

# High-end NC independent breaks out beyond brands via Web 2.0

BY CHRISTOPHER OSTROWSKI

CARY, NC—During the last hotel market downturn, the Internet effectively became an adversary of hotels, with the third-party travel-booking sites taking advantage of properties' weakened positions and reaping the financial rewards. But that relationship has changed almost completely in this latest down cycle, as evidenced most recently at one four-star, independent hotel here that's leveraged the new Web 2.0 world to its own market-leading benefit.

Harnessing the latest demand-generating capabilities of the Internet is the 150-room Umstead Hotel and Spa, which made its premier in January of 2007. But soon after that debut the Umstead—which is owned by Ann Goodnight, managed internally and a member of the Leading Hotels of the World—found that its initial Internet marketing strategy was lacking.

"We weren't seeing effective online booking," described Richard Brooks, the Umstead Hotel's director of sales and marketing. "And we are without a brand, and I know the importance of an identity from my background working at Disney. So when you mentioned the Umstead, no one knew what that name meant. We

were the first hotel in North Carolina to receive AAA's five-diamond award, but until people could identify us and our amenities and services, that didn't become a factor. So it was imperative we de-

could offer. We saw the potential there for online booking for this hotel."

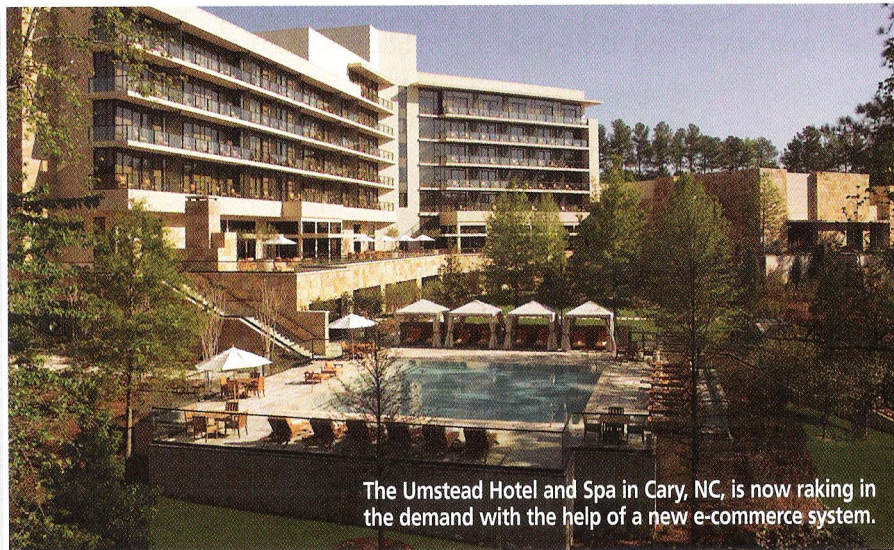
As a result, by the end of its first year in operation, the Umstead Hotel ditched its old tool and tapped e-commerce solution

meta-search tags. Their booking tool, iHotelier, also made things a lot easier by creating packages, tracking the number of website impressions and visits to the site and allowing us to up-sell certain amenities and create a true destination at this hotel."

Furthermore, in this new age of hotel user-generated content and feedback where guests are able to submit reviews on hotels—whether bad, good or truthful—all over the Internet and on specific sites like TripAdvisor, the Umstead was able to utilize TravelClick to track how the property is perceived.

Consequently, Brooks explained that now, through TravelClick's SearchView tool, the hotel's management can view guest comments on the Web and measure those comments and ratings against the competition's.

"Monitoring the system is very important to us and we'll make changes accordingly," Brooks noted. "For example, there were enough complaints out there to make us offer high-speed Internet access complimentary. The same thing occurred with our complimentary coffee and breakfast. Also, we'll have the guest relations manager contact guests if they see that they had a negative experience and try to turn that around." **HB**



The Umstead Hotel and Spa in Cary, NC, is now raking in the demand with the help of a new e-commerce system.

played the proper online tools, especially pay-per-click to get the key phrases for those guest inquiries. We wanted to identify those key search terms to bring more of an identity to the hotel and what we could offer. In the first year of operation here, the tool we were using wasn't effective. But we knew the potential the Web

provider TravelClick as its new online partner. "TravelClick pretty much knew the marketplace and the region itself here, so they were very well-versed on all the key phrases we needed to assign in the search engine optimization," Brooks said. "They also knew what changes we had to make to our website and added