



Engaging the Hyper-Interactive Traveler Using Web 2.0 and Social Media: The Hotelier's Best Practices Guide

| By Max Starkov and Mariana Mechoso Safer

Today's travel consumer is tweeting, texting, emailing, communicating with friends via Facebook, and commenting, often in real-time, on restaurants and hotels via review sites like Yelp and TripAdvisor. How will you reach these hyper-interactive consumers at multiple touch points during the research process? And once your hotel has their attention, what should you do to encourage brand loyalty, increase site stickiness, create buzz around your hotel, and ultimately increase bookings?

Many hoteliers believe they do not have the resources to dedicate to Web 2.0 and Social Media; in other words, they are unable to meet the needs of today's hyper-interactive traveler. With more than 400 million users on Facebook, an average of 50 million tweets sent each day, and consumers expecting interactive and engaging hotel websites, the bottom line is this:

Your hotel cannot afford to ignore Web 2.0, Social Media, or the hyper-interactive traveler.

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Background:

Numerous articles have been published about the magnitude of participation on Social Media channels. Nothing exemplifies this more than the fact that recently, Facebook's traffic surpassed Google's.

By encouraging interaction on your hotel website and on Social Media channels, joining in the conversation, and making changes to your business based on guest feedback, you show your current and potential guests that you listen. This is invaluable for building brand loyalty and encouraging positive reviews.

As stated in the Social Media Revolution video on YouTube, "We don't have a choice on whether we do Social Media; the question is how well we do it." If you do not interact with your guests via your hotel website and Social Media channels, your competitors will. More than 700,000 local businesses have active pages on Facebook; by 2011, 99% of businesses will have a Facebook account and 91% will be on Twitter.

Connecting with your Website Visitors Using Web 2.0 & Social Media Strategies

There are multiple cost-efficient ways to connect with current and future guests via Web 2.0 initiatives and Social Media, both of which are integral parts of the de-commoditization strategy. In addition to further connecting with your key customer segments by utilizing these initiatives, you will be able to engage additional market segments, thereby increasing your market share. All of these initiatives also serve to provide visibility and to increase your web presence, which is essential for SEO.

Hoteliers must align the interactivity of the hotel website with the hyper-interactive behavior of today's travel consumer. Create multiple opportunities for your website visitors to communicate with your hotel and allow them to share their experience via their social networks (i.e. if a website visitor enters a sweepstakes, make it easy for them to share that they entered with their friends on Facebook and to tweet the contest).

Before you launch your own strategy, assess what your competition is doing. How many of your competitors have a Facebook page, a Twitter account, a YouTube channel, a Flickr account? How many offer check-in specials on FourSquare? How many of them have Web 2.0 functionalities on their websites? Do their websites accommodate and encourage feedback? Many hotels do not have a solid, unified strategy, which will allow your hotel to stand out and capture an audience that your competition leaves in the dark.

When it's time to establish your own strategy, remember it's not just about having a Web 2.0 and Social Media presence. It's how you execute that strategy that determines your success.

Using Web.20 Initiatives to Engage your Website Visitors

Most websites are not equipped to handle the hyper-interactive travel consumer of today and instead offer dead, stale visual and textual content. There is minimal interaction with the user; all he/she can do is read what is on the website as if reading a novel in a library. There are no interactive Web-2.0 features engaging the travel consumer and soliciting his/her participation and input. This is contrary to the mere nature of today's hyper-interactive Internet user.

How can you add engaging content to your website that will solicit the participation of its visitors?

1.) Initiative: Blog on the Hotel Website

42% of consumers accessed travel information on a blog, and 40% of consumers actually posted a review themselves (PhoCusWright 2009). Update your blog at least twice a week, and sprinkle keywords in your posts. Blogs are extremely SEO-friendly and the search engines index blogs almost immediately after a post is made live. A well developed hotel blog strategy could provide visibility to unique aspects of your hotel product and destination, and a differentiated approach to reach key customer segments.

2.) Initiative: Customer Feedback on the Site

By offering a comprehensive customer feedback form where customers can leave comments and complaints, you communicate to your guests that their feedback is valuable to you. Make sure to include questions about the usability of your website. If possible, offer an incentive for people to fill out your feedback form, such as a free amenity or upgrade during their next stay, to encourage participation.

In addition to the positive SEO benefits (many customer reviews include keywords i.e. "We were looking for a Boston hotel that fit our budget and found the perfect fit!"), testimonials, accompanied by photos if possible, make your hotel come to life for your website visitors.

Finally, make sure that you are monitoring and responding to customer reviews on the major review websites.

3) Initiative: Interactive Sweepstakes

Contests and promotions are great for getting people excited about your brand and for building buzz, encouraging daily visits to your website and growing your opt-in email and mobile list. By offering an incentive for people to enter on a daily basis, they will inevitably become more familiar with your hotel and website.

Case Study: CVB in Southern California

A CVB client wanted to increase their Social Media following and launch a campaign on its website that would generate buzz around the destination. HeBS recommended an interactive sweepstakes to reach consumers at every online touch point and to connect with consumers via mobile, email, and Social Media.

HeBS built an interactive sweepstakes on the website and participants were entered in a drawing to win a \$1,000 free vacation. Second, third, fourth, and fifth place free hotel room prizes were also rewarded. Lastly, a \$250 Gift Card was awarded to the person who referred the contest to the most friends to promote viral marketing.

Results:

- 1,200 Unique Registrants
- + 300 Facebook fans in 5 days

- + 250 Twitter Followers in 5 days
- Over 800 mobile numbers added to mobile marketing list
- Over 500 new emails added to the email opt-in list
- Over 30 comments on the Facebook fan page regarding the contest
- Winner of a Major Award for Outstanding Integrated Campaign

4) Initiative: Interactive Calendar of Events

An interactive calendar of events is a great way to keep your website visitors updated on all the latest events happening at and around the hotel. It's also a recommended way to keep your website content fresh, with a constant flow of new information to encourage repeat website visits. If your hotel has popular dining events, tastings, leisure activities, etc. at the property and/or events close or near the property, such as museum exhibitions, theater performances, sporting events, concerts, and more, a calendar of events is a must. The goal is to make the calendar the go-to point for area visitors and to keep them on the hotel website.

Web 2.0 functionalities on the website have multiple benefits in addition to engaging your customer segments. They help overshadow any negative presence in organic search, build a stronger brand relationship, and bring your brand to life.

Using Social Media Initiatives to Build Loyalty and Increase Traffic to Your Website

Four in five travelers read reviews on Social Media and 95% of those indicated such reviews were influential during the decision making process (PhoCusWright 2009). There is no doubt that Internet users are increasingly influenced by Social Media sites and peer reviews. By utilizing a comprehensive Social Media strategy, hoteliers can create Social Media "buzz" around the hotel, target receptive audiences, and ultimately stimulate hotel website visits, interactions and bookings.

HeBS' 2010 Benchmark Survey on Hotel Internet Marketing Budget Planning and Best Practices showed that half of hoteliers surveyed (50% exactly) in 2010 planned to create profiles for their hotels on social networks.

Social marketing should become an important component of any hotel's marketing mix and part of the comprehensive Direct Online Channel Strategy for any hotel company. Naturally, it is important to use the right ROI metrics to measure the success of social marketing efforts of the hotel.

Create a positive presence and exude brand voice on the following high-traffic Social Media networks:

1) Initiative: Facebook

Create a Facebook page for your business and make sure to respond to posts as it is easy to tell when a hotel is not "listening" to its audience. Ignoring those that like your Facebook page is a sure way to lose them! Consider a 'Reviews' or 'Discussions' Facebook tab, where you may respond to customer feedback

in a professional manner and show that you care about customer support. Include events, at least one photo album, and videos, when possible.

Add value to your Facebook page with a booking engine widget, an email sign up form, and a customized tab describing the benefits of following your hotel.

Post upcoming deals and promotions, area events, announcements such as new amenities, questions for soliciting feedback (“What is your favorite thing to do in San Francisco?”) and exclusive offers for Facebook Fans. Always include a link to a relevant landing page (make sure this is often your own website) and choose a thumbnail photo for the URL to attract attention to the post.

2) Initiative: Twitter

Use Twitter to monitor what is being said about your hotel, to engage an audience that is talking about your hotel and/or its location, and to speak directly to your current and future guests. Make sure you are not only tweeting but actively engaging and responding to tweets. If you are only concerned with posting content, you are not listening.

Tweet about discounts, upcoming events in the area, general news about your hotel, and offer exclusive discounts for your followers. Always include a brief call to action and a link.

Your following on Twitter should be based around your target market; however, if there are special events that you wish to push via Twitter, you should also build the following around those who might be interested in those events (the majority of your followers should be local if you’re looking to concentrate on last-minute events or special offers.) To build your follower list, decide who your main audience is and who would be interested in your brand, and follow them to encourage that they follow you back.

Case Study: Boutique Hotel in Boston

HeBS created, customized, and launched a Twitter profile for a boutique hotel in Boston in September 2009. We began to build a following by tweeting and hinting about the launch of the new hotel website. We also did branded and informational tweets about the property—its reputation, its services, its location, etc.

By mid-December, we built a loyal following and were an established presence in the Boston-based “Twitterverse.” We had already generated revenue from Twitter and established a reputation as a good place to check for upcoming Boston events. We also introduced “{Hotel Name} Chirps”—last-minute deals for Twitter followers.

Having made the most of its smaller following, HeBS saw that the hotel needed more followers to expand its reach and capitalize on its Twitter successes. In order to increase followers, generate buzz about the property, and strengthen relationships with current followers, HeBS launched a one-day free-room giveaway exclusively on Twitter.

Over 120 people entered the Hotel free-room giveaway on 12/18/09 between 10 AM – 5 PM. The week of the contest, Twitter generated almost 12% of the clicks to the site and over 2% of bookings initiated.

3) Initiative: YouTube

Why is YouTube so important? YouTube serviced over 6.6 billion streams in Oct 2009 alone, followed by Hulu (632 million) and Facebook with over 217 million streams. YouTube is the second largest search engine—second only to Google.

Create a YouTube channel, with a look and feel customized to your brand and hotel website. On this channel, feature videos that highlight your destination, your hotel, and any positive news or press coverage. By including optimized tags on videos to increase your presence in organic search, you will overshadow any negative videos that may be present on YouTube, and ultimately increase your brand presence.

4) Initiative: Flickr

Create a Flickr account and upload albums that highlight your hotel and destination. If possible, include photos of your guests enjoying themselves at your property. All photos may include an optimized description.

A Flickr account that is well organized with optimized descriptions of photos is sure to stand out in the search engine results, and an account in Flickr helps your official photos show up in image results – making the threat of unflattering photos in search results much less likely.

Make sure to pay special attention when establishing profiles—always include photos and marketing messages, and be sure to maintain a consistent image that represents your brand across all media.

Once you have established these profiles and accounts, find a highly visible place to link to them from your hotel website.

Measuring Results of Web 2.0 & Social Media Efforts

In a world where we now have the tools to measure the return on investment of every dollar, the big question remains: How do you measure the results of your Web 2.0 & Social Media efforts? Web 2.0 initiatives need to be budgeted, but is it worth it to devote a significant amount of time (or even hire someone) on Social Media?

What is the Payoff of Having Web 2.0 Initiatives on Your Website?

Here are concrete results of having Web 2.0 initiatives on your hotel website:

- Increased time spent on site: a sweepstakes, blog, calendar of events and even a customer comment form encourage your website visitors to spend more time on your website. The more time they spend on your website, the more they become familiar with and invested in your hotel—and the more likely they are to make a reservation.
- SEO: fresh, new content on the site in the form of blogs, calendar of events, and a sweepstakes provides original content on the hotel site for customers and search engines.

- Email capture for future promotions: a sweepstakes on the hotel website will build your opt-in email list. A HeBS client recently hosted a sweepstakes on their website. When the sweepstakes ended, they had 12,000 new email addresses to add to their opt-in list. In addition, over 3,000 people forwarded the sweepstakes to friends.
- Pathing towards a booking: use analytics to study where your visitors go after interacting with a Web 2.0 initiative. Are they on their way to make a reservation? Many times they are. In 2010, one HeBS client had 21.1% of its visitors begin the reservation process after visiting the calendar of events page.

How Do You Measure the Success of Your Social Media Efforts?

Social marketing initiatives rarely generate outstanding ROIs when measured in bookings and revenue. Social Media and social marketing initiatives should be reviewed with "sober eyes" and within the context of the impact of the hotel's multi-channel marketing strategy.

Rather than focusing on bookings and revenue, remember the best uses of Social Media:

- o Buzz-building
- o Brand-building
- o Interacting with and engaging customers
- o Serving as an important component of the hotel's multi-channel marketing strategy
- o Keeping up with the times, making the hotel look current, cool and up-to-date
- o Driving engaged and relevant traffic to the property's own website

Unleashing a multi-channel marketing campaign simultaneously across all available tools such as Social Media, mobile Web, search engines (SEM and SEO), display advertising, email marketing, etc. produces a compounded effect and far greater returns than each individual marketing format. In other words: The Whole is Bigger than the Sum of its Parts.

Social Media efforts may certainly result in bookings, yet direct revenue should not be the only metric in which you measure results. If you solely focus on bookings, then you ignore other valuable metrics such as increased visits to the website, brand loyalty, and SEO.

Here are ways you should measure the results of your Social Media efforts:

- Brand loyalty/engagement: if your audience is commenting on Facebook and Twitter, then they are interested in what you have to say and are more likely to book your hotel over the competition. You are building stronger relationships with current and future guests.
- Real-time search: the search engines have started integrating tweets into search results. Google even offers the ability to search by 'Updates,' or tweets. Recently, a HeBS client showed up second on the first page of search results for the very competitive term of 'Boston Hotel,' because of a recent tweet containing that keyword.
- Customer service improvements: are you using feedback about your hotel from Facebook and Twitter to better your business? Are you monitoring for disgruntled guests and potential guests with questions, and responding quickly? If you are truly listening to your audience, you will find ways in which your customer service is lacking and will work to improve in these areas.

- Increased traffic to your site: while Social Media is still not a major revenue generator, HeBS clients have seen significant traffic to their websites driven by Social Media. For a HeBS client located in Northern California, visits from Twitter accounted for 4.5% of total traffic generated to their website in Q1 2010.

Measuring the results of your Web 2.0 & Social Media efforts should not be based strictly on direct revenues. Have you successfully created more awareness about your hotel and its value proposition? Are you generating more positive buzz about your hotel? Are you listening to and engaging with your audience? If the answer is yes, then you have begun to harness the power of Web 2.0 & Social Media.

Conclusion

Every web savvy hotelier knows that the Internet, especially Web 2.0 and Social Media, has changed the way in which customers plan and purchase travel. Hoteliers need to tailor their hotel Internet marketing strategies to include these initiatives and evolve with these changes in the travel purchase process.

It is no longer a question of whether your target markets are engaging with Web 2.0 initiatives or are active on Facebook and Twitter. Social Media is even popular among the mature generation (63-75): 36% of them had a social network profile in 2009 vs. 10% in 2007 (eMarketer). If you are not reaching the hyper-Interactive traveler using Web 2.0 and Social Media initiatives, then you are going to quickly lose market share as your competitors gain.

Consider partnering with a full-service hotel website development and Internet marketing firm to build a strong and cohesive Web 2.0 and Social Media strategy.

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HeBS has pioneered many of the "best practices" in hotel Internet marketing and direct online 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 consultants at (212)752-8186 or info@hospitalityebusiness.com.