



Building a Destination Web Strategy in Hospitality

Leverage the popularity of the destination for the benefit of your hotel | By Max Starkov and Jason Price

Many destinations have suffered steep declines in visitors over the past three years. And while travel to some destinations is down by 10%, 15% and in some cases 20%, online travel to these same destinations has grown by 30% annually over the past three years. Hoteliers cannot control the amount of travel to their destinations. At the same time Internet-savvy hoteliers can dramatically increase their online market share at the expense of their competitors that are "asleep at the wheel". Hoteliers that employ robust Destination Web Strategies have an effective means to capture new lucrative markets, boost direct distribution and decrease the need for intermediaries.

Defining a Destination Web Strategy

A Destination Web Strategy means leveraging the popularity of your destination to your own advantage by making your hotel or cluster of hotels the "hero" of the destination, and in the same time turning your hotel website into a valuable destination resource for your online customers and increasing its value and relevance for the search engines.

This strategy is one of the most effective means to market a local property or a cluster of properties within a particular destination. It allows the hotel to leverage the richness of the destination and shape the local attributes of its environment with creative marketing initiatives that appeal to its online customer base. The strategy is also an imperative for hoteliers to highlight the property within the context of local resources, because local government sponsored initiatives to promote the richness of the destination, which includes your hotel, are quickly diminishing.

Hotel planning is destination sensitive. When searching for accommodations on the Internet, consumers usually use keywords based on the name of the destination +hotel, e.g. "Boston Hotel". An estimated 85% of Internet users rely on search engines to locate information on the Web (e.g. Yahoo, Google, MSN, AltaVista, etc). Independent hotels, branded hotels, hotel management companies and lodging companies must all rely on search engine referrals. So by having a robust Destination Web Strategy, the search engines will be able to find additional value in your website, catalog and index the website more effectively, associate it more specifically with various local attractions, lifestyle attributes and aspects of the destination, and drive more business to the property.

Hoteliers able to leverage the popularity of their destination, matched with a well-defined hotel product mix, can capture more online market share and boost conversion rates. The key ingredient is by promoting the many facets of the hotel and cluster of hotels and its relationship to the destination. This approach allows for creative flexibility by making the hotel always the center of attention, the "hero of the destination."

Types of Destination Web Initiatives

A Destination Web Strategy can take many forms and shapes based on the particular destination or business environment. Here are the most common types of initiatives we at Hospitality eBusiness Strategies have developed for many of our clients:

- Destination Section or Page: An optimized destination section or page within the hotel website of a single hotel property or a corporate website that represents a cluster of hotels in a given destination.
- Destination 1-Pager: A stand-alone fully optimized one-page website representing a cluster of hotels within a destination.
- Destination Website (single property): A stand-alone website encompassing destination attributes matched with attributes of the hotel. (e.g. eco travelers, gamblers, spa enthusiasts)
- Destination Web Portal: A stand-alone multi-page fully optimized website representing a cluster of hotels with local area content, pages targeting different audiences (e.g. business travelers, leisure travelers, etc).

Some hotel companies, guided by Internet-savvy consultancies, have already begun employing Destination Web Strategies to counter the disastrous effects of merchant model discounts and better market their product and local destination attributes. Whether the hotelier has one hotel or cluster of hotels, a Destination Web Strategy enables the hotelier to offer a rich, deep, destination focused website with the creative flexibility of appealing to a variety of patrons. These may be: conventions, meetings, groups, business and leisure travelers, lifestyle activity seekers, family, weddings, honeymoons, recreation, etc.

Building a Destination Web Strategy

A Destination Web Strategy is an exercise in evaluating the attributes of the destination, the various aspects of the hotel product, and the relevant lifestyle attributes of your existing and potential customers, and packaging it in a presentable manner for the online consumer. The final product becomes a well defined destination-oriented website that serves as the foundation for creative and innovative online marketing and distribution.

You will now be able throw marketing muscle behind various initiatives in response to societal trends, current events, and general shifts in the market place. This strategy is "natural" for the hospitality vertical as the product, by definition, is destination specific.

This strategy involves conceptualizing, developing and optimizing the hotel website to achieve two main goals:

- Provide valuable and relevant destination information so that the online travelers and the search engine spiders alike find value on the website beyond the mere hotel product content
- Turn the hotel into the "gravitational center of the destination"

Developing the Destination Web Strategy is a complex task (see Table 1: Destination-Hotel-Lifestyle Matrix) and requires a combination of Internet, hospitality and destination-specific knowledge and extensive research. Some required steps include:

- Identifying the most popular area attractions
- Identifying the relevant lifestyle categories, attitudes and values of your existing and potential customer base
- Identifying local events that can be exploited to attract guests at the property
- Identifying how local attractions and lifestyle attributes relate to the property
- Identifying patterns of consumer online purchasing habits for the hotel/resort and the particular destination
- Evaluating the most popular target keywords for the destination
- Ranking the keywords according to their popularity and relevance
- Developing credible and relevant copy based on detailed destination research
- Weaving the target keywords throughout the copy
- Developing the "invisible copy": page titles, description tags and meta tags.
- Overhauling your website to add the identified destination, lifestyle and property attributes and position your hotel product as the central point of the destination
- Performing a Destination-Focused Search Engine Strategy

CASE STUDY I

Hotel Management Company:

The HMC owns a cluster of multi-branded properties in a hyper-competitive market. The firm launched a destination web strategy in early 2002. This particular market serves as an ideal venue for family vacationers. This client's destination website was built within the context of these two audiences and positions the properties at the center of the destination. With multiple properties the site provides choice: city-wide availability across a selection of branded hotels, displaying price, location, services, and amenities. The site provides a detailed directory of area interests, distances to attractions, top ten lists of things to do and places to eat, tips on getting around, and identifies relevant lifestyle attributes. It offers an excellent platform for highly successful email and PPC marketing campaigns. As a result the HMC

generates incremental Internet-related revenues well above the national average, captures new markets and realizes significant savings.

The Destination - Hotel - Lifestyle Attributes Matrix

The complex nature of clearly identifying and defining the specific appeal of the destination, matched with the special or unique characteristics of the hotel product and its attributes, combined with the values of your customer base, is best described in the Destination - Hotel - Lifestyle Matrix table below. It is likely hoteliers will be able to identify with more than one matrix combination.

The process for building a destination strategy begins by evaluating typology, attributes, and resources in the local environment. Identify your type of destination. Is this an urban destination, suburban destination, ocean or resort destination, mountain destination and so on? Next identify all the external attributes within your area. The destination may offer outdoor recreation services, an extensive transportation infrastructure, seasonal events and attractions, major business districts, conference centers and much more. Finally, based on typology and attributes, what are those particular resources that people need or may desire at the destination? These may include water-based recreation, historical artifacts, cultural resources, dining resources, and business/commerce resources, and many others.

After the destination is analyzed, begin evaluating and introducing the hotel product and the lifestyle attributes of your customer base into the mix. The product mix may include: wedding facility, conference room, meetings and reception area, and concierge services, while the customer profile may include business travelers, senior travelers, and even families with pets.

The lifestyle attributes are more complex. Identifying the attitudes and values of a person or group, and sometimes of people that you have never seen or heard from (e.g. potential customers) is inevitably more difficult. Are your property and/or destination appealing to city slickers looking for "old world charm"? How about attracting snowbirds coming from the north? Or the Generation-X crowd? Or antiques hunters?

It is a matter of perspective on what is truly important to the customer. Different characteristics of the property or destination can appeal to different customer segments. For example, to the business traveler, choosing a hotel may be influenced by the availability of a function room, high-speed Internet access or proximity to an area corporation, while a leisure traveler may find the same hotel a great location for local area attractions; same hotel, same destination, different purpose.

The Destination - Hotel - Lifestyle Attributes Matrix is meant to illustrate the complexity of the relationship between the property, its customers and destination. Identify each element in the matrix relevant to you and compare the results with your existing online strategy. How do you compare? Are you representing your property or properties in the best possible way? Have you ignored market segments or lifestyle categories that are core to your local destination? Any Director of Sales & Marketing and e-Commerce Manager should be asking such questions as they evaluate their online marketing and distribution strategy.

Benefits of a Destination Web Strategy

The Destination Web Strategy allows for a highly informative, content rich website that encourages site references for increased link popularity that boosts search engine positioning. The creative flexibility of this strategy captures key customer segments and shapes the property with a variety of new, varied and exciting insights for the online consumer. It attracts new customers seeking choice, particular in lifestyle categories, plan meetings or weddings, or provide close proximity to a convention center. This strategy can be configured to appeal to any audience where there is relevance to the local destination.

Since the Internet provides unprecedented flexibility to shape locally relevant content at relatively low cost, a Destination Web Strategy becomes a source of "permanent innovation" for the hotelier. Exploiting the existing popularity of the destination and leveraging the appeal of the local market to various customer segments boosts direct-to-consumer distribution over the Internet at a very reasonable cost. The need is very real as the environment is increasingly more competitive and traditional marketing channels and even government supported efforts are diminishing.

The Destination Web Strategy:

- Allows the hotel brand, hotel management company, branded or independent hotel and resort to leverage the popularity of the destination for the benefit of its property or cluster of properties within a destination
- Allows hoteliers with cluster of properties within the destination to cross-sell their properties and leverage differences in location and price to appeal to a range of travel planning budgets, tastes, and perceived values
- Reduces the overall marketing cost (creation, development, maintenance, and search engine submissions) as the strategy bundles together more than one property, or a single property with the attributes of the destination
- Allows customers to locate a property or group of properties unique to a particular attribute of the destination or a lifestyle category

From an online marketing and distribution standpoint the strategy increases a site's link popularity, boosts positioning on the search engines, creates numerous co-marketing opportunities, expands and lowers cost of pay-per-click marketing, increases the relevancy of targeted email marketing strategies, offers real-time city-wide availability for cross-selling and up-selling, and most importantly creates numerous points of entry online to the property. It's your chance to make your property the champion of the destination!

CASE STUDY II

Major Resort in Southeast US:

A slowdown in travel forced this upscale resort client to overhaul its website aimed at attracting outdoor recreational travelers, golfers, families and capture an upsurge in the weddings market. Its mountain setting makes for not only an ideal wedding venue but also enables a similar approach applied to hiking, boating, golfers, and eco-travel enthusiasts. The resort is positioned as the center of the destination and identifies all area attractions, local and regional events and activities, and lifestyle attributes. As a result the resort website already generates 20% of the resort's revenues and captures important markets that otherwise would be inaccessible without a robust Destination Web Strategy in place.

Conclusion

One of the most effective means to market a local property or a cluster of properties within a particular destination is through a Destination Web Strategy. Hoteliers must begin thinking about how to leverage the appeal of the destination to boost incremental Internet revenues from key and new markets that are within reach. First movers have already demonstrated the viability of this strategy. Now is your chance to practically monopolize the local destination with respect to web-based distribution as you become the "champion of the destination" over the web. Hospitality eBusiness Strategies (www.hospitalityebusiness.com) is one of the pioneers of the Destination Web Strategy concept and helps hoteliers conceptualize, implement, and launch their own robust Destination Web Strategy.

