

HeBSdigital

Building A Blog Strategy in Hospitality

Grow customer relationships and direct online revenue | By Jason Price and Max Starkov

The ease and ubiquity of blogs and their application in hotel marketing deserves a closer look. Must we act on such bold statements as “blogs are the future” and “a blog is a marketing must”? Also, what are the implications for blogs in hospitality? Should creating a blog become part of your own hotel marketing mix? Does hospitality require a different blog strategy than in other verticals? Are there alternatives to blogs? Can a blog help you differentiate your services and de-commoditize your product? What role does a blog serve if at all and what are the pros and cons of developing a blog strategy? The ideas discussed in this article could help hoteliers conceptualize the creation of a blog strategy.

Background:

Web log or “Blog” is an online journal type of a website containing postings of written content and displayed in the latest order received. Traditionally a blog is a shared journal, much like a discussion board. The postings are a series of topical discussions written by a blog host or “blogger” and correspondences by blog readers. Blog contributors range from average citizens with armchair rants to researched articles written by credible journalists and industry experts. The general neutrality of a blog that gives a voice to everyone and the “freshness” of the blog content helps propel its wide appeal. Blog content and its word-of-mouth power can influence purchasing decisions, expose secrets, and create political movements.

According to Blog Pulse, a blog industry monitor, by the end of 2005 there were a total of 34 million blogs with the rate of 70,000 newcomers every hour. Blog postings exceed 695,000 every 24 hours. The Japanese government estimates 3.35 million blogs in Japan. Nearly 7,000 blogs originate from New York City alone. Blogs cover practically every topic from fashion to child rearing, politics, travel, electronics, movie reviews, and new coffee shop openings. They reach deep into society with a committed blog readership of over 20 million. The diverse content flows freely, and daily. The virtual space is drowning in blog content.

A 2004 Intelliseek/Forrester study revealed that consumers trust word-of-mouth recommendations far more than they trust traditional marketing and advertising. Word-of-mouth recommendations represent the most trusted form of advertising with the highest impact, suggesting that people would rather hear about real experiences and perspectives than through marketing speak. Blogs have become the quintessential forum for the word-of-mouth.

As convergence grows and the media morphs we also see the rise of blog videos, blog casting, blog radio, and blog mobile. Like a website, the blog content can be displayed and distributed on many platforms and in multiple formats.

In our view blogs are yet to play an important role as a marketing tool in hospitality. But blogs are already playing a vital role in word-of-mouth customer property reviews and peer-to-peer recommendations. Here are two important aspects of blogs that affect hospitality today and hoteliers should be aware of:

- Blogs as part of the hotel defensive strategy
- Blogs as a marketing tool in hospitality

Blogs About Your Hotel: What You Do Not Know Could Hurt You

Monitoring blogs that contain customer postings with property reviews, feedback and recommendations can help hoteliers avoid major publicity disasters and alienate potential customers. As a form of damage control the hotel can respond to each blog allegation, provide counter arguments, and even provide some publicity or selling points. At the same time this information becomes useful as a means to fix the problems before they grow larger and more public. The hotel can only win if it enters the discussion rather than remain oblivious or unresponsive.

Case Study | Blog Postings about a New Boutique Hotel in Manhattan

The popular real estate blog Curbed.com tracks the latest developments, transactions, and general news on Manhattan real estate. Within its hotel section was an article earlier this year and series of discussions surrounding a new boutique hotel in Manhattan's trendy Lower East Side. Not one blog posting spoke in favor of the property. More than twelve Curbed rants generated significant complaints. People who had at one point walked by the hotel, people with an interest in hotel restoration, and local area business owners spoke unfavorably mentioning bed bugs and poor design, inflated room rates, poor customer service, and bets on date of bankruptcy.



The potential damage, particularly after a new property opening can have a devastating effect.

Hoteliers should include monitoring of blog postings as part of their "property defense strategy". Searching for blog postings on a blog search engine like technorati.com or feedster.com or reviewing daily web magazines like hotelchatter.com and its "Hotel Hell" stories is a good start.

Blogs as Marketing and Advertising Tool in Hospitality

In this section we will review several important aspects of blogs and blog postings as a marketing format in hospitality.

Launching a Promotional Hotel Blog

- Is launching a promotional hotel blog the answer? What more can a blog provide above and beyond the property website and your existing online marketing efforts? Will the added blog dialogue strengthen your direct distribution strategy and grow online revenues?

Any respectable hotelier in 2006 already has a competitive website that describes the accommodations, services and amenities, customer testimonials and online feedback forms, photo gallery or virtual tour, and local area information and directions. A competitive hotel website should employ robust customer segmentation and feature fresh, up-to-date contents that both online consumers and search engine bots like. An optimized website contains high keyword-density to boost the search engine-friendliness and is updated on a regular basis with new content and rich media.

For online promotion, the hotel should already participate in local, vertical, and paid search marketing, email marketing, link creation, and many other strategies to draw in customers seeking a hotel in your destination. Having a robust direct Internet marketing strategy in place,

and generating substantial revenues from your online efforts is a must in 2006.

In our view launching a hotel blog for the sake of promoting the property contradicts the very character of the blog phenomenon, i.e. the general neutrality of the blog as a “shared online journal”, -- an unbiased form of web expression. A hotel blog promoting the hotel product will soon be discovered for what it is – a marketing tool of the hotel and will be abandoned by its readers. If a blog is perceived as too commercial and biased it will never work and lose interest from its audience.

On the other hand how do you control negative postings on your own blog? As mentioned, a blog is a shared journal, so you have to allow comments and feedback—how do you control the bad ones on your own site? Delete them? Who at the hotel property will continuously feed the content and monitor all the readership contributions? As mentioned, “fresh content” is major characteristic of the blog, and the constant feeding of content may become a burden to the existing online marketing effort.

Expert Blogs

- One of the reasons for the popularity of the blogs is the value provided by blog postings by credible journalists and industry experts. How can a hotelier take advantage of people’s need to hear from the experts?

Take the blog exposure of your property further by harnessing the expertise of key employees. Your head chef may already blog on cuisine sites or the golf pro on sports sites. These individuals can serve as field agents for the hotel in the blogosphere. If you are a spa resort, ask your spa services professionals to share their expertise and provide advice on outside blogs or by launching a blog of their own or enable a blog extension of the Spa Section of the hotel website. If your property specializes in weddings, ask your professional wedding planner to do the same. Similar arrangements can be made at a golf resort with its golf pros, a beach resort with its scuba or adventure fishing pros, etc.

The whole notion here is that a blog featuring expert advice and know-how from a credible source speaks volumes about the property itself and the services it provides (“If this hotel has this knowledgeable person on staff, obviously this is a hotel I can trust with my hotel stay”).

All of the blogs should be devised as “Ask the Experts” blogs, and should provide links for more information to relevant sections of the property website. A smart GM will find ways to compensate the expert employees for this subtle but nevertheless important promotional effort.

Travel Community Blogs

- The “travel community” blog is based on an ongoing dialogue between an expert panel on one side and members of a travel club or reward program on the other.

Starwood’s TheLobby.com is an example of such a community log. It serves as a forum for Starwood Preferred Guests and a panel of travel writers from Electric Artists.

Another version of the community blog are the Affinity Blogs that serve as discussion forums for people with common interest or strong opinions about a subject matter (e.g. wedding planning, traveling with pets, family travel, gay travel, etc)

Destination blogs maintained by travel writers or destination experts can also serve as important travel community forums.

Hotel Policy about Blogging

- Do your employees blog? Are they using office hours and computers to leave nasty blog postings that may result in legal repercussions for your property? Or perhaps they are active participants in popular blogs and their postings are valued by other blog readers.

In any case, any proactive hotelier should have a clear policy regarding blogs and your employees' blog participation, naturally with a policy designed to be sensitive about privacy issues. Such a corporate policy should address the intended purpose plus incentives and will keep you informed and with some control of the blog process.

Develop a panel of experts to provide content on various topics. They will serve as bloggers in their area of expertise. Mandate that at least once-a-week they review the discussions and ad follow-up as well as new content if possible. A hotel-inspired blog may get picked up on different sites, get fed through really simple syndication, (RSS), or generate input from local area businesses. In other words—acquire a life of its own.

Hotel employees could become influential evangelists of your property by acting as trusted experts as described above, or by identifying themselves as being employees of your hotel and providing contact info and the hotel website URL, etc. On the other hand they could act as your "eyes and ears" and monitor the Web for negative blog publicity about your property. Hotel employees have to become stakeholders in the property's online image and in the benefits that come with a positive Internet presence.

Identify Blogs that Matter

- Step into the blogosphere by identifying various blogs that make sense to your product and intended audience. The majority of blogs accept content in the form of reader responses and article submissions. Using the search engines or sites like technorati, start by building a list of relevant blogs.

Next consider the information you want to share and be sure it is newsworthy. The nature of the blog is to be informative rather than to sell. If the subject matter is of interest then readers will respond. A blog discussion will resonate differently for different people in the discussion. Rather than pitch an article about your luxury beds, describe how these beds are designed to be the next trend in luxury accommodations. If the article gets accepted you may have an entire following of contributors commenting on the discussion.

In an environment cluttered with travel information and fierce hotel competition, plus third-party online intermediaries pushing rates only, a blog is one way to help de-commoditize your hotel product. A blog can reinforce the national and local brand, build customer relationships, promote certain aspects of the hotel product (golf, spa, wedding, dining, etc), and stimulate conversation and discussions on the hotel product.

Nurture a Relationship with High Value Bloggers

- Another approach is to build a rapport with key bloggers who will evangelize about your latest news and developments. Inform a spa enthusiast blogger about the new Sagestone Spa at Red Mountain Spa in Utah. Nurture a relationship with high value bloggers in your space and keep

them posted on the latest news about your hotel or resort.

Many bloggers do not accept financial compensation as this may compromise the integrity of the blog as well as risk exposure by the blog community. Instead, reward the effort with a free weekend stay or some advertising.

Blogs as an Advertising Medium

- That is right, advertising on blogs. Many high-trafficked blogs and blog search engines now accept display ads and sponsorships, and ad agencies are buying up blog real estate. The same goes for pay-per-click advertising on many blogs, typically served by Google and Yahoo Search Marketing. Blog ad rates may be lower due to low traffic but the niche marketing has its benefits.

In our view, at this point a property is justified to advertise only on blogs that are highly relevant to the hotel product or location, e.g. regional golf or spa blogs, destination blogs, etc.

Blogs as Part of the Search Marketing Efforts of the Hotel

- Technically speaking an entire blog discussion is wrapped in code and displayed like a website. The written copy is in HTML and indexed by the searched engines. Just like a website, words may contain embedded links and be keyword rich. From an online marketing standpoint, there are immediate and direct implications of blogs in hospitality search marketing.

Be mindful of the search engines when writing for blogs. Include descriptive copy, ad photos, and embed outgoing links in your prose back to hotel website, if allowable.

Mentioned a few times, Google and other search engines reward sites with new content, that contains links and high Keyword Density, and that draws inbound links. A blogger who writes optimized content will help boost the rankings of the site on various search engines as well as get picked up elsewhere.

What Type of Blogs Work in Hospitality?

From further analysis and testing we have found that blogs can be used successfully by:

- Travel community blogs for members of travel clubs or hotel reward programs.
- Affinity blogs that serve as discussion forums for people with common interest or strong opinions about a subject matter (e.g. wedding planning, traveling with pets, family travel, etc)
- Expert blogs by spa, golf, tennis, fishing or culinary pros
- Destination blogs maintained by travel writers or destination experts

Conclusion

In our view hoteliers should consider blogs only as part of a comprehensive Internet marketing strategy, together with other important aspects such as search marketing, email marketing, website optimization, link popularity, online sponsorships and display ads. Blogs and blog marketing should become a line item in the overall hotel marketing budget.

On the other hand Hospitality eBusiness Strategies considers blogs a vital part of the comprehensive De-Commoditization Strategy of the hotel, a potent tool to provide a unique value proposition to its customers. A well-developed hotel blog strategy could provide visibility to unique aspects of the hotel product and destination, and a differentiated approach to reach key customer segments.

Consider seeking advice about your hotel blog strategy from an experienced Internet marketing hospitality consultancy. Look to experts who can help you navigate the Internet and utilize the Direct Internet Marketing Channel to its fullest potential. They can also help incorporate a blog strategy into the overall online marketing and distribution strategies. These experts can also teach hoteliers and their staff best practices and provide crucial professional development, as well as guide your hotel company's direct Internet distribution and marketing strategies.