

Website design now must address the need to engage your customers across channels.

# hyper-interactive consumers

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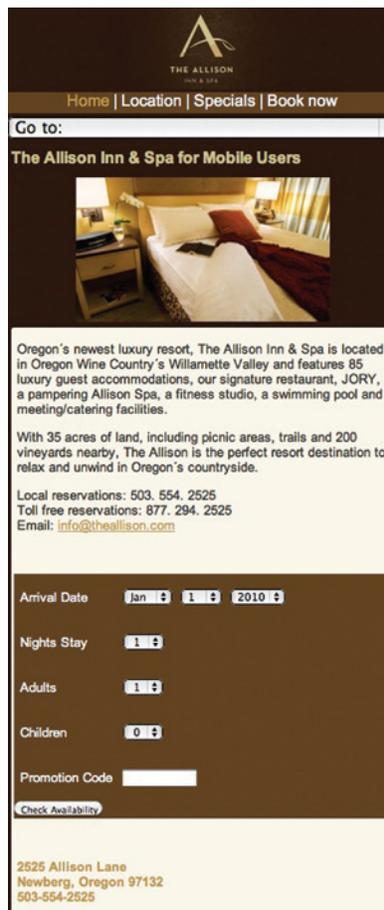


**T**oo many hoteliers do not realize how important it is to address the significant change in travel consumer behavior over the past several years, namely the emergence of a new breed of hyper-interactive travel consumers.

Today's hyper-interactive Internet user is tweeting, texting, emailing, communicating via Facebook, and commenting, often in real-time, on restaurants and hotels via review sites like Yelp and TripAdvisor.

Yet too many hotel websites offer dead, stale textual and visual content. There are no interactive Web-2.0 features engaging travel consumers and soliciting their participation and input.

Now is the time everyone must address the profound change in inventory distribution and marketing in hospitality: social media, mobile web, cross-channel marketing and the emergence of the hyper-interactive travel consumer.



## Main Revenue Driver

Today's hotel website carries the burden and responsibility of generating the bulk of bookings for the property. This year, 45% of all hotel bookings in North America will be online. In 2010, direct online channel sales via the hotel website will exceed 62% of total online hotel bookings for the industry as a whole, and 74% for the top 30 hotel brands.

The direct online channel is by far the most cost-effective distribution channel and provides hoteliers with excellent ROIs, immediate results, as well as long-term competitive advantages. A recent analysis by Hospitality eBusiness Strategies (HeBS) showed that the cost per booking via online travel agencies (OTAs) is in average eight- to 10-times higher than via the hotel website.

**The Allison Inn & Spa, Newberg, Oregon, has been honored for its mobile application.**



### Take A Hard Look

Hoteliers must realize that the hotel website has become not only the main revenue driver for their property, but also the main influencer for making travel purchase decisions and the main hub for customer engagements in today's multi-channel interactive environment. Enhancing and optimizing the hotel website to meet and exceed industry best practices and customer expectations should be a top priority. Here are some important considerations:

#### **If your hotel website is over two years old:**

- ▷ So many things happened over the past 24 months that hoteliers no longer have a choice whether to re-design their website or stick with their existing site. A website re-design is a must and should be considered in Q3 or Q4 of 2010, or at least budgeted for early 2011.
- ▷ The new website should reflect best practices for an optimum revenue-generating website.

- ▷ A website re-design is typically a 90- to 120-day project; plan accordingly.

Website optimizations, enhancements or re-designs tend to pay for themselves within three to four months.

#### **If the site is over 12 months old:**

- ▷ Search engine optimization (SEO) can take full advantage of the much cheaper organic search related visitors to your site.
- ▷ Web 2.0 optimization can improve customer engagement on the site.
- ▷ Customer segmentation optimization can fully address all key customer segments, from meeting and group planners, to corporate and leisure travelers, social event and family travel planners.

### Franchisee's Vanity Website

Many hotel chains allow and even encourage their franchisees to launch property vanity websites. For the franchisee, a vanity website's main objective is to provide incremental revenues

to what the brand website can provide. It does this by:

- ▷ Creating deep and relevant content—at least 35 to 50 pages of fully optimized local content that can successfully compete against the OTA websites' descriptions of the property.
- ▷ Focusing on long-tail keyword terms to capture incremental traffic and bookings.
- ▷ Focusing on local content: area attractions, local events and happenings, as well as main feeder market initiatives.
- ▷ Addressing key market segments via deep relevant content and SEO: meeting planners, group planners, SMERF, weddings, social and special events.

If developed as per industry's best practices, the franchisee vanity website should generate at least the same amount of revenue as the major brand site generates for the property.

### Best Practices

When re-designing the website, hote-

The new website for The Bulfinch Hotel, Boston, paid for itself in four months with a 2010 return on ad spend of 3,187%.

liers need to understand that website design is not an art and it is certainly not rocket science; it is a creative solution to a business problem.

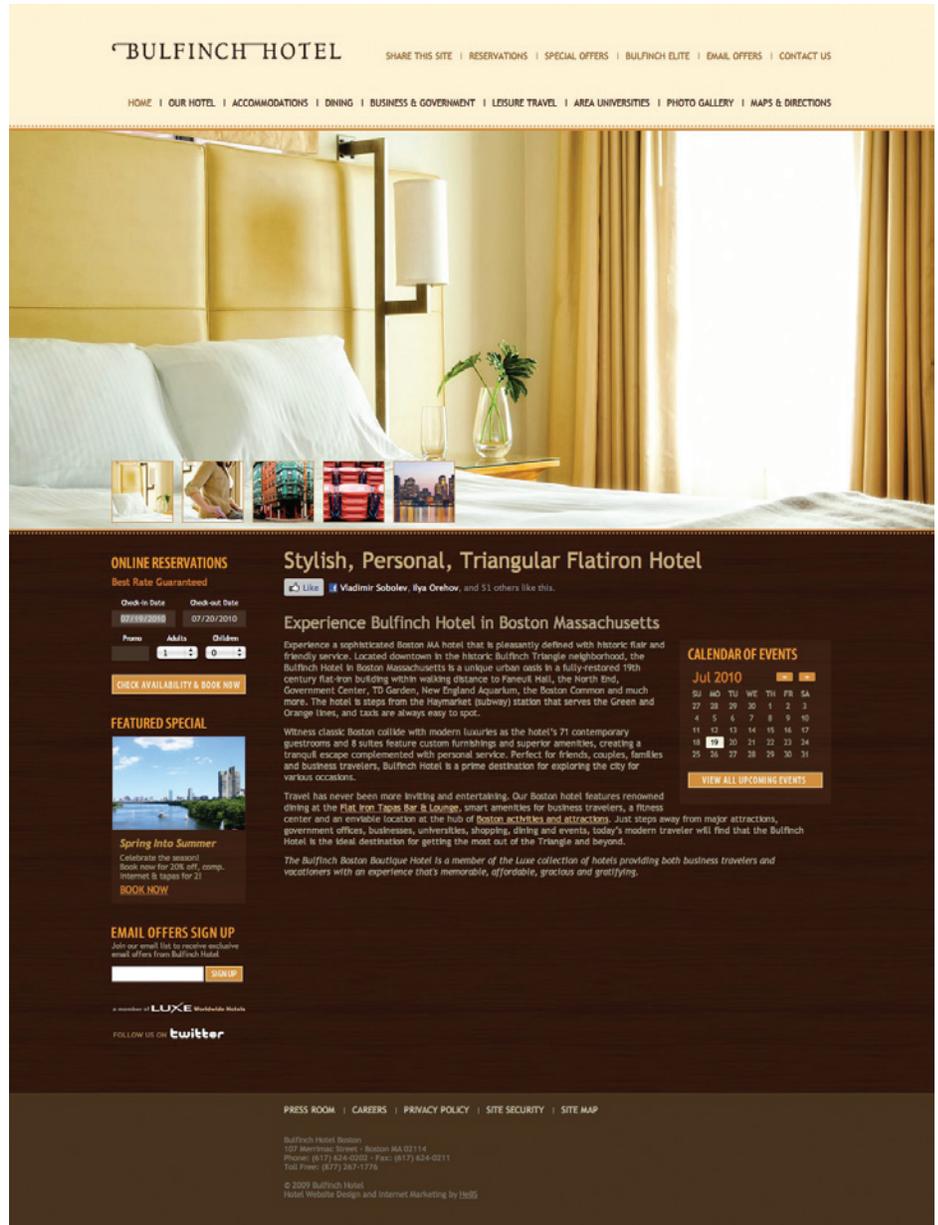
Your site needs to “meet and exceed” user objectives and not provide any obstacles to achieving these objectives. If the hotel site has a solid, professionally design layout that is supported by easy-to-understand navigation, helpful functionality and relevant textual and visual content, users will stay longer, explore the site deeper and ultimately book.

Today’s hotel website must reflect 2010-2011 industry’s best practices and should be:

**User-friendly.** Website user-friendliness refers to the quality of user experience on the website. In human-computer interaction, usability usually refers to the elegance and clarity with which the interaction with a computer program or a website is designed.

Website user-friendliness encompasses several key components that are crucial to the user experience, including:

- ▷ Site architecture and page layout: wide-screen websites with large “hero” photography, high image density, interactive applications and videos take advantage of fast download speeds and big monitor dimensions.
- ▷ Golden Triangle rule: website design, page layout, navigation and call-to-action features should take into consideration the fact that users tend to focus more on certain parts of the page.
- ▷ Website navigation: two-three, four-tier navigational structure provides better organization of content and smoother browsing experience for users.
- ▷ Rich media and imagery: selling travel is all about selling a vision, a dream—an intangible product. Rich media—from photos and visual gal-



- leries, to videos and virtual tours, interactive maps—can truly present the hotel product and make it tangible and real.
  - ▷ Website copy and descriptions: the quality, depth and breadth of the website copy is essential in promoting the hotel product to travel consumers as well as to search engines (Google, Yahoo! and Bing) in the form of relevant keyword terms and keyword density.
  - ▷ Destination web strategy: is your hotel the “hero” of the destination?
- Search engine-friendly.** The search

- engine-friendliness of the hotel website includes addressing issues such as:
- ▷ Search engine friendly site architecture, page layout, logical and consistent navigation, website development language (crawlability of the site) for the search engine bots.
- ▷ Relevancy, depth and breadth of the website copy.
- ▷ Search engine optimization (SEO) on the site, including keyword density of the website copy, unique H1 and H2 headers, page titles, description tags and keyword tags on every page.

- ▷ Number of recognized inbound links (link popularity).
- ▷ Internal linkage, site maps, Google site maps, etc.

Search engines are an important component of the hotel direct online channel strategy. HeBS own research shows that between 50% to 70% of website traffic and revenue is a direct referral from the search engines.

The search-engine friendliness of the hotel website is important not only for the organic search. Good SEO on a website improves the Quality Index for paid search, as well. The low Google Quality Index you pay more per click and your listing is ranked lower.

**Booker-friendly.** The booker-friendliness of a hospitality website is a direct result of how well the hotel website handles a whole range of complex issues that can influence the purchasing behavior of the website users. Here are only some of them:

- ▷ Building trust and credibility
- ▷ Ease-of-use of the booking engine, smoothness of the booking process
- ▷ Alignment of website content with content on the social media sites about the hotel to remove credibility gap
- ▷ Reservation widget as part of the global navigation of the site, with customized look-and-feel design that “mimics” the website design
- ▷ Availability of bookable unique special offers, packages and promotions with excellent perceived value proposition
- ▷ Assurance of best rate and rate parity for non-bundled hotel rates
- ▷ “Book with Confidence” marketing messages at the point of sale
- ▷ Perceived good security and privacy policies on the site

**Web 2.0-friendly (customer engagement-friendly).** The social media phenomenon has spoiled today’s travel customer, who now expects to interact on the hotel website in exactly the same manner as on the social networks. Therefore, hotel websites can no longer exist as mere online brochures and transactional mechanisms.

Hoteliers must align the interactiv-



**The new website for One Bal Harbour Resort & Spa, Florida, paid for itself in three months, while Luxe Worldwide Hotels, Los Angeles, has great “stickiness” with more than 1,600 pages of content.**

ity of the hotel website with the hyper-interactive behavior of today’s travel consumer. Here are some of the Web 2.0 features expected by consumers on the hotel website:

- ▷ Blog on the hotel website: share the latest news, happenings and photos at and around the hotel, and solicit customer comments and input.
- ▷ Customer reviews on the hotel website: enable hotel guests to leave comments and rate the hotel thus providing valuable reviews for their peers.
- ▷ Interactive sweepstakes: get people excited about your hotel, build buzz and your opt-in email and mobile list.
- ▷ Interactive calendar of events: keep website visitors updated on all the latest events at and around the hotel, as well keep website content fresh to

encourage repeat website visits and improve SEO.

- ▷ Feature your hotel’s social media initiatives on the website: from Facebook’s “I Like” button and links to your social media profiles on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube to multi-channel promotions involving the website, email, social networks and mobile Web.

**Mobile Ready.** Any mobile marketing initiative in hospitality, such as mobile-ready hotel website, must start with the realization that the mobile Internet is not wireless access to the conventional Internet. Mobile users are on the go and have shorter attention spans. The mobile Web suffers from slower speeds, imperfect mobile browsers, smaller displays, cumbersome data entry/retrieval processes.

Therefore, hoteliers need to offer a website specially designed to provide an excellent user experience in a mobile environment. Features of the mobile-ready website include:

- ▷ Fast download speeds
- ▷ Automatic detection of type of mobile device to serve appropriate version of the mobile site
- ▷ Efficient and simple navigation
- ▷ Short and concise textual content with no fluff
- ▷ Scaled-down visual content
- ▷ Easy-to-use mobile booking engine with easy access to your user profile, pre-populated with your contact information, credit card information and reward program number
- ▷ One-click map and directions to the hotel
- ▷ Toll-free phone for additional information and reservations
- ▷ Mobile website SEO
- ▷ Mobile website analytics

Optimizing and re-designing the hotel website should be a top priority for any hotelier.

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