



Is Hotel SEO Dead? More Than Half of Your Website's Revenue Depends on It

By Max Starkov and Sue Wiker

Marketers love exclaiming "SEO is dead!" and heralding the next big thing that will save your website – social media, retargeting, mobile, tablets, you name it. However, regardless of what some in the industry say, SEO is still alive and well. HeBS Digital's own experience categorically shows that more than half of website booking revenue (56% to be exact) across our client portfolio comes as direct referral from the search engines, including organic and paid search.

The ongoing Google Panda updates (Panda 3.9 just launched) have made many hotel websites with thin content obsolete and have raised the bar for hotel websites, demanding not only unique and engaging copy. The [Google Venice](#) update had a heavy impact on the localization of search. In summary, it means that Google will try its best to serve you localized results based on your location, whether or not your search query is geo-targeted – you could type in 'hotel' and Google bases search results off of your location.

Hoteliers are also challenged to keep their hotel website consistently updated with fresh content as this significantly affects SEO. This means that budget dollars need to be allocated to keeping the website current or investing in a tool such as the HeBS Digital CMS Premium which – among other things – allows hoteliers to add and edit both textual and visual content on a 24/7 basis.

Case Study: Hotel Search Engine Revenues

In spite of all the new and trendy digital marketing initiatives and formats that overwhelm hoteliers nowadays, reliable old search engines generated over 55.6% of website revenue for HeBS Digital's client portfolio consisting of thousands of hotel properties.

Here is the search engine (Google, Bing and Yahoo) year-to-date contribution as percentage from the total website revenues, as of September 30, 2012:

- SEO revenues: 32.7%
- SEM revenues: 22.9%

There is a direct correlation between the quality of the website SEO and the results from your paid search (SEM) campaigns. The better the SEO on the site, the better the Quality Index assigned to your paid search campaigns by Google, which means higher ad position, better conversion rates, higher ROIs and lower cost per click. A robust content strategy, supported by adequate technology and marketing funds, can make all the difference and allow the hotel to maximize its revenues from the search engines.

All of this isn't to say that SEO is exactly the same as it was when it started. Some optimization practices have kicked the bucket – and we were happy to see them go. Search engine algorithm updates have targeted black hat practices that generally bring down the quality and relevance of queries.

So what has changed as far as SEO in hospitality is concerned?

SEO Practices Laid to Rest (Forever!)

- **Keyword Stuffing:** This should have gone out the door a long time ago, but in case you were still holding on to it, Google Penguin put the last nail in the coffin in April 2012.
- **Thin Content:** Gone are the days of one or two-sentence websites. Google Panda stressed the importance of deep and relevant content that provides a helpful user experience.
- **Link Farms:** Also struck down by the Google Panda update, link farms shouldn't be touched with a ten foot pole. Inbound links from these thinly-veiled sites will drop your site's performance considerably.
- **Exact Match Domains:** While affecting a small percentage of searches, the Exact Match Domain (EMD) Update wiped out one of the last vestiges of old-school SEO.

What's left? Strong editorial content. Web content has always been the king of SEO – the recent Google Panda algorithm updates turned website content into the emperor. Each of the updates that punished poor practices ultimately underscored one thing: relevant content is here to stay. Quality content has taken center stage over the past 18 months, making it imperative to have strong copy supported by a focused SEO strategy. We've put together our list of top ten recommendations for a well-optimized site.

HeBS Digital's Top Ten Recommendations for a Long SEO Life:

1. Redesign your website. This may not sound like it affects SEO, but it does. Redesigning your site allows you, with the help of analytics, to develop an intuitive site structure that organizes relevant content. Using a silo strategy, each page contributes to the SEO of its parent page. Additionally, this is the time to button up things on the back end: XML site maps, canonical tags, robot.txts on minor pages, site load speed, and so on. Install a state-of-the-art content management system (CMS) on the website.

Another important reason for the hotel website re-design is the growing need for centralized website content and digital marketing asset management technology. Hotel marketers are challenged to create and manage fresh content; store and distribute the hotel digital marketing assets; and circulate special offers and packages, events and happenings, all through several distinct channels. Managing a desktop website, mobile and tablet websites, and social media profiles on Facebook, Twitter, Google+ can become overwhelming without a content management system.

Obviously, hoteliers need more than just a simple website CMS capable of adding and editing textual and visual content. For example, HeBS Digital's [CMS Premium](#) offers all of the above capabilities and was specifically developed to accommodate the Google Panda and Freshness updates by allowing hotel marketers to maintain fresh content on the hotel website with no programming knowledge required.

2. Create engaging content on the hotel website. The ongoing Google Panda updates mandate that website content be deep, relevant, unique and engaging. Any hotel website without sufficient depth of content would have hard time with search engine rankings. HeBS Digital recommends a minimum of 25 content pages for a select service property, and 35-40 pages of content for a full-service property website. A big full-service hotel or resort's website should start with 75-100 pages of content. Utilizing the website's CMS platform, create landing pages for each hotel special offer, package or promotion, as well as for events and happenings at the property or in the destination.

3. Use professional copywriting. You get what you pay for – cheap copywriters typically provide thin, lifeless content that does little more than take up space on a page. Take the time to find professional copywriters with both SEO and hospitality experience that can be called "travel writers" in their own right. These writers will be able to not only generate unique, engaging and quality content, but also help you brainstorm ideas and provide guidance how to best present the hotel product online. Money spent on lasting content is money well spent.

4. Develop a content creation plan. Building additional content does three things for your site. It creates deeper content, gives you more real estate to target segmented keywords, and it increases your PPC campaigns' quality scores and lowers their cost per click. Capture incremental revenue by targeting events such as nearby colleges' graduations or upcoming sports games. Knowing these events ahead of time will allow you to post them far enough in advance to gain traction by the time the event happens, and will prevent a last-minute rush. Develop content based on special offers related to local attractions, such as theme parks, museums, sporting venues. Ultimately, the goal is to allow the website content to grow by hundreds of content pages every year.

Now that you have done all this work on your website and its off-site extensions, set aside some money to maintain it. Having the flexibility to tweak your SEO strategy throughout the year is a great thing. Anticipate minor content changes, new landing pages, linking incentives and other recommendations your SEO team may have.

5. Implement mobile SEO. Quality content is the biggest “must-have” for a mobile site. The Google Panda algorithm updates favor mobile websites with rich visual and textual content that is fresh, engaging and optimized for the search engines. Having a hotel mobile website – even if developed according to industry’s best practices – is only the beginning. The mobile web abides by different rules that require mobile Web-specific marketing initiatives. Mobile search engines favor and predominantly serve local content; therefore, hoteliers need to optimize their local content and listings on the search engines, main data providers, and local business directories.

6. Create a blog on the hotel website. The Google Freshness update values – you guessed it – fresh content. This can sometimes be difficult to do for a static product such as a hotel, which is where a blog comes in handy. A branded blog can keep followers up to date on the latest happenings at the property as well as area events and, for strong brands, include a lifestyle element. Keep in mind that a stale blog is worse than no blog at all.

7. Bring local search listings up to date. Since the Google Venice update, local presence has become more of a focus. Over the past year or so, the SERPs have changed to allow for more local results, meaning that it is even more important to have strong local search listings. Be sure that you have uploaded quality photos, included accurate information, and written an optimized description. All this information will help you build a strong local presence and increase your performance in mobile searches, which are increasing annually.

Creating and maintaining a Google+ page is a vital component of any hotel’s SEO strategy. While Google+ may not be the sensation that Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest are, it is the most important social medium when it comes to SEO. Google+ essentially gives Google direct access to your browsing habits, what results you find useful, and what sites you give your seal of approval to. Once you create a page, put relevant users in your circle and interact with them. This will give you an opportunity to take up more real estate on the SERPs and show up more often in “personal results.”

8. Devise a quality inbound linking and citation strategy. The Google Webspam update further penalized link farms and purchased links. Generally speaking, paid links have very little SEO value. Go for unique “organic” links with relevant anchor text, such as editorial links and mentions of the property, listings on local CVB websites, local colleges, and nearby convention centers, theme parks and attractions. Remember: bloggers are your friend, so work with local bloggers to have your hotel mentioned and linked to in their blog postings.

9. Utilize online press releases to promote special offers. Press releases in the form of travel consumer deal alerts are an important tool for increasing traffic, awareness, and quality inbound links and citations. Use a distribution system that allows you to target specific geographic areas for the most impact, and don’t forget to include a few links back to your site. However, keep in mind that press releases should still be “newsworthy” items – announcing that your hotel is great for group travel does not warrant a press release.

10. Implement high-powered analytics and search ranking technology. Search engine result page (SERP) rankings are just one measure of success. Organic performance can also be measured by revenue, bookings initiated, time on site, and other metrics. Platforms such as Adobe Omniture can give detailed metrics on each keyword such as pages viewed, entry points, and revenue to help you make tweaks to your SEO strategy. Revenue attribution SEO analysis, complemented with search ranking and recommendation technology such as BrightEdge, provides hoteliers with a concrete action plan to improve SEO results. When possible, analytics should be implemented prior to SEO work so you have a baseline to judge success against.

Conclusion

Contrary to what some marketers may be saying, SEO is not dead. It's not even close. Search engine optimization will never die, because it pushes hoteliers to continuously improve their sites. The recommendations above are great for SEO, but they also improve the user experience – something all hoteliers should strive to do. When you search something on a search engine, you hope for relevant results that will answer your question quickly. When done right, this is the end goal of SEO. Properly and honestly executed, SEO will help you rank highly for relevant, targeted keywords with a high conversion rate. Everybody wins.

About the Authors and HeBS Digital:

Max Starkov is President & CEO and Sue Wiker is Manager, Copy + SEO Dept at HeBS Digital, the hospitality industry's leading full-service digital marketing, hotel website design and online channel strategy firm, based in New York City (www.HeBSdigital.com).

HeBS Digital has pioneered many of the best practices in hotel Internet marketing, social and mobile marketing, and direct online channel distribution. The firm has won over 220 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, IAC Awards, etc.

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 benefiting from HeBS Digital's direct online channel strategy and digital marketing expertise. Contact HeBS Digital's consultants at (212) 752-8186 or success@hebsdigital.com.