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Hotel Websites Are Not Ready For Today's Hyper-Interactive Travel Consumer

| By Max Starkov

Many hoteliers do not realize how important it is to address the significant change in travel consumer behavior over the past several years, namely the emergence of a new breed of hyper-interactive travel consumers.

Most hotel websites are not equipped to handle the hyper-interactive consumer and read like a static online brochure. There is minimal interaction with the user; all he/she can do is sit back and read what is on the website, as if reading a Mark Twain novel in a county library. Many hotel websites offer dead, stale textual and visual content. 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, who 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.

The New Hyper-Interactive Travel Consumer

The advent of social media and the Mobile Web has accelerated the hyper-interactiveness of Internet users and travel consumers in general. Social media means deep user engagement, content generation by users on a daily, if not hourly basis, multi-channel interactions and opinion sharing. The Mobile Web takes this behavior to an entirely new level and enables it 24/7.

This new breed of hyper-interactive travel consumers can be described with the following three distinct characteristics:

- They are hyper-connected: these consumers are communicating in real-time with friends, network, colleagues, family and peers via text, email, social networks, online content sharing and reviews.
- They are hyperactive: these consumers exhibit short attention spans in an environment of constant information overload. They also exhibit impulsive behavior with no tolerance for dull, static content that is not engaging.
- They are hyper-engaged: these consumers are passionate, opinionated, easily excitable and fully engaged. They love sharing opinions, reviews and “cool stuff”, and really appreciate the opportunity to be able to do that easily.

Sound familiar? Many of us fall into the category of hyper-interactive consumers.

A survey “The NEXTGen Traveler” by Ypartnership and PhoCusWright found this new type of travel consumer to be “heavy users of wireless and digital technology”. Here are just a few industry stats characterizing today’s hyper-interactive consumer:

Social Media Aficionado

- 57% of US Internet users maintained a social networking site profile in 2009 vs. 45% in 2007.
- Social media is popular even among the mature generation (63-75 years): 36% of them had a social network profile in 2009 vs. 10% in 2007 (eMarketer)

Facebook Devotee

- There are more than 400 million active users.
- 50% of active users log on to Facebook in any given day.
- Average user has 130 friends on the site.
- Average user writes 25 comments on Facebook each month.

Twitter Addict

- According to comScore, 75 million people worldwide visited Twitter.com in January 2010. That represents a growth of 1,100% in a year. Compete.com estimates that 23.5 million of those came from the U.S. alone.
- According to Twitter, some 50 million tweets are sent in one day. Impressive, but what does it mean? Well, tweets in 2009 grew 1,400%. Traffic to Twitter.com grew around 1,100%, and total sent Tweets went up 1,400%.
- According to Alexa, Twitter.com is ranked the 12th most popular website in the world.

Mobile Obsession

- 93.6% Mobile Penetration in the U.S. in 2009 (eMarketer).
- 67% of travelers and 77% of frequent business travelers with Web-enabled mobile devices have already used their devices to find local services (e.g. lodging) and attractions (PhoCusWright).
- 71% of U.S. adults felt it was safe to make a purchase via a mobile phone, 43% are willing to purchase hotel rooms, and 40% tickets for travel via their mobile devices (Harris Interactive Poll April-May 2009).

SMS/Texting Fanatic

- In 2008, over a trillion text messages were sent worldwide.
- On average there were 357 texts vs. 204 phone calls/per month per cell phone subscriber (ITU).

Customer Review Enthusiast

- 89% of US Online Buyers read customer reviews before they buy (eMarketer).
- A recent survey by PhoCusWright revealed the true power of customer reviews in the travel planning process: 84% of respondents read a review of a product or service.

What Are Hoteliers Planning in 2010?

Some hoteliers are beginning to realize that their static, Web 2.0-unfriendly websites are simply not ready to deal with today's hyper-interactive consumer and are already exploring ways to remedy the situation.

The just released results of the 4th annual Benchmark Survey on Hotel Internet Marketing Budget Planning and Best Practices by Hospitality eBusiness Strategies (HeBS) clearly shows that more hoteliers are planning to engage in Web 2.0 and social media initiatives in 2010:

What type of Web 2.0 & Social Media marketing initiatives are you planning for 2010?	2008	2009	2010
A blog on the hotel website	14.5%	14%	37.9%
'Share this site' and RSS on the website	N/A	N/A	24.1%
A photo sharing functionality on the hotel website	12.7%	4.7%	32.8%
Sweepstakes and contests on the hotel website	9%	3.5%	36.2%
Survey and comment card on the hotel website	18.4%	14%	31%
Subscribe to a reputation monitoring service	8.4%	2.3%	19%
Create profiles for my hotel(s) on the social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, etc.)	13.3%	14%	50%
Create and post videos on YouTube	N/A	N/A	46.6%
Actively participate in blogs that concern my hotel	12.7%	5.8%	24.1%
Advertise on social media sites (e.g. TripAdvisor, Facebook, etc.)	8.1%	15.1%	39.7%
I am not planning on Web 2.0 and Social Media initiatives for 2010	N/A	15.1%	6.9%

How Can Hoteliers Make their Websites Web 2.0 Friendly and Engage the Hyper-Interactive Consumer?

The hotel website has become the face of the hotel to the outside world. Hoteliers must understand that engaging the users via a fully interactive, Web 2.0 enabled website not only meets the demands of today's hyper-interactive consumer, but creates deep and lasting interactive relationships which in turn positively affect conversions and revenues.

Hoteliers must align the interactivity of the hotel website with the hyper-interactive behavior of today's travel consumer. A Web 2.0-friendly site increases interaction with visitors, engages website users, generates interest, increases site stickiness, and ultimately increases bookings.

In addition, Web 2.0 initiatives on the hotel website are a vital part of the comprehensive de-commoditization strategy of the hotel, a potent tool to provide a unique value proposition to your online customers. A well-developed Web 2.0 strategy on the hotel site could provide visibility to unique aspects of the hotel product and a differentiated approach to reach key customer segments.

Create multiple opportunities for your website visitors to communicate with your hotel. Start a blog so that you can speak to them, and allow them to leave their feedback (this will benefit the hotel's SEO as well). Launch a sweepstakes (e.g. Free Room Giveaway) that allows your visitors to enter to win a free night's stay and refer the contest to their friends, spreading it virally. Let them show off their vacation photos by creating a photo sharing contest (always have an approval process before photos go live). Post a fun scavenger hunt on the site and not only generate buzz, but add new hotel fans on Facebook and followers on Twitter, add new users to the opt-in email and text lists, and generate incremental bookings in the process.

Here are two case studies of Web 2.0 initiatives HeBS recently launched for its clients:

Case Study 1: Multi-Channel Interactive Scavenger Hunt for a Resort in Southern California

Description: This multi-channel Interactive Scavenger Hunt required participants to collect 4 clues via Facebook, Twitter, text message and an email marketing piece. They in turn would be entered to win a grand prize of a \$1,000 free vacation that included a two-night stay, spa treatment, dinner and a choice of tennis or a round of golf

Results:

- Unique participants: 1,275
- Increase in Facebook fans: 89%
- Increase in Twitter followers: 25%
- New mobile text list opt-ins: 662
- New email list opt-ins: 650
- Having fun while hunting for clues: priceless

Case Study 2: Interactive Sweepstakes on a Hotel Website in New York City

Description: This 30-Day Free Room Giveaway Interactive Sweepstakes featured on the hotel website allowed participants to enter daily to win a free night's stay, and an extra incentive of a \$250 VISA Cash Card prize was awarded to the person who forwarded the sweepstakes to the most friends.

Results:

- Sweepstakes participants: 8,231
- New email list opt-ins: 1,624
- Sweepstakes forwarded to a friend: 443 times
- Sweepstakes mentioned in various travel publications
- Numerous tweets and re-tweets about the sweepstakes

Many of these Web 2.0 features such as interactive sweepstakes and contests, blogs, event/activity calendars, photo sharing contests, sharing the site with friends, following the hotel via Twitter and Facebook, customer surveys and testimonials, etc. can be implemented even now, in this economy, with or without re-designing the whole website.

Consider seeking advice from a Web 2.0-savvy, full-service hotel website development and Internet marketing firm to actively help you revamp the interactivity of your hotel website. Learn which Web 2.0 and interactive initiatives make the most sense for your hotel, as well as how to implement the latest trends and best practices so you can meet the new demands of today's hyper-interactive travel consumer.

About the Author:

Max Starkov is Chief eBusiness Strategist at Hospitality eBusiness Strategies (HeBS), the industry's leading full-service hotel Internet marketing and direct online channel strategy firm based in New York City (www.HospitalityeBusiness.com).

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.