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Top 20 Secrets to Success in Hotel SMS Mobile Marketing

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With the rapid growth of the mobile channel, SMS marketing is becoming a vital component of a well-rounded digital marketing strategy. Unfamiliar with Best Practices for leveraging this channel, many hoteliers are missing out on one of the most effective ways to connect with customers anytime, anywhere.

With more than 7 trillion text messages sent around the world in 2011, it is no secret that mobile users are hyper-engaged and hyper-connected via mobile messaging. Why is it then that marketers continue to overlook this opportunity to build a relationship with customers? In a recent Hipcricket survey of mobile users, 57 percent of respondents said they would be interested in opting in to a brand's SMS loyalty program. Yet, 80 percent of survey respondents said they have not been marketed to via SMS by their favorite brands. Even more compelling, 90% of survey respondents who had participated in an SMS loyalty club felt they had gained value from being a part of the program. Why the hesitation to include SMS into the marketing mix? Many hoteliers simply don't know where to start, and are rightfully cautious to reach consumers through this nascent channel.

Despite hoteliers' apprehension to engage in this channel, many hoteliers understand the potential SMS offers to effectively reach consumers. In HeBS Digital's 5th Annual Benchmark Survey on Hotel Digital Marketing Budget Planning, 25% of hoteliers indicated that SMS marketing was an initiative they planned to leverage in 2011.

What mobile marketing initiatives are you planning for?	2010	2011
Mobile site	25.9%	37.5%
Mobile booking engine	22.4%	37.5%
SMS Text marketing	27.6%	25%
Mobile banner advertising	19%	12.5%
iPhone app	24.1%	8.9%
I am not planning on mobile marketing initiatives for 2010	32.8%	38.4%

What are the Types of SMS Marketing?

There are two basic types of SMS marketing: mobile push and keyword opt-in. SMS push marketing is the sending of a mobile blast via text message in 160 characters or less. Mobile pushes can promote a contest, special, upcoming event, or last minute rates.

Even more important for engaging customers is an interactive keyword opt-in campaign. A keyword opt-in campaign prompts users to text a designated keyword to a short code (a short series of numbers) to opt-in to a mobile list. Users immediately receive an auto-response marketing message revealing promotion details or announcing successful opt-in. Some creative ways to engage guests via keyword campaigns are mobile trivia surrounding the destination or property, mobile sweepstakes, and allowing customers to “unlock” deals.

Before leveraging SMS in your marketing mix, it is imperative to prepare an SMS marketing strategy in line with Best Practices. From understanding the personal nature of mobile to setting clear metrics to measure performance, HeBS Digital explores SMS marketing Best Practices and the right ingredients for mobile marketing success.

Top 20 SMS Best Practices

- 1. Remember it's personal.** Just as you respect the privacy of your hotel guests during their stay, it is important to respect the private nature of their mobile phone. A mobile device has become one of the most personal belongings for customers. This device is the gateway to a user's photos, email, social media profiles, agenda, and more importantly, personal conversations with friends and loved ones.

When engaging in mobile SMS marketing, it is extremely important to ensure that your campaign provides meaningful content that resonates with your customers. Otherwise, you risk your SMS campaign delivering with the intrusive nature of a telemarketer. What's the first step in connecting with

your customers via SMS on a personal level? Focus less on the use of the technology and more on the people using it. Tap into your customers' passion points and align with them.

- 2. Don't send a mobile push unless you have engaged with the customer via mobile campaign within the last four months.** A key thing to remember when sending an SMS blast to any mobile list is that your customers must be aware that they've opted-in to receive mobile messages, and that they are comfortable engaging with your brand on the mobile platform. As tempting as it may be to export mobile numbers from your email list or a database you've collected over time, these customers have yet to engage with your brand via SMS. Sending a mobile blast to users who have not participated in a keyword opt-in campaign will seem intrusive and unexpected in the eyes of the consumer.

To avoid this, engage with your customers with a fun and relevant keyword campaign where they text a keyword to a short code to interact with your brand and opt-in. This will get your customers comfortable and familiar with your brand on the mobile platform. Within four months of this mobile interaction, you can begin sending mobile pushes to the opt-in list. Customers now expect messages from your brand via SMS and will always have the option to opt-out with every message sent.

- 3. Provide customers with value.** Make sure every mobile campaign and mobile push is highly relevant to your customers and provides unique and useful value. Part of ensuring that mobile messages speak to your customer segments is keeping in mind the immediate, hyper-local nature of mobile that allows us to reach our customers anywhere, anytime.

First, consider the demographics of your customers and their mobile behavior. A mother who is interested in booking family travel has very different lifestyle

behaviors at 10 am on a Wednesday than she does at 12 pm on a Sunday. It's vital to reach your customer segments at the right time with the right information.

It's also important when putting together your SMS strategy to consider ways to keep your customers connected and build a brand relationship. How can you reach your customers on a consistent basis and either help enhance their everyday life or make their lives easier? For instance, if your hotel property has an onsite restaurant that you wish to promote, you may want to consider launching a Chef's Tips mobile campaign where once a month you send cooking tips a few hours before the average dinner time. These messages can include links to easy recipe ideas and fun cooking advice. This message is immediately relevant to your customers' everyday life and is a great way to stay connected.

Remember, SMS is a way to reach your most loyal and passionate customers. Allow your customers to opt-in to monthly messages or tips that tap into their passion points such as cooking, family travel, wine, and more. Sharing recipes from the onsite chef, beauty and health tips from the onsite spa, or even wine recommendations and wine-tasting tips, are great ways to keep loyal customers engaged with your brand.

4. Keep it interactive with mobile keyword campaigns, contests, and trivia.

Remember, mobile should be engaging. Including fun and creative keyword campaigns and mobile trivia that speaks to your customer segments is a great way to build a brand relationship and generate revenue.

Consider running a "Secret Ingredient" promotion featuring a hotel special package that has a surprise add-on or free gift. To redeem the package and find out the secret add-on, customers have to text the keyword to a short code. The auto response message will reveal the add-on and the promo code to book the package. **[A successful HeBS Digital mobile SMS opt-in campaign](#) generated 76 mobile opt-ins, 23 room nights, and 636% ROAS.**

Other engaging campaigns to consider are fun mobile trivia surrounding a hotel or brand theme. Here is a great opportunity to highlight interesting facts and selling points of your hotel. Don't be afraid to get creative with your trivia. Fun destination themed trivia tends to perform best.

5. **Make it clear that customers are opting in.** When a customer participates in your mobile campaign, always make it clear that by texting a keyword to the short code they are opting in for future mobile messages. To be safe, you may also want to include a double opt-in.

6. **Test. Test. Test.** With any new marketing channel, it is important that you put your trust in industry experts and develop a clear outline of necessary tests before the launch of every mobile campaign. Before launching any mobile campaigns, create a test list of mobile numbers to receive your marketing message. If you are launching a keyword campaign, be sure to have 3-5 people text the keyword to the short code and examine the auto-response message. Make sure that the message is correct with a clear call to action and all shortened links included are properly working.

7. **Capitalize on the immediacy of mobile.** The mobile channel allows you to reach customers anytime, anywhere. Take advantage of this immediacy to promote last minute specials to your local feeder markets.

SMS mobile blasts are perfect for marketing your onsite restaurant to locals. Alert your local customers of happy hour specials, new entrees added to the menu, and upcoming events.

- 8. Include clear opt-out instructions with every mobile message sent.** Just as customers can opt-out of an email list at any time, every mobile message must include the option for customers to opt-out. Without this option, customers will feel prisoner to your marketing message and it will taint the brand relationship.
- 9. Define clear metrics of success.** The success of an SMS campaign can be a hard thing to measure. Before launching any SMS campaign, set goals that you want the campaign to achieve. If the SMS campaign includes a link, click-through rate is a great way to measure the effectiveness of your mobile blast. Other metrics include number of mobile opt-ins for a keyword campaign, redemption rate for promotions utilizing mobile coupons or promo codes, contest sign ups, increase in mobile website traffic, and brand awareness.
- 10. Include a clear call to action or instructions to redeem in the mobile message.** Reaching customers with your mobile marketing message isn't enough. For a mobile marketing campaign to be successful there must be a clear call to action. Once you set goal metrics for your marketing campaign, include a call to action in your marketing message that helps you achieve your metrics of success. Whether it be texting a keyword to a short code, booking a package, or signing up for a contest, make your call to action clear with no more than two steps for customers to reach your end goal.
- 11. Utilize mobile coupons.** One in ten mobile users redeem mobile coupons (emarketer). Mobile coupons are a great way to drive bookings and increase incremental revenues. Consider utilizing mobile coupons for up-sells and add-ons to special packages. Allow users to text the add-on of their choice to a short code to receive a mobile coupon to redeem by presenting at check-in. Mobile coupons are also a great way to drive foot traffic to your onsite restaurant or spa.

12. Utilize the mobile channel for your most loyal customers. Keeping in mind the personal nature of mobile, you want to utilize this channel for your loyal customers and Brand Ambassadors. Consider integrating mobile into your hotel's loyalty program, or create a mobile loyalty program if one doesn't already exist.

The mobile loyalty program can grant members access to exclusive offers, insider updates, and travel tips. You can even consider rewarding members with a mobile coupon valid for the month of their birthday or special occasions.

13. Segment your mobile lists to send more targeted messages. A highly targeted mobile marketing strategy means a higher campaign conversion rate. There are creative keyword opt-in campaigns you can implement to segment your mobile list based on interest and location.

To better target your mobile customers by interest, consider creating segmented deals for customers to "unlock" by texting a keyword to a short code. These deals can be segmented by spa, dining, hotel, and events. Website visitors will be prompted to text the category of their interest to the short code to receive mobile alerts for that particular category. This helps ensure that mobile messages are highly relevant to the customers who receive them.

To better target your local customer segments, consider a landing page on your website dedicated to locals where they can opt-in to receive mobile alerts for dinner specials, last minute rates, and news on upcoming events.

14. Direct users to a mobile landing page. One of the biggest mistakes that marketers make is sending a mobile blast that doesn't link to a mobile landing page. When executing any mobile campaign, always keep the user

experience in mind. If a customer follows a link on their mobile device and it leads them to a landing page that is hard to navigate or read, this is going to dramatically affect your conversion rate.

15. Remember that mobile is just one touch point in a multi-channel strategy.

For true SMS Marketing success, you must integrate SMS into the comprehensive marketing mix. You can promote keyword opt-in campaigns to your email list, highlight your mobile promotions on your hotel website, feature your mobile promotions on your social media profiles, and even integrate SMS into your banner campaigns.

Don't overlook the utility that SMS messaging provides. On the Maps & Directions section of your hotel website, include a "Text to get Directions" option so website visitors can easily access directions to your hotel from their mobile device. Other great website utilizations of SMS are a "Text Event Details" on your hotel website's Calendar of Events, a "Remind Me When This Special Ends" alert on hotel special packages, and a "Text Reservation Details" on hotel reservation confirmations.

16. Include images when possible. Just as rich imagery on your hotel website sells your property and destination, including an image with an SMS blast helps to increase conversions. Make sure your image corresponds with the details of your offer to enhance the effectiveness of your campaign. For instance, if you are promoting a summer special, rich imagery of a hotel's rooftop pool will make the package more enticing for customers.

17. Ask customers to register their preferences. The frequency in which a customer receives a mobile marketing message can mean the difference between an opt-out and a life-long mobile subscriber. Send customers a mobile survey asking them how often they would like to hear from you and what topics interest them most. This way all messages are highly targeted and your mobile marketing strategy is in line with customers' preferences.

18. Learn from the results. Simply measuring the success of your campaigns is not enough. Analyze the results to shape future SMS promotions to better target your customer segments and increase conversions. Some key questions you should ask yourself: What is the best time of day to send a mobile blast based on past results? What types of campaigns have the highest number of opt-ins? Which customer segments are most engaged with my brand via mobile, and how can I provide these customers with more value?

19. Know your competitive set. Just as you know what services the hotels in your comp set provide guests, it is important to understand how your comp set is engaging with customers via SMS marketing. If available, consider opting-in to your competitors' SMS lists to understand how they are staying connected with customers. What are they doing well? How can you differentiate your hotel's SMS marketing strategy?

Browsing a competitor's website is a great way to see if they are running any SMS promotions. If you find the majority of your comp set isn't running any SMS campaigns, this presents an even greater opportunity to own this channel with your customers.

20. Find a trusted partner. Finding an SMS marketing vendor that has a secure, intuitive platform and expert advice in SMS Best Practices is not always easy. Make sure you do adequate research to find the right vendor who meets your needs. Aside from exploring the vendor's SMS platform capabilities, ask for case studies, client testimonials, and details regarding their client assistance services. The right vendor won't just help you launch SMS campaigns; they will assist in executing a successful SMS strategy.

Conclusion

The immediacy of SMS and the opportunity it presents to build a deep connection with customers can no longer be ignored. Mobile is a way of connecting with your

audience, tapping into their passion points, and allowing your guests to welcome your brand into their lives.

With any new channel, a well-executed strategy that understands its audience is key. For true success, no channel can exist as an island and should be integrated into a comprehensive marketing mix including multi-channel campaigns and promotions.

Remember to set goals and define metrics of success before launching any SMS campaigns. These metrics will guide your SMS strategy and campaign execution. Learning from the results of your campaigns is the true secret to SMS success, and with Best Practices and professional consulting, you can watch your SMS strategy soar.

About the Author

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HeBS Digital has pioneered many of the "best practices" in hotel Internet marketing, social and mobile marketing, and direct online channel distribution. The firm specializes in helping hoteliers build their direct Internet marketing and distribution strategy, boost the hotel's Internet marketing presence, establish interactive relationships with their customers, and significantly increase direct online bookings and ROIs.

A diverse client portfolio of over 500 top tier major hotel brands, luxury and boutique hotel brands, resorts and casinos, hotel management companies, franchisees and independents, and CVBs has sought and successfully taken advantage of the firm hospitality Internet marketing expertise offered at HeBS. Contact HeBS Digital consultants at (212) 752-8186 or success@hebsdigital.com.