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Position yourself online

Feb 19, 2008
By: Russell Shaw

In a trend that now seems irreversible, consumers and businesses that had been booking their hotel reservations through call centers, GDS-equipped travel agents, and even third-party Internet reservations providers are doing their own booking, directly through individual hotel Web sites.

In some cases, these customers go directly to the hotel site, even bypassing the corporate site of their hotel's flag.

To harness this trend, hotels increasingly are realizing they need a great Web site, a good booking engine and an understanding of the competitive market. Hotels need to get smarter on how they position themselves online.

In terms of operations and planning, these realities increasingly are on the mind of such hoteliers as Jayson Smith, manager of E-marketing and Creative for Trump Entertainment Resorts in Atlantic City, N.J. (www.trump.com).

"We are seeing the shift (to direct booking off the Web site)," Smith said. He adds that this shift has led to some revised thinking in how the Web sites for the three Trump Atlantic City hotels capitalize on this shift.

The three Trump Atlantic City Resorts are the Trump Taj Mahal Casino Resort, the Trump Marina Hotel Casino, and the Trump Plaza Hotel & Casino.

"Online is the easiest way to target high-quality cash customers," Smith said. "Direct booking increases our booking revenue and cash revenue. It helps to extend our branding into markets such as Washington and Baltimore that would cost a fortune to buy in traditional media."

The goal, then, would be to equip the Trump Atlantic City Web sites with enough features and functionality to, as Smith puts it, get these customers within the marketing cycle. That means equipping the site with such amenities as loyalty and retention program promotions and transactional functionalities for such initiatives as Trump One Card, which allows members comp choices, more Cash Back, as well as exclusive access to member-only events.

In terms of promotions, Smith cites the growing popularity of online games on the Trump Entertainment Resorts. Geared toward games offered at the properties themselves, these games are intended to provide potential guests visiting the Web sites with eagerness and excitement about these games, as well as instructional and practice opportunities intended to boost potential guests' confidence factor and turn lookers into bookers.

Special promotions are also key Web site musts for resort properties, such as the Best Western Island Palms Hotel & Marina (www.islandpalms.com) and general manager Bob Levine. One example is a recent chocolate-covered strawberry promotion for Valentine's Day. That promotion was featured on the Specials page.



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Toolkits from solution providers such as TravelClick have also helped ease the content updating tasks necessary for properties with marketing machines that are always in motion.

In a key example Smith, cites the ability to quickly add or replace photos of property activities and amenities, move them from page to page, as well as add visually attractive news of seasonal or holiday promotions. Such time-sensitive tasks that might have taken a Web master hours or even days to complete now can take far less time to complete.

Sidebar: So How Do You Get Web Visitors To Your Site In The First Place?

On the back end, site analytics capabilities can offer on-the-fly intelligence about which campaigns are working and can be expanded and continued, and which other campaigns might not be performing quite to expectations.

The backdrop here, of course, would be to craft strategies that would get potential guests to find the Web site to begin with. Even though the trend exists, so many competitors are aware of this that hotels such as the Trump Resorts and the Best Western Island Palms & Marina are constantly tasked with staying in the vanguard.

In terms of this Web site traffic steering, two imperatives cited by both Smith and Levine are increasingly sophisticated SEO (Search Engine Optimization) programs, as well as participation in pay-per-click programs from Internet search engines such as Google and Yahoo.

Simplified, SEO means populating your hotel site with keywords that are likely to be entered by prospective guests as they use search engines to find hotel properties with specific features, or in specific regions. Pay-per-click often means purchasing certain search terms, entry of which by Web users in search engines would prompt a text-based ad for your hotel- as well as a link to your site-on top or on the side of search results pages.

"These features have made the customer very comfortable" in booking (through those channels), Smith added.

Five Ways To Make Your Hotel Web site More Effective

1. If your property is part of a well-known brand, ensure that your Web site has a unique Web address. Doing so will enable your customers to more easily find your site, and to bookmark your site for future visits.
2. If you have a customer loyalty program, make sure your site offers your members and guests the ability to manage their membership online. Account information retrieval is a big first step.
3. Be current with information about your property. Replace and add photos and updated hotel restaurant menus as they are available. You don't want your guests turned off by old information.
4. Use Web site analytical tools to determine which promotions are working and which are not performing that well. Conversion rates (such as the percentage of visits to promotional announcements that ultimately lead to booking) are just one example Then, take the information gleaned and fix the issues that might be causing the lack of enthusiasm.

Consider using SEO techniques and Pay-Per-Click campaigns to draw more visitors to your site from search engines such as Google and Yahoo.

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