of control over rates, offers and up-selling. On the downside, it creates huge pressure on hoteliers to ensure that their website can be found.

It's not difficult to find someone willing to 'optimise' a website, but Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) isn't purely technical. A sound knowledge of the hotel business is required to harness the power of SEO. Along with selecting keywords, there are many other ways to increase website ranking, such as using reciprocal links for popular, related sites and including themed 'word saturation' throughout. It's also important for hoteliers to take control of their own site maintenance where possible.

By using an intuitive Content Management System (CMS), keywords, text and image content can easily be replaced, without incurring charges for each update. Maintaining accuracy and content freshness presents a credible image and encourages repeat visits. A good CMS also enables hoteliers to easily amend menus, add latest news, run seasonal offers and make real-time adjustments. Clever coding makes things even easier; by using date-sensitive triggers and database-driven content, presenting a constantly evolving site is relatively painless. However, once the basics are right, there are other considerations.

Data capture is essential, both in creating a community around the website and for informing future marketing decisions and campaigns. A good statistics package adds a further degree of control and provides useful information on customer behaviour. One of the most popular packages 'Google Analytics' is free and can be easily bolted-on to an existing website. This allows monitoring of specific page visits and analysis of product offers; ultimately increasing site efficiency and maximising business revenue.

A sound online booking system is essential to driving sales. It must be easy to navigate and work as a selling tool in its own right. There are many 'off-the-shelf' packages available but it's worth considering a bespoke system that can be customised to match the hotel's offering. Low occupancy periods can be tackled by changing rates in real-time, or offering password-protected discounts to travel agents and corporate clients. By presenting timely incentives, such as champagne on arrival or dinner for two, packages can be tailored to meet customer needs. Associations can also be made with other tourism suppliers by offering theatre tickets, or passes for local attractions. Customers should feel like they have interacted with the hotel prior to arrival, as the customer experience begins online.

Interaction can be taken a stage further, and 'social media' offers some great tools, while also maximising web traffic and increasing SEO. However, setting up blogs and producing podcasts can be a huge drain on time, so before launching into a social networking strategy, there are a couple of low maintenance options to consider. Setting up an RSS feed is easy, and it allows

customers to subscribe to content updates with a click of the mouse. Forums, guest books and comments pages are also simple to add, but hoteliers must react to the content otherwise it's futile.

If hoteliers decide to embrace social media there are some pitfalls to be aware of. It's crucial to avoid taking on a false persona or faking any aspect of the dialogue; the damage that can be done is well documented. This is a place then for honest, two-way interaction with customers, and it represents an opportunity to improve and refine offerings, based on genuine customer feedback.

So, where to next? There is plenty hoteliers can do on their own, but to take serious steps forward, it's best to buy in expert advice. It's often cheaper in the long term. As a former hotelier, I am well aware of the constant strain on budgets and the lack of time available to consider new methods and technologies. As a marketer I'm at the forefront of these developments and, in my opinion, neglecting website development is a costly mistake. Allocating resources now to harness the power of the internet will pay huge dividends in the future.

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