

WRAP IT UP

Use Your Web Site to Provide Complete Vacation Planning

BY MICHAEL SQUIRES



Resort occupancies and revenues are up, thanks to baby boomers with the time to travel and money to spend on recreation. Spas and health-oriented programs are exploding in popularity, and many destinations with one golf course are adding a second. Resort operators catering to this profitable segment are discovering an important factor that sets boomers apart from other guests: They shop and book online, and they expect the properties they chose to be fully Web-enabled.

Retired professionals are proving to be accomplished Internet users who begin shopping for their vacation months in advance of their trip. They know everything about your property before they reserve a room, and they want to schedule and confirm their itinerary of activities weeks before check in. At the property, they want to begin their activities immediately without wasting time at the guest services desk – and properties that don't provide these services are disqualified early.

Savvy resort operators are rapidly developing effective Internet marketing strategies and fine tuning their Web sites to give shoppers 360-degree tours, dining menus and the ability to book recreational activities online. The most successful destinations make it easy for guests to design a personalized activity-filled itinerary themselves so it is waiting for them when they arrive.

The results of intelligent Internet services go right to the bottom line. "Our 2004 revenue from Internet reservations was \$37,000; in 2006 we generated about half a million dollars in Internet bookings," says Dan Harris, lodge operations manager at Skytop Lodge, a resort on 5,500 acres in Pennsylvania's Poconos

Mountains. "Phone inquiries have dropped off, but our reservation-office conversions have gone up, because guests shop online and the ones who call us know what they want before they pick up the phone." Skytop Lodge installed the Maestro PMS system and ResEze online booking engine to facilitate easier Web connectivity and give guests more online options. It also hired a specialist to help with its Internet marketing. Skytop Lodge's guests book online and reserve amenities via email before they arrive. "Text messaging is probably the fastest growing means of Internet communication, and Skytop Lodge is looking into text message ads," Harris says. "This is a completely new media channel for reaching shoppers that may be important in the future."

The Marco Beach Ocean Resort, a luxury destination on Florida's Gulf Coast, has found similar success with Internet marketing. If you are flying down to the beach in your Gulfstream V executive jet and need a Four-Diamond resort with an award-winning chef and, by the way, a nearby airfield big enough to accommodate your plane, the Marco Beach Ocean Resort will probably be where you spend the night. "Guests plan activities, schedule tee times, spa appointments and dinner reservations long before they arrive," says Phillip A. Starling, the property's managing director. "Our staff uses its Internet-enabled Concierge Assistant system to create detailed itineraries and then emails them to guests as confirmations that include links to appropriate Web pages and sites that display online menus, golf course descriptions and pictures of a guest's off-property destinations." The property also provides a list of links to local airlines, (if the Gulfstream is grounded)

weather information and other key sites. The resort's concierge staff utilizes its Concierge Assistant software to review the activity history of incoming guests and then contacts them several weeks before they arrive to verify activity preferences.

Skytop Lodge's Dan Harris says that if a property wants to increase revenue from online sources, it must develop a spectrum of online channels. "We boosted online revenue by implementing a global Internet strategy. We focus on online hotel review sites such as TripAdvisor and TravelPost, and we reworked our Web site for the most appropriate seasonal keywords to attract search engines that bring shoppers to the property. We are doing more with online graphics, too. Guests tell us they value our property video tours and how easy it is to book from our site. We also have a campaign to capture guests' email addresses with an opt-in permission so we can include them in our email blasts."

A recent TravelClick study of booking trends reported a 19.9 percent increase in Internet reservations in 2006 over 2005 for the major hotel brands. Resorts can expect a similar increase. It is clear that operators who adapt their marketing and online booking efforts to connect guests with Internet-based property revenue centers will continue to be the winners.

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