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## Meet Industry Experts on the Future of Hotel Website Design

| By Erica Garza

**I recently sat down with Tim Skylarov, Creative Director and Vladimir Sobolev, Senior Web Developer – Special Projects to examine the latest best practices in website design and digital marketing technologies. We discussed the need for hoteliers to re-evaluate their website re-design strategies and budget for website re-design and optimization overhaul in 2012.**

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At HeBS Digital, we believe that hotel Internet marketing starts and ends with the hotel website. The firm has won over 175 prestigious industry awards for its digital marketing and website design services, including numerous Adrian Awards, Davey Awards, W3 Awards, WebAwards, Magellan Awards, Summit International Awards, Interactive Media Awards and IAC Awards.

Many hotel websites are not designed to handle today's hyper-interactive consumer and read like a stagnant online brochure, offering stale textual and visual content. There are no interactive features engaging the travel consumer and soliciting his/her participation and input. This is contrary to the mere nature of today's hyper-interactive travel consumer, as well as against the mandates of the recent Google Panda and Freshness updates.

Today's hotel website carries the responsibility of generating the bulk of bookings for the property and relies on ambitious and creative website designers and digital technology developers to produce new, engaging and ROI-producing sites on a consistent basis. The hotel website is by far the most cost-effective distribution channel and provides hoteliers with excellent ROIs, immediate results, and long-term competitive advantages.

#### **How does web design and development today compare to when you first started?**

**Tim:** Web design has changed quite a bit over the years. Since the beginning of my professional career it has gone from one level to a completely new one that simply cannot compare. Technology evolved and web/ux design evolved with it. Websites became more interactive and easy to use. Back in the day, we used static HTML and small pictures – now we use cutting-edge CMS, HQ pictures and even videos to build the best user experience. Design trends evolved because of the quick evolution of technology/techniques that are required to make new design trends possible to be built out. Displays also got bigger and this changed the way we experience media on websites. Designers received a lot more real estate to play with and as a result we now have large, wide-format beautiful photography as well as rich-textured backgrounds featured on our websites.

**Vladimir:** We have made noticeable progress. A lot has been improved and raised up to the new level. At the moment there are no limits in complexity of development.

#### **As far as design, how does print differ from web?**

**Tim:** Those are pretty much different things. Media types are different, colors are different; targets, layouts, technology, and even audiences are different..

#### **In a recent article titled "The Future of Web Design" Courtney Boyd Meyers claimed, "OpenType fonts liberated web designers" in 2011. Do you agree with this statement and why?**

**Tim:** I could not agree more. Back in the day we only had a dozen cross-platform fonts (e.g. Arial, Times New Roman, Verdana) that we were able to use for website design. This was something that was seriously limiting our creativity. It might seem that fonts don't have that much impact on the website design, but this is not true – fonts are a very significant part of the design experience.

#### **What major products or innovations have contributed to today's web design and development?**

**Tim:** Fast evolution of web technologies such as HTML5, CSS3, JavaScript libraries etc. I try to evangelize industry-leading design best practices, speaking to those standards within the company. I'm continually looking for new technologies that will give us an opportunity to enhance and improve our websites.

**Vladimir:** I agree. HTML5, another global HTML revision, is designed to fundamentally change the way designers and developers create websites, as well as how visitors interact with them.

**How has the increase in mobile devices and tablets influenced web design and development?**

**Tim:** Well, with the increase of mobile devices we have to keep in mind different form factors, screen sizes, resolutions, platform capabilities etc. while designing websites. We now have to spend a lot more time on the drawing board.

**Vladimir:** To keep up with rapid mobile devices, more attention to development is required. We have to consider the specific limitations Tim mentioned to optimize graphics, content and revise the interface.

**What is responsive web design and how has it affected your creative choices?**

**Tim:** Responsive Web Design (RWD) is a concept/technique that combines regular "desktop" website layout with a layout for mobile devices. It's one solution to rule them all. In theory, RWD will make your website work for every screen size and every device. There are a lot of pros to this concept, but there are also some very serious cons that you need to consider – design and production times are getting longer, therefore we have to do more researching, testing, and design more mockups and layouts. We need a lot more time for development and a lot more time for QA.

**What are some of your biggest and most daring achievements in web design at the company?**

**Tim:** Fluid wide-format next-gen websites we introduced in 2011. Think <http://www.hotelzaza.com/> and <http://chamberlainwesthollywood.com>. And also [http://www.shellhospitality.com/Black\\_Friday/](http://www.shellhospitality.com/Black_Friday/).

**Vladimir:** The creation of the AJAX engine for our out-of-the-box design level websites. All new out-of-the-box websites are running on this engine. AJAX technology has existed for quite a while already, but the right projects and resources to implement across the entire site appeared just recently.

**What inspires you?**

**Tim:** Everything around me. I keep my eyes wide open – people, cities, books, movies, music.

**Vladimir:** Any task or problem can inspire and encourage me to create something new. Harder and more complex tasks are the most exciting for me. Today developers are provided with a huge number of features; many services offer their API and SDK for third-party applications development and it allows us to create some totally awesome things.

**What do you envision for the future of web design and development?**

**Tim:** The future is mobile. Websites will become more flexible to accommodate different devices, from cellphones and tablets to laptops, desktops TVs, gaming consoles and that microwave oven.

**Vladimir:** The future is in semantics and a lot of that is now provided by HTML5. Developers and designers can use "cleaner," easier and consistent coding. HTML5 helps to get rid of restrictions which require usage of third-party plug-ins like Adobe Flash and it's only getting better.

**How does HeBS Digital help our hotel clients?**

**Tim:** HeBS Digital has solutions that fit every hotel client's needs and objectives: we offer standard, premium and out-of-the box hotel designs. We recommend our Standard Designs Package for small and select service hotels, ex. Branded: <http://www.doubletreehotelburlington.com/>, Non-branded:

<http://www.executivehotel-panama.com/>. For full-service hotels, luxury and boutique hotels, resorts and casinos we recommend our Premium Design Package, ex. <http://www.newyorkpalace.com/> and <http://www.brushcreekranch.com/>

For high-end luxury and boutique hotels we recommend our Out-of-the-Box Design Package, ex. <http://www.thejouledallas.com/> and <http://www.therogernewyork.com/#index>

**Vladimir:** Equally important to the website design is what sits on the back end of the website. For example the recent The Google Panda Update made most hotel websites obsolete. Bare, sparse copy

stuffed with keywords can no longer sustain a respectable SERP ranking. The latest Freshness Update created the need to add fresh content to the website on an ongoing basis..

### **A Note about HeBS Digital's Website Design Services**

In 2011 HeBS Digital created the latest version of its proprietary website content management system ([HeBS Digital CMS Premium](#)), which was specifically conceptualized and built to accommodate the stringent Google Panda and "Freshness" updates by allowing hotel marketers to maintain fresh content on the hotel website in the form of:

- Promotional landing pages for timely specials and packages (e.g. a March Madness package as opposed to an Advanced Purchase package valid for all of 2012)
- Event landing pages for events and happenings at the property and in the destination
- Promo tiles and banners on the website for featured specials and events
- Marketing and sales messages in the main image window on every page focusing on various aspects of the hotel product: room and dining promotions, complete meeting packages, wedding promotions, etc.
- New content pages on various topics: from seasonal and sports events, to local festivals and customer segment-specific content (family travel, seniors, weekend travel, romantic getaways, etc.)

Each local promotion or event page has "micro-formats" applied to it, which are rich snippets of data that signify to a search engine that these events are in fact stand-alone, current events, with exact starting and ending times associated. These ensure that all of our events are viewed as "current" rather than repetitive or stagnant.

Schemas codes are also incorporated on all time-sensitive landing pages: local promotions, special offers or events at the property and in the destination, as well as on a variety of pages site-wide: dining, accommodations, hotel services and amenities, etc.

The result? A typical single-property website has 40-60 pages of content indexed by Google. The HeBS Digital CMS allows clients to build a multitude of new landing pages and fresh content over time, and typically has over 2,500 -4,500 pages of relevant and deep content indexed by the search engines.

### **About HeBS Digital**

HeBS Digital is the industry's leading full-service hotel digital marketing, website design and direct online channel strategy firm based in New York City ([www.HeBSDigital.com](http://www.HeBSDigital.com)).

HeBS Digital has pioneered many of the "best practices" in hotel digital 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 top tier major hotel brands, luxury and boutique hotel brands, resorts and casinos, hotel management companies, franchisees and independents, and CVBs are taking advantage of the hotel digital marketing and direct online channel expertise offered by HeBS Digital. Contact HeBS Digital consultants at (212) 752-8186 or [success@hebsdigital.com](mailto:success@hebsdigital.com).