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A Homepage Of One's Own

Hoteliers use algorithms, cookies, IP addresses to create booking sites relevant to individual users.

By *Adam Kirby, Associate Editor -- Hotels, 7/1/2008*

A good hotel knows its returning guests—not only their names, but also their likes and dislikes, their interests, their personalities—and works to customize a guest's visit based on that knowledge. So why should those guests expect anything less when they visit the hotel's Web site?

The Leading Hotels of the World Ltd., New York, has re-launched its lhw.com as a sophisticated new Web site that recognizes returning users and customizes the site's appearance and offers based on the user's data profile. The photo-heavy, Ajax-based site saw its conversion rate skyrocket by 35% just weeks after its April launch, and the site is generating an ADR 23% higher than the average across all channels, says Marshall Calder, Leading's senior vice president of marketing.

Leading's new site is strewn with dramatic imagery that dynamically changes based on a user's particular interests, as do the text and marketing offers. A detailed search function allows users to identify their perfect destinations by selecting personal preferences, filtering for attributes like child-friendly, historic, golf or spa, among others. The filters are "additive," resulting in a customizable target list of options.

The site logs search and booking data, and using algorithms and proprietary software, future site visits are customized to the user's interests. The software picks up patterns between site navigation and booking tendencies to make assumptions about a given user, and the site's imagery, text and even offers are tailored accordingly to that individual. If a user shows an interest in golf, for instance, he or she could expect to see golf photos and package offers upon future visits to the site.

In creating the site, backend designer Leading Interactive Reservations LLC focused on giving users a complete travel-planning experience. Destination guides were written and general images were uploaded for dozens of cities with Leading properties, with the goal of not merely promoting the hotels, but the locales as well. "The site became |'stickier" and more relevant," Calder says. "There has been an increase in page views per visit. It gets them more deeply engaged with the brand."

The site is currently available in English and German, with additional language translations under development. IP addresses are used to identify a user's geographic location, and the appropriate language and relevant offers are displayed on the homepage. Beyond that, however, IP addresses and cookies are not being used. Users have to log in to see their personalized sites. It is a privacy issue, says Tim Peter, managing director of Leading Interactive. "We don't want to show things that we shouldn't have the right to know, without them telling us specifically. We're making sure we're not overstepping the bounds of what is reasonable to their sensibilities," he says.

Engine Customizes Search

Leading's targeted search function is quite similar to technology put forth by the search engine VibeAgent.com. VibeAgent, which does not accept paid search placements, touts unbiased search results influenced by a user's personal preferences and the preferences of the user's friends and likeminded travelers. The Charlottesville, Virginia-based Web startup also uses a series of detailed tags in the categories of ambiance, activities and recommended-for to classify hotels and let users conduct a very specific search. "If you know you're looking for a romantic hotel and you want to play tennis and you want to go to the beach, you can do your search with those tags and we will order your results based on those tags," says VibeAgent co-founder and CEO Adam Healey. The attribute tags are assigned by VibeAgent staff as well as site users. VibeAgent also lets users filter searches down to specifically mapped areas of a given city.

What makes VibeAgent intriguing is its intuitive search capability, which uses algorithms to learn users' interests, based on their past reviews and click history. As VibeAgent amasses data about likeminded travelers and hotel attributes, it will predict a user's ideal hotel and will refine hotel searches accordingly. In other words, the site gets smarter over time and will give increasingly targeted hotel search results. "The way you review a hotel impacts your future search for hotels, and the way your friends review hotels will impact your future search," Healey says.

The real uptake for hoteliers will come down the road. VibeAgent is collecting a goldmine of market data on travelers, which it plans to sell to hotel companies. For instance, a particular user who has a history of searching for hotels with scuba diving would be an attractive marketing target to a beachfront resort.

Direct Marketing Via Web 2.0

Worldhotels, Frankfurt, has hired Avon, Colorado-based Travelscream Technologies to offer RSS feeds and other Web 2.0 social media marketing tools to its hotels and resorts worldwide. The agreement lets Worldhotels member properties deliver promotions, property news and rich media to interested guests, travel agents and journalists.

RSS, which stands for Really Simple Syndication, allows Web content to be published to other sites or within feed readers, without the need for manually re-posting the contents. Individuals request the information based on their interests and receive it automatically. "Travelscream is building a travel agent base that is saying, 'I want this kind of information—tailor it to me, I can use it,'" says Tom Griffiths, Americas vice president for Worldhotels.

Prior to adopting Travelscream late last year, Worldhotels properties were delivering promotional content to travel agents and would-be guests in a scattershot, unrefined way. "Now, we can create a meaningful offer for a travel agent's clientele, we can measure how many bookings are coming out of a specific agency, and we can test promotions by knowing how much a family is willing to pay for a specific stay," Griffiths says.

The Travelscream service costs participating Worldhotels properties a meager US\$500 per year, and it is money very well spent, Griffiths says, estimating an annual ROI of 25 times or higher.

This form of highly targeted online hotel presence will grow in popularity and importance as social media continues gaining a foothold, Griffiths says. "Our industry is trying to find more and more niche opportunities, because that is how our guests think of themselves: 'This is just like me.' Travelscream gives us an opportunity to really leverage those niches," he says.

The major distribution vendors are likewise branching into the Web personalization sector. TravelClick has begun offering its new Hospitality Toolkit software, which lets hoteliers target content to consumers based on their geographic location, search engine keywords and email campaigns. If the user progresses with the transaction, the customization can be carried into the TravelClick's iStay booking engine.



For example, an online marketing campaign targeting golfers would take the user to a Web page that highlights the hotel's golf packages. iStay then defaults to those golf packages when the consumer continues the shopping process, offering personalized hotel packages and amenities. Hospitality Toolkit, which syncs 29 languages into iStay using IP addresses to display the default language by region, lets hoteliers update Web booking content in real time.

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VENDORS

(This is not a complete list of central reservations systems providers.)

Agilysys agilysys.com

Amadeus amadeus.com

Expedia expedia.com

GenaRes Worldwide genares.com

GuestCentric guestcentric.com

Micros Systems micros.com

Newmarket International newmarketinc.com

Northwind-Maestro PMS maestropms.com

Passkey International passkey.com

Pegasus Solutions pegs.com

RezStream rezstream.com

Sabre Travel Network sabretravelnetwork.com

SoftBrands Hospitality softbrands.com

SynXis synxis.com

TravelClick travelclick.com

Travelscream travelscream.com

Trust International trustinternational.com

Vizergy vizergy.com

Most Visited Travel Web Sites

(Ranks based on U.S. Internet usage for April 2008, according to Hitwise)

1. tripadvisor.com

2. hotels.com

3. ichotelsgroup.com

4. franceguide.com

5. nps.gov

6. marriott.com

7. choicehotels.com

8. disneyworld.disney.go.com

9. hilton.com

10. harrahs.com

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