

INCREASE, STREAMLINE YOUR ONLINE PRESENCE



By Chris Crowell | Hotelworld Network

ARTICLE REPRINT

Is the online world one distribution channel, or several? That may be a question of semantics, but it represents the near limitless and innovative business potential the Internet holds. Hotels have learned and still are learning that the Internet opens up myriad possibilities for increasing booking and brand awareness.

According to TravelCLICK, a provider of interactive distribution solutions and marketing services to independent and chain hotels, online booking accounted for nearly half the market share of all electronic channels in 2007. Tammy Peter, VP of channel management for Wyndham Hotel Group, said 70 percent of Wyndham's central reservation booking comes from online sources.

"With the continued decline in voice reservation volume, we expect to spend the majority of our development funds on e-commerce initiatives going forward," Peter said.

Large hotel companies have entire e-commerce teams with members constantly working on updating, researching, and optimizing everything Web-related.

"In a perfect world, there should be one person dedicated to e-commerce at each property," said Isaac Gerstenzang, corporate director of e-commerce for Destination Hotels. "The e-commerce person bridges quite a few fundamentals that are out there. We're bridging the gaps between sales and marketing and information technology and public relations."

Ignoring the Web could leave your hotel behind like an 8-track tape. Increasing online presence and crafting the proper Web strategy is multifaceted but mainly starts with the website.

WHAT'S IN A WEBSITE?

Shane Ettestad, VP of Internet marketing services at TravelCLICK, said the actual website design is a crucial first step—make sure it has clean architecture, doesn't change layout between pages or have any redundant navigation items. After that, it helps to give customers what they are looking for.



Shane Ettestad,
TravelCLICK, Inc.

"We see that consumers really have a thirst for photography, video, and virtual tours more so than anything," Ettestad said.

"Great photography is No. 1," Gerstenzang said. "That's what's going to lure people in. You want to make sure they feel an experience through the site." He recommends making an interactive map

that highlights activities like hiking trails or theaters—anything to engage customers and tell them what they need to know. "The longer they stay on, the longer they have to book," he said.

One big sin is a lack of information. An example Ettestad gave is a hotel near a ski destination that was not getting as much booking as its competitors, despite having similar location and similar booking. The problem, TravelCLICK discovered, was the other hotel websites mentioned their hotels had free shuttle services to the slopes. This hotel did, too, but it didn't specify so on its site. Once the hotel featured the offering on the site, bookings went back up.

One last tenet for a good hotel site is the booking process itself. Make it easy to follow and uncomplicated.

"It's great to make the site flashier, but it has to be user-friendly and easy to book a reservation," Gerstenzang said.

BRANDED EFFORTS

TravelCLICK's numbers indicate a 23 percent growth in brand website booking in 2007, continuing this channel's growth over the last few years. Strategies for these brand sites all differ and offer a variety of options.

For Wyndham, the key is segmentation. The Days Inn site is different from the Microtel Inns and Suites' site to maintain individual brand identity and to appeal to a particular demographic. According to Peter, brand sites draw the most bookings for the Wyndham Hotel Group.



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01

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Marriott focuses on its website's "power alleys," the parts of the site that see the most traffic during any month, such as brand sites and booking pages.

"The homepage is important, but in the age of Google, it's not as important as other parts in the site," said George Corbin, VP of e-commerce at Marriott International. "The search result won't land you on the homepage. The result is for that specific site within Marriott.com."

Marriott also offers its elite members, and soon all of its rewards members, a forum to discuss their stays and how to best use the rewards program in an effort to further brand loyalty through its online presence.

To take online booking a step closer to the customer, Best Western International introduced a downloadable widget called Knock Knock. When Best Western has a new promotion, a customer will be alerted by a noise and graphic on his or her desktop.

"We are in the middle of redesigning it after getting feedback from elite members," said Karmela Gaffney, managing director of advertising and e-commerce at Best Western. "It will provide a link directly to our website and give the weather and news related to the destination."

SEARCH OUT THE SITE

You have a clean website, with photos, videos, a list of amenities and a single-screen booking page. Great. Now how do you get people there?

Gerstenzang cited search engine optimization as the biggest key in driving site traffic.

"There's millions of words you could put in [a search engine] to find a hotel, and you're never going to be on the top for every key word. But you need a strategy of what's important to you. The Royal Palms Resort and Spa in Phoenix is a luxury hotel and spa resort — that's important to that hotel. So we make sure it's optimized in the meta tags and copy so when someone types in 'luxury spa destination', hopefully we come to the top." In addition, hotels can purchase pay-per-click search engine ads to ensure they come up ahead of others for certain key words.

"It's auction style," Gerstenzang said. "A word or phrase could be five cents or \$10 per click. But it's not just how much you'll pay, it's how relevant the content is." Buying the phrase 'New York City hotel' would cost a lot per click and maybe not catch the right customers.

The advantage to pay-per-click is its immediacy. Keyword optimization could take months to affect Google, whereas pay-per-click is yours upon purchase.

"You can track how well your campaigns are doing and you can target who gets your promotional copy," Gerstenzang said. "The big brands buy the banner ads to get a brand presence, not looking for immediate returns."

Online advertising can provide more value than advertising in traditional media because of the ability to target very specific demographics.

At Best Western, the offline to online advertising ratio still is about 2:1, but 67 percent of the offline ads have driven online bookings, according to Gaffney. "Down the line, I think people will be increasing online advertising significantly," he said. ■



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02