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Website Optimization vs. Search Engine Optimization

What's the best way to go? | By Max Starkov and Jason Price

Hotel websites are often designed by those who know nothing about the hospitality industry and without taking into account fundamental search engine marketing and online distribution principles. Hoteliers often try to resolve this problem by hiring Search Engine Optimization (SEO) vendors for a quick fix of the hotel website, believing this will boost search engine rankings and increase online revenues. However, these quick fixes are often construed as spam, and only a fully optimized website can produce the desired online revenues and position your hotel company ahead of the competition. SEO vendors do not address of two crucial criteria used by the search engines...

Background:

Many hotel websites are performing poorly as far as online distribution and search engine strategy are concerned. Why? Many hotel websites have been developed by web designers who know nothing about the hospitality industry, based on input from hoteliers who are not experts on Internet strategy, online distribution, and eMarketing. And many of them were designed as online brochures without taking into account fundamental search engine marketing and online distribution principles.

Using a “quick fix” approach to undo what’s fundamentally wrong

Hotel websites that are designed without regard to Internet strategy, online distribution, and eMarketing inevitably produce poor results and few bookings. Hoteliers then turn to Search Engine Optimization (SEO) vendors for a quick fix of the hotel website to boost search engine rankings and increase online revenues. In reality, “slapping” Meta tags to a stale, user-unfriendly website and submitting it to the search engines can achieve few sustainable results. On the contrary—this quick fix approach can be construed as spam by the search engines and result in search engines banning the hotel site (excluding it from their indices).

Only a fully optimized website can produce the desired online revenues and position your hotel company ahead of the competition. Website optimization takes a comprehensive look at the website and prepares it for optimal performance (maximum user experience, bookability and conversion rates) and yes, for the search engines.

Unlike other e-commerce categories, Internet users search for travel and hospitality services and offerings within the context of a particular destination. Therefore, the search engine strategy for travel and hotel websites is subject to different methodology than what the generalist SEO (Search Engine Optimization) companies usually offer. This destination-focused search engine strategy requires in-depth knowledge of the travel and hospitality industry, extensive destination research, and destination target keyword analysis. Only a destination-focused search engine strategy can help the travel and hotel website leverage the popularity of the destination for your benefit.

Website Optimization is a complex undertaking that includes turning the hotel website into a search engine-friendly website. Often it starts by undoing damaged work of web designers and SEO firms. One must recognize that Website Optimization rather than Search Engine Optimization requires a total review of the website, from the way it was built to expansion of navigation with keyword rich body copy. Website Optimization is comprehensive and includes:

- Optimizing the architecture of the site and removing all of the search engine unfriendly features such as FLASH pages, pop-ups, frames, splash/intro pages, etc.
- Converting text in GIF format to HTML format
- Introducing tiered navigation on the site and removing mouse-over or hidden drop-down sub-navigational menus.
- Introducing a detailed and easily accessible Site Index, and develop a Google Site Map for each of the properties.
- Optimizing the body copy (the text, the visible copy on the site) throughout the site and drastically increasing the “Keyword Density” (number of keywords per 100 words of copy).

- Customer Segmentation: introduce rich content addressing all key customer segments: meeting planners, group travel, weddings, business travelers, spa, lifestyle activities, etc.
- Destination Web Strategy—turning your hotel into the “hero” of the destination by introducing rich destination content, quick area guides, calendar of events, and area attractions, thus making your hotel website highly relevant for any destination related keyword search.
- Creating landing pages for various email marketing and PPC marketing campaigns that enrich the website with relevant and fresh content and act as additional entry points to the site.
- Launching comprehensive PPC and Paid Inclusion email marketing campaigns featuring various domains (e.g. Specials page, or Weddings page, or Meetings page), thus spreading your “tentacles” across the Web and providing additional entry points for humans and search engine spiders alike. These campaigns also function to bring additional traffic to the site, boosting the Traffic Rank of the site.
- Launching a comprehensive Link Popularity strategy for the website, which is a crucial criteria used by the search engines to determine the ranking of the website. In addition a robust link creation strategy brings additional traffic and creates multiple entry points to the site for the search engine bots.
- Optimizing the page titles, description and Meta tags to support the body copy.

From all of the above, a SEO company usually deals with only optimizing the page titles, description and Meta tags of the site.

What are the Search Engines looking at?

Here are the most important criteria used by the search engines to rank a hotel website:

- The overall search-engine friendliness of the site (e.g. site built entirely in FLASH, site built in frames, Intro/Splash pages with no navigation and copy, lack of site maps, the copy in GIF or JPEG and not in HTML text format, etc)
- Rich content on the site
- Body copy with high keyword density
- Invisible copy (page titles, description tags, Meta tags)
- Link Popularity of the site (number of incoming links from highly authoritative websites like hotel directories, portals, etc.)
- PageRank (Google)
- Traffic Rank

As a result of their assessment the search engines determine the relevancy of the website to each keyword used and decide the ranking of the site.

Overview of Two of the Important Criteria

Here is an overview of two crucial criteria used by the search engines and not addressed by a SEO company:

Body Copy:

The copy on the hotel website serves two audiences: Internet users and the search engines. The body copy plays an essential role in promoting the hotel and its product/services to web customers. The 2004 RUSH Report by HeBS/iPerceptions found that leisure travelers-website users cited the site content/descriptions as one of the top 3 features they disliked most about hotel brand websites.

Equally important is that today's Search engines value the descriptive body copy (visible copy) found on the website more than the invisible copy (tags). The body copy must contain relevant target keywords and phrases (destination and product related) that permeate throughout the website. The so called "Keyword Density" i.e. number of keywords per 100 words of copy should be enhanced significantly. Search engines rate body copy as the only truthful source to pull descriptive data on the website for indexing. Search engine executives constantly reiterate that the body copy is the most important factor for getting high rankings.

Case Study: Body Copy and Link Popularity of a Hotel Brand Website

Using the HeBS proprietary CyberScore Rating System, we evaluated the website of a prestigious hotel brand (body copy and descriptions) and the site Link Popularity and compared it to the industry average derived from similar evaluations of over 20 brand websites.

- The body copy on the property pages consistently failed to disclose the location of the hotel and to "associate" the property with its respective destination.
- Extremely low Keyword Density.
- No customer segmentation strategy resulting in the absence of rich content related to key customer segments (e.g. meeting planners, wedding planners, business travelers, etc).
- No destination web strategy to make the hotel the "hero" of its destination.
- Low link popularity and even lower number of links recognized by Google, which inevitably will hurt the search engine ranking.
- Audit Results: The hotel brand utilizes only 27% of the "best practices" opportunities, way behind the industry average of 48%.

Strategic Linking and Link Popularity:

Link popularity is another important criteria used by the search engines (Google, Yahoo, MSN, etc) when ranking a website. The higher the link popularity, the more authoritative and relevant the incoming links, the better the chances for a top position in the search engine results.

Link popularity refers to the number and quality of incoming links that are pointing to the website. Outside websites that consider your own website important will create a link to your site. In the search engines' view, links to your website are considered a "vote of confidence" by a third party website for your site.

Today search engines want links from authoritative sites, or links from websites that share the same focus as your website, i.e. travel-related websites, destination portals, travel guides, CVBs, travel and hotel directories, etc.

Positioning the hotels on such authoritative sites achieves two goals:

- Boosts its Link Popularity which is vital for the search engine rankings.
- Leverages the marketing dollars and accumulated traffic of these sites, which ultimately increases direct sales as more traffic is led toward the brand website.

The goal is for the hotel to position itself at all "points of contact" with potential Internet travel bookers. Utilized expertly, these important online channels can produce immediate results while keeping the hotel company and properties in full control of the brand, pricing strategy and revenue management techniques. An essential by-product of such a strategy is the incoming link generation by outside websites.

Here are only some of the possible authoritative non-transactional sites for strategic linking initiatives:

- Online Event Planner Services
- Online Luxury Travel Services
- Honeymoon Services
- Romantic Getaway Services
- Online Hotel and Travel Directories
- Local travel and hospitality services
- Destination and city directories
- Travel guides
- Gay & Lesbian Services
- Family Travel sites
- Romantic Getaways
- Foreign direct services

Conclusion

Hotel websites are often designed by those who know nothing about the hospitality industry and without taking into account fundamental search engine marketing and online distribution principles. Hoteliers often try to resolve this problem by hiring Search Engine Optimization (SEO) vendors for a quick fix of the hotel website, believing this will boost search engine rankings and increase online revenues. However, these quick fixes are often construed as spam, and only a fully optimized website can produce the desired online revenues and position your hotel company ahead of the competition.

SEO vendors do not address two crucial criteria used by the search engines:

- **Body Copy:** Today's search engines value the descriptive body copy (visible copy) found on the website more than the invisible copy (tags). Search engines rate body copy as the only truthful source to pull descriptive data on the website for indexing.
- **Strategic Linking and Link Popularity:** The higher the link popularity of a website, and the more authoritative and relevant the incoming links, the better the chances for a top position in the search engine results.

A hotel website must undergo a full Website Optimization to turn it into a search engine-friendly website. HeBS helps optimize websites by enhancing the user experience and developing successful search engine strategies.