



Give guests control on mobile devices

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<http://www.hotelworldnetwork.com/software/give-guests-control-mobile-devices>



Today's mobile innovations in the industry are driven by a contradictory guest—one who is savvier and more elusive, and yet much more personally engaged and accessible. To stay top of mind with today's guest, hotels need to become tip of thumb.

Much of the industry has optimized or is in the process of optimizing their websites for mobile devices, which basically provides a stripped-down site that makes important site functions easier to find and use.

"It's a micro version of Choicehotels.com," said Mary Beth Knight, VP of e-commerce for Choice Hotels. "I say micro because it's a site [guests] can interact with and perform key functions, ... but it doesn't have the richness of the experience of Choicehotels.com like graphics, promotional messaging and the vivid imagery in the website."

The key to the mobile site is understanding who is accessing it and what that guest's primary needs are, which, according to Knight, include contact information, hotel locating and a booking function.

"They want to look, book online, click to call—they want the basic search and book elements," Knight said.

Scott Lunsford, VP of eProducts and Internet solutions for Wyndham Hotel Group, which recently launched mobile sites for all of its brands, said a mobile site must put value on each click and the customer must "get a lot of information with each move," he said. "When you do a search, the results will have the rate, amenities, directions, all on the first screen so there's not a lot of other pages to go to."

The benefit for the industry is not necessarily grabbing a new customer base; it's more about being available anywhere and everywhere a guest needs service. By doing this, hotels can book

room nights they probably would have missed out on otherwise.

“The majority [of the bookings are] the same set of customers, but there is that group, late in the evening, that may not have gotten to us because they don’t know the number to call Days Inn, but they can do that quickly now,” Lunsford said. “We are picking up that convenience customer.” He noted that early in the week, Internet bookings are mostly made from personal computers, while the majority of mobile bookings come at the end of the week.

Paolo Torchio, VP at E-site Marketing, an Internet marketing company that provides e-business solutions to the hospitality industry, said mobile devices aren’t being used to research as much. They are platforms for immediate or necessary action.

“The biggest opportunity is at the airport with flight changes and delays,” Torchio said. “You can have a device that can make a reservation anywhere.”

Both Wyndham and Choice reported better than expected growth from their mobile sites since their rollout and that these mobile customers “are converting at much higher rates than assumed,” Lunsford said.

On the hotel’s end, the mobile sites serve as two channels in one, allowing guests to call in a reservation or to tap into the central reservation system just as the traditional site does, which is important for the booking engine on the mobile site.

“Best-case scenario, the mobile-optimized website would link to the mobile-optimized booking interface, which would deliver the reservation into the hotel’s CRS,” said Shane Ettestad, EVP-Internet marketing solutions for TravelCLICK.

Knight said it can be difficult to track all of the activity from mobile sites when guests use the click to call feature.

Overall, the mobile-optimized booking engine opens up more possibilities for the guest and hotelier.

“From here, one could open up mobile-only rates and promotions and keep all the channel tracking and yielding tracking intact at the CRS level,” Torchio said.

As further convenience to the guest, mobile sites can be coded with “sniffers” that detect whether the user is viewing the site on a mobile device or a computer and chooses the appropriate site to avoid any confusion or extra steps, Torchio said.

Other applications

Other mobile tools growing in favor are downloadable applications for smart phones. The most widespread of these is the iPhone application, or “app.”

Apps are attractive because their graphics are more impressive and most features can be used without Internet access, said Audrey Cornu, VP-Internet for Tishman Hotel Corp. She recently helped the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort launch its own personalized iPhone app that focuses on showcasing the hotel and allows for interaction when needed.

“Build a brochure and a map [guests] can download,” she said. “They can look at photos, and it moves much quicker than an Internet site. Then have a section that talks about restaurants and has a link to make online reservations.”

Ettestad said an iPhone app makes the most sense, at this moment, for bigger brands that have a wide range of hotels when guests are looking for a property nearby, or for a smaller brand with a cult-like following.

“What other types of content can you give to a consumer to make it worthwhile, to use again and again,” he said. “It might be connected to user reviews or destination content or other travel tidbits for the consumer.”

Choice Hotels, the first brand to come out with an iPhone app, provides the “ability to book with added features, like images of hotels, and rich mapping of locations to where a customer is in real time,” Knight said. “The app is another distribution platform that makes finding our hotels easy.”

This technology paves the way for further guest interaction. One way, Knight mentioned, was more accessible and direct feedback to the brand, and the other way, which may be intimidating to some employees, puts more power in the palm of the guest’s hand and removes the need for staff interaction.

These are “apps where ... guests can access room service or concierge request or housekeeping request,” Ettestad said. Some individual high-end properties are starting this now, but there’s the opportunity for such an application to be brand wide.

“I think what you’ll see is not just, ‘show me the hotel,’ you’ll actually get more into the service area so I can check-in and order room service and also request another pillow rather than pick up the phone.”