

TRAVEL 2.0: POWER TOOLS TO BUILD YOUR BUSINESS



By Kristi White | Director, Revenue Optimization | TravelCLICK Inc.

ARTICLE REPRINT

In Travel 2.0, additional sites such as TripAdvisor, Google Maps, Virtual Tourist, and TravelPost empower consumers with interactive tools to research hotels and plan their trips, comment on their recent stays, and interact with other like-minded consumers. Savvy hospitality operators are embracing all aspects of Travel 2.0—and beyond—because of its ability to drive business, build community, and empower guests.

The power of Travel 2.0 to grow your business is enormous, especially in today's digital economy. A recent survey by Forrester Research found that, when faced with a recession, more than 40 percent of marketers would increase spending on strategies that help make personal connections with customers. Travel 2.0 does exactly that.

What are the best ways to leverage it? Here are five strategies:

1. See Yourself As Others See You. Over 70 percent of shoppers today are influenced by consumer comments and ratings when purchasing; hoteliers can use the power of user-generated content (UGC) to their advantage. Provide a forum for guests to post comments or “trip sharing” ideas directly to your website. Turn the chatter into marketing intelligence. Find out what guests are saying about your hotel on travel sites, chat rooms, and blogs—and how you can respond effectively to their comments, positive and negative. Many options are available to post guest reviews. Some consumer review sites offer a ‘widget’ that enables you to pull content on your hotel and link it back to the third-party site. Keep in mind that these tools will link to all comments, which could be problematic if your hotel receives any negative reviews. A better option is to use a tool that lets you receive guest reviews from multiple sites and gives you the power to serve as a publisher, selecting the reviews you want to post. Again, positive reviews on your site will build consumers’ confidence as they weigh the option to book with you. At the same time, including some select not-so-glowing reviews is recommended to build your site’s credibility.



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Direct feed of select reviews from travel websites.

2. Improve Website Stickiness.

Consumers will search as many as four websites before making a purchase. Your mission is to have them book direct with you, through your website, and define strategies to enable direct booking. Key to this strategy is ensuring awareness of your property and your website, making your site “sticky”—with dynamic, interactive content that keeps the consumer engaged, and build confidence in the consumer’s mind that booking direct is a good thing.

A few important tools will support your strategy:

- A robust destination guide, enabling website visitors to discover your destination and plan their trips without leaving your site.
- Trip-sharing capabilities, built into the destination guide that enable guests to make recommendations to other Web guests.
- ePostcards, providing the opportunity for guests to share their trip experience with friends and family members.



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Source: *Hotel Executive.com*, April 2009

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The added value of these interactive tools is their capacity to add significant site content that further highlights your hotel's benefits. The interactive content is continuously updated, which improves your search engine optimization and continues to feed prospective customers with fresh information.

3. Leverage Search Engine Optimization (SEO). According to research, over 80 percent of consumers begin at a search engine like Google when researching products and services online. Hotels that appear before yours in searches are more likely to get the guest booking. It's that simple. With SEO, you can maximize your search engine visibility by integrating into your website content the key words that prospective guests are most likely to use in search engines. After website launch, continue to track key words and analyze content to improve your search engine ranking. Think global: Consider a multilingual strategy that incorporates language nuances and uses country-specific SEO strategies for countries that could potentially produce a solid stream of bookings to your hotel. Consider also the Geo Search—mapping tools used to locate businesses. As a starting point, make sure that you are registered with Google local and Google maps and your listing is complete and correct. Continue to update your hotel site to improve SEO and feed prospective customers with fresh information that will get their attention—and their business.

4. Consider Pay-Per-Click (PPC) Advertising. PPC is a fast, powerful and cost-effective way to reach the top of search engine listings and drive traffic to your website. By targeting certain keywords to display your ad, for example, "luxury hotel Sydney Opera House," you ensure your message is displayed only on the most relevant searches. All keywords are based on a "per-click" cost and you pay only when a potential guest clicks on your ad and visits your website.

5. Explore Social Media Optimization (SMO). With the increasing popularity of social media, hotels have a potential new venue to leverage for competitive advantage. The key is to define your hotel strategy and implement it consistently and relevantly to the target audience within the social networking grid. The challenge for hoteliers is to adapt their hotel message to this new dynamic medium. Travel-oriented social media sites, such as TripAdvisor, Virtual Tourist, and TravelPost, give consumers interactive tools to research hotels and plan their trips, comment on their recent stays, and interact with other like-minded consumers. Explore using these travel sites and other well-trafficked social sites, such as FaceBook, StudioVZ, and Bebo, to build brand awareness, nurture customer relationships, and develop a community of interest around your hotel. Consider "fan specials" or other offers specifically developed for this audience. The viral power of social networking can provide a very cost-effective marketing channel that builds awareness of your hotel with new audiences.

TRAVEL 2.0 ROI

Travel 2.0 opens a new world for the hospitality industry, one that provides more ways to increase visibility and revenue for your hotel and shape your brand through consumer exchanges that increase conversion. Although a dollar-for-dollar ROI for Travel 2.0 is difficult to track, components of Travel 2.0 can be leveraged at various stages of the consumer buying decision, from shopping to actually making the purchase—ultimately improving your business results.

As consumers talk to other consumers online, discussing your property and expressing their opinions of your hotel, you can seize the Travel 2.0 opportunity to find new markets, improve your performance, and expand your venues for revenue growth. Travel 2.0 is here to stay—and here to help you outperform your competitors. The time is now for Internet marketing that builds connections—ones that will endure the ups and downs of the market. ■



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Kristi White is Director of Revenue Optimization for TravelCLICK. An industry veteran, she leads one of the most unique organizations within TravelCLICK, the Revenue Optimization Team. Her team is 100% dedicated to providing personalized attention to TravelCLICK iHotelier customers to maximize each hotel's transactions revenue through best practices in marketing and distribution. A recognized expert

in her field, Kristi is a frequent speaker on revenue management and distribution at industry conferences and hospitality schools. She is also a member of the Board of Directors for the HSMAI Revenue Management Special Interest Group. Kristi holds a B.A. in political science from Louisiana State University and a Certified Hospitality Sales Professional and Certified Hospitality Supervisor certification from the American Hotel and Lodging Association. She can be contacted at 817-719-2956 or kwhite@travelclick.net



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