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Marketing Hospitality Web Sites

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Abstract

The web has emerged as a potent business channel. Yet many hospitality websites are irrelevant in a new and cluttered technical world. Knowing how to promote and advertise a website and capitalizing on available resources are the keys to success. The authors lay out a marketing plan for increasing hospitality website traffic.

Marketing hospitality websites

by Galen Collins
and Jamie Murphy

The web has emerged as a potent business channel. Yet many hospitality websites are irrelevant in a new and cluttered technical world. Knowing how to promote and advertise a website and capitalizing on available resources are the keys to success. The authors lay out a marketing plan for increasing hospitality website traffic.

"While industry executives and analysts say the industry has plenty of issues to deal with, 1999 should go down in the books as the year e-commerce finally took off."[1] With $14 billion in 2000 sales and a forecasted $32 billion for 2006, travel is a leading category of on-line spending.[2] Way back in 1997, the Ernst and Young Internet Shopping Survey found that making online reservations is a favorite on-line shopping activity.[3]

The decision is no longer whether to have a website, but how to market it in this evolving and increasingly cluttered medium. Hospitality organizations have created wonderful websites, yet like a wonderful "brick and mortar" establishment, the acid test is visitors that stay and spend.

Sites are tracked

Establishing specific objectives, such as increased market share, reduced selling costs, improved customer relationships, and recruiting employees, is the requisite first step in a website marketing campaign. Savvy operators also track visitor responses (e.g., reservations booked or employees hired) and analyze server log files[4] to measure their cyber-objectives.

Unlike traditional media–print, radio and television–which rely on third party audience activity measures (Nielsen, Simmons, or Arbitron), websites record almost every visitor's every move (mouse click).[5] This rich data source yields additional website performance metrics.

The website server logs every file requested—commonly trans-

lated into hits, page views, and visits.[6] Each file requested equals one hit. A web page with three graphic files and one text file, for example, generates four hits. Page views measure text files, highlighting the website's popular areas. A visit is the hits and page views for a specific website visitor.

Bill Sthay, vice president of reservations for Outrigger Hotels, looks at page views, paying special attention to "the most viewed pages to see what areas of our site are of most importance to our viewers."[7] The most useful log file statistics for Sal Dickinson, vice president of marketing for the Resorts Division of Meristar Hotels and Resorts, are the most, least, and first pages viewed.[8]

The referrer and agent information, which may be added to the server log files, often reveals how visitors came to a site as well as their browser names and version. This works, however, if the visitors followed a link. If the visitor came from a bookmark or types in the URL, nothing appears.

Although statistics can be tracked manually, tracking software (shareware, freeware, and commercial) saves time and presents information in graphic form, providing a more compelling and understandable performance picture.[9] Other useful statistics for benchmarking a website's performance are listed as follows:

• **Visitor count:** Identifies the number of visitors. A popular website may have 5,000 to 10,000 visitors per day, fewer than 100 may visit a low-traffic site.

• **Page views:** Indicates visitor satisfaction. If visitors view many pages on the average, they are probably finding interesting information.

• **Length of average visit:** Indicates whether visitors are reading pages or just browsing. Another indicator of reading or browsing is the average duration of page view. When examining this statistic, one must consider the page style, length, and graphics. The more graphics, the longer the page takes to load. Furthermore, many argue that thanks to limited bandwidth, www stands for the world wide wait.[10]

• **Domains, geographic areas:** Helps indicate where visitors accessed the Internet, which helps focus promotional efforts. Most visitors, however, may come from Vienna, Virginia, home of America Online. Although "the geographic analysis of visitors is relatively useless because it shows you the origin of their ISP... the breakdown by country is interesting."[11]

• **Busiest hours, days:** Helps plan daily and weekly updates, promotion campaigns, and advertising.

• **Most requested pages:** Identifies popular pages and pages needing attention.

- **Most requested last pages:** Helps spot trends and bad pages. If the last page requested, for example, has a large number of links to external web sites— it is probably the reason most people exit from this point. If the last page requested has no external links, it may need updating or contain errors and inconsistencies.

- **Top paths through site:** Shows the common website paths, providing insight into the effectiveness of its focus and organizational structure. If a resort website's primary goal is to raise overall daily revenue, for example, ideal paths would lead to other reservations (e.g., golf, tennis, massage, dining room, etc.), in addition to room bookings. Gwyneth Storr, Internet resources manager for BridgeStreet Accommodations, uses "this information to discern the most popular pages and change our navigation paths."[12]

- **Top entry page:** Identifies a visitor's first page viewed. Since the top entry page is not always the home page, appropriate internal links (e.g., link back to main page) should be added to every web page. A well-conceived internal linking scheme eliminates dead ends, eases navigation, and highlights the site's offerings.

Branding is critical

The first step for establishing a web identity is a short, memorable URL. This means spending $15 to $35 to purchase a one-year lease on a domain name.[13] Although America Online or Geocities offer web space, the primary web address should stop after .com. A URL such as www.hilton.com is easier to remember and builds a better image than www.aol.com /members/~hilton.

Most consumers guess an organization's URL by planting www before and .com after the company's name. Unfortunately, there is a finite pool of these second-level domain names to sandwich between www and .com. Only one www.apple.com exists, although Apple Computers, Apple Records, and other "Apple" entities might like to have this easy-to-remember domain name.[14]

If the name desired is already taken, the company should consider alternative spellings by including hyphens, using abbreviations, or substituting numbers for words, or consider registering in a top-level domain other than .com. In addition to .com, over 200 country code top-level domains exist. A Swiss company could register in .ch or a Canadian company in .ca. Countries such as Tonga (.to), Nieu (.nu), and Turkmenistan (.tm) offer a catchy ending for memorable URLs.[15]

Once a name is selected, it should be incorporated into collateral materials, with the e-mail and website addresses on business cards, brochures, press releases,

advertisements, etc.–any medium that makes sense (videos, T-shirts, audio recordings, cocktail napkins, pens, beach towels, tip covers, guest receipts, matchbox covers, etc.). Just as important, online branding opportunities should be considered.

Site registration needed

Portals, the major search engines and directories, are one of the best online ways to increase website traffic. They are called portals "because of the role they try to play as the front doors to people's Internet journeys."[16]

The URL should be registered with search engines, either personally or with automated submission software or a registration service (e.g.,www.submit-it.com). Although the latter two methods take less time, someone from the marketing team should make the time to register with the top search engines such as AltaVista, Lycos, HotBot, Excite, and WebCrawler. No submission service or software knows the property better than a marketing team member. "We have used software that registers our sites with several hundred search engines and directories, but have also found that a manual submission to the dominant ones... works better," Meristar's Dickinson said.[17]

The site should be registered when it is roughly 90 percent finished and working properly. In some cases, it may take several submissions to get listed. According to Search Engine Watch (http://searchenginewatch.com), Infoseek registers pages within

minutes. AltaVista and HotBot take a day or two, and Excite takes about three weeks. Lycos and WebCrawler take months to register page submissions.

To reach audiences abroad, consider the target countries' search engines (www.bizforms.com/search.htm). Major American search engines like AltaVista have foreign language editions. The web is a great tool for reaching international markets but customers must understand the message.

An international version of the website, using simple grammar and avoiding long sentences, slang, colloquialisms, and jargon, may be appropriate. Or it may have to be completely translated into a foreign language. In either case, the right tone and style are necessary. What seems acceptable in New York City or New Delhi may look strange in Milan, even in Italian. Adding foreign words to meta keyword tags helps. The number of people searching for "complejo turistico" instead of resort may be surprising.

Additional pages as well as the homepage should be registered to improve the odds people will find the web site by entering through another page. This also reduces the risk of a search engine not indexing the pages. Finally, the site's placement should be checked regularly using tools [e.g., Webposition (www.Webposition.com) and PositionAgent (www.positionagent.com)] to monitor the web site's search engine rankings and for helpful ranking information. Often a website, which begins on top of

engine search results, slips over time. Consequently, Gwyneth Storr, Internet resources manager for BridgeStreet Accommodations, resubmits their site on a periodic basis "according to each search engine and its unique schedule."[18]

Location is important

Crawlers, also known as robots or spiders, create most search engine databases. These software programs find and index web pages for their database. Every search engine indexes the page URL and title. Most search engines also index the web page headers (meta-tag) that start each section, the most frequently mentioned words and the first few lines of text. Some, such as AltaVista (www.altavista. com), index every word on a web page.

The higher a website is listed on a search engine's results page, the greater the chance someone will visit that site. Understanding how search engines catalog pages and place them in an "order of relevancy" helps improve one's ranking. There are a number of main factors that influence a site's ranking:

- **Page title:** This is a critical factor affecting a site's ranking. Keywords in the page title are usually the most relevant keywords on the page. A title that clearly reflects the page's theme is critical. Instead of "Welcome to my hotel," a title that says "Welcome to The Treetops Hotel, Playa Del Carmen, Mexico!" is more effective.

Since bookmarks and most search engines display the page title, they should immediately grab the reader's attention as well.

- **Meta-tag:** This information, hidden from the reader, includes a detailed page description and keywords (see Exhibit 1). Search engines often display the contents of the meta-page description on their search results pages. As some search engines use page summaries fewer than 200 characters, the most relevant information should come first. Also, the meta keyword list should be limited to fewer than 1,000 characters and repeat keywords no more than seven times. Some search engines penalize web pages that use the same keyword repeatedly or use keywords that have nothing to do with the page's content.

- **Keyword combinations:** Thoughtful phrases, e.g., luxury hotels, luxury resorts, and variations, e.g., travel, travelers, improve a page's ranking. Most importantly, words that someone would type to find the web page should be used. Successful competitor sites can be reviewed for guidance in keyword selection and page wording. Unlike a restaurant's secret recipe, a web page's html code is open for all to see. The "view source"

Exhibit 1
Website tags (www.metatagmachine.com)

URL: www.hyatt.com

Title: Hyatt Hotels and Resorts–Come Feel the Hyatt Touch

Meta Keywords: Business Travel, Luxury Hotels, Business Travelers, Business Planning, Meetings Planning, Hyatt Hotel and Resorts, Park Hyatt, Golf Hyatt, Grand Hyatt, Luxury Resorts, Worldwide travel, Hyatt Regency, USA, America, Golf Holidays, Argentina, Australia, Azerbaijan, Canada, Caribbean, Chile, Egypt, France, Germany Greece, Guatemala, Hungry, India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Kazakstan, Korea, Macau, Malaysia, Mexico, Micronesia, Morocco, Nepal, New Zealand

Meta Description: Business travelers worldwide can find luxury hotels to cater for all needs. Hyatt Hotels and Resorts, Park Hyatt, Golf Hyatt, Grand Hyatt, and Hyatt Regency are all accessible from this site

option on most web browsers clearly displays a web page's html coding.

While restaurateurs are known to borrow recipes, borrowing meta-tags may prove costly. Although it is a new legal frontier, the early rulings indicate that hijacking meta-tags is illegal.[19] For example, Holiday Inn should not include meta-tag keywords such as Hilton, Hyatt, or Howard Johnson's.

• **Page text.** Where applicable, each web page should be started with a descriptive summary statement of fewer than 200 characters. The text at the top of the page often counts more than the text at the bottom and may be used as a site description by some search engines. To prevent graphical descriptions (e.g., Siapan.img.) from appearing in search engine page descriptions, the summary state-

ment should immediately follow a web page's graphic whenever possible.

The text should be well organized and focus on a page's theme, using clear, complete and properly punctuated statements. A few search engines disregard incomplete sentences. Also, meta keywords, especially two-word phrases, should be added into the text without losing the message. This is vital for search engines that do not reference meta-tags. Repeating meta keywords in the text is beneficial as long as it is within a well-constructed sentence and has appropriate context.

In addition to search engines, the site should be registered with web guides and directories. RelevantKnowledge, Inc. (www.relevantknowledge.com) ranked Yahoo!, the best known directory, as the most visited website. Unlike search engines, guides and directories manually list sites based on

submitted information. A person, rather than a machine, reviews the site. Consequently, directories and guides provide more targeted results than search engines.

Since most directories stringently screen new submissions, they should be submitted in the appropriate category. When possible, the major areas of the website should be listed in different categories to enhance their visibility. For example, a hotel website could list its homepage in one category and its recreational activities in another. Top directories with hospitality-related listings include Yahoo!, InfoSpace, Nerd World, All Business Network, What's New, and BigBook[20]

Notable travel and tourism directories include *Hotels and Travel on the Net* (www.hotelstravel.com), *Hospitality Net* (www.hospitalitynet.org/), *Ecotravel* (www.ecotravel.com), *The Search Engine for Travel Information on the Net* (http://www.setii.com), and *TravelHub* (www.travelhub.com). *Hotels and Travel on the Net*, for example, contains hundreds of thousands of international listings with hotel, airline, airport, travel-related products and services, and travel reference categories.

Websites should be registered in the city and metro guides that cover their geographical area. Users access these increasingly popular directories for city, state, or country information. For example, USA CityLink (www.usacitylink.com) provides information on dining, vacation tips, tourist attrac-

tions, convention centers, airports, entertainment, accommodations, shopping, etc. A person wishing to find a Mexican restaurant in Phoenix would access the Phoenix city guide.

Some guides (e.g., Looksmart) list only submissions judged to be among the best sites on the web, assigning a numerical score, star rating, or medal. Judging criteria include presentation, design, content, personality, and experience. To improve the chances of being listed, the submission should focus on the top-level areas and include eye-catching, descriptive information based on a clear understanding of how the guide functions.

Finally, one should consider submitting the website for awards. A high profile award such as "Cool Site of the Day" dramatically increases traffic. To improve the odds of being selected, it is important to get to know the reviewers' preferences. Meaningful award sites include The Webby Awards (http://www.Webbyawards.com/main/), WebAward (http://www.Webaward.org/), and Cool Central (www.coolcentral.com).

Search engine, directory, and guide listings are a great way to begin marketing a website. Yet, according to a 1998 study in *Science Magazine*, even the most dedicated surfer using the best search engine would be able to find barely one third of the pages.[21] Although measuring the web is a task unto itself, experts agree that hundreds of millions of pages exist.[22]

A final listing option is elec-

tronic travel distributors such as Travelocity (www.travelocity.com), Pegasus' Travel Web (www.travelWeb.com), or Microsoft's Expedia (www.expedia.com). These paid listings often work with a hotel's global distribution system (GDS)[23] There are many creative approaches, free and otherwise.

Banner ads promote

A banner is an ad on a web page hyper-linked to the advertiser's site and a leading online method to promote websites. BridgeStreet Accommodations, for example, had a paid banner on Homestore (http://www.homestore.com/) because of good referral traffic[24]

Advertising banner terms include cost per thousand (CPM), governing, frequency, and click-through percentages. CPM is the cost per thousand banners served (impressions) and typically influenced by the visitor demographics. A website that charges $1,000 per banner and guarantees 100,000 impressions has a CPM of $10 ($1,000/100).

Smaller properties may consider joining a banner exchange, a cooperative web advertising program. While most banner exchanges allow almost any type of banner advertising, there are specialty banner exchanges that focus in specific areas such as travel websites (e.g., http://www.1-2-free.com/banner/global/home.html.)

Click-through percentages are based on the relationship between banner impressions and the number of people who click on the banner. The current industry average is under 2 percent.[25] For improved click-through rates, a banner must be topic specific and well designed, and placed at a site with the right audience. For example, a banner for a beach resort would have better results on a Hawaiian page than on a web page design page. Selecting placement pages helps target the desired market. Furthermore, testing banner ads can be easy and inexpensive.[26]

The South Seas Resorts has purchased banner ads on city guides and destination-specific sites (e.g., FLAUSA, visitors and convention bureaus, tourism-oriented chambers, etc.), since the top keywords that bring visitors to their website are geographically related, such as Sanibel, island, Florida, beach, etc.[27]

Most analysts agree that banner frequency—the number of times a banner is consistently displayed—around three is optimal.[28] A banner's life span is short. Response rates can drop by one half from the second to third time someone views an ad.[29] Therefore, banners should be rotated and bad performers quickly removed.

The pace the entire campaign follows must be watched; 100,000 banner impressions purchased for a site that receives 2.4 million visitors per month could be quickly exhausted. Pacing the impressions over a 30-day period, however, provides a campaign with balance and a potential for greater exposure.

Tips on banner design to increase the click-through ratio are as follows:

- Use animation to increase response rates 30 to 40 percent. Animation, however, can be annoying if used on a page that a user would dwell on for an extended period of time.
- Have a call to action in the banner. Adding the words "click here" to a banner can increase response rates twofold.
- Avoid nondescript colors like beige and gray. A recent study reported that bold colors like yellow and green outperform black and white.
- Match the message to the target audience. Banners with keywords pull much better.
- Use wider banners, typically 468 or 500 pixels, to draw a higher response rate.
- Use promotional incentives to induce users to click on the banner.
- Refresh banner frequently. Several studies show that banner ads drop off in click-throughs after several days, but jump when a new banner appears.
- Establish a system to track what works and what does not work in an ad campaign.
- Keep the banner design simple but distinctive.

Links increase visits

Many sites offer reciprocal links, two websites hyper-linked to each other. Sites with similar interests are the best reciprocal links. This is a great way to increase the number of visitors and provide visitors with additional information. Routinely adding related sites to the website usually increases repeat visitors.

The Colony Hotel in Maine, a recent winner of Cornell's Eco-Management Award, links to organizations it belongs to such as the Green Hotels Association, Maine Businesses for Social Responsibility, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The Colony Hotel site also links to "various service providers in our area with whom we do business (wedding cakes, sea kayaking outfitter, etc.)."[30]

Some operators should consider joining a web ring (dir.webring. yahoo.com/rw), a group of sites (e.g., bed and breakfast ring located at http://bandb.tqn.com/blring.htm) with the same topic. Links are listed at the bottom of the page, along with the ring's identifying graphic. In almost every case, there will be links to the "next" site in the ring, the "previous site" in the ring or a "random site" in the ring. There is no cost to join a web ring, which some feel may be a successful organizational and navigational tool for the web of tomorrow.[31]

E-mail is an effective mechanism for promoting a web site. E-mail messages usually take one of three forms: person-to-person, posted to a newsgroup, and submitted to a mailing list.

Sending a "solicited" message is the most direct method. Direct

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e-mail marketing is a promising field, but unsolicited e-mail should be avoided like the plague.[32] "Spam," the derogatory jargon for unsolicited e-mail which taints the sender and annoys the receiver, may soon be regulated.[33] "Don't be lured into mass e-mail broadcasting schemes... called spamming."[34] E-mail should be sent to people who have signed up to receive e-mail, sending them messages "designed to be quick, easy to read, and extremely relevant to the recipient's buying habits or interests."[35]

Targeted lists available

Although the best mailing lists are compiled from website visitors, bulk e-mail lists also exist.[36] These databases, which contain individuals who have requested specific categories of news and information, permit targeted mailings.[37] References on these announcement services should be double checked to ensure that they never spam.

The Internet has thousands of newsgroups covering a vast array of topics. A promotional message posted to a newsgroup should be short, informative, and relevant. For example, if a newsgroup participant asks about tourist attractions in Arizona, an appropriate reply by an employee of an Arizona resort might be a message, a few paragraphs at the most, discussing tourist-related links featured at the resort's website. Google offers a good newsgroup starting point, with millions of current postings, searchable by keywords.

Unlike newsgroups whereby users retrieve messages, mailing list users receive messages. With potentially thousands of people receiving a promotional message, a blatant advertisement quickly generates hate mail. An ideal posting is informative, helpful and brief. One of the best mailing list directories, Liszt (www.liszt.com), provides a searchable and category index of almost 100,000 mailing lists.

Whenever possible, a creative e-mail signature file should be used and customized for each target audience (e.g., golfers, business travelers, etc.). This little file goes at the end of every e-mail sent, except when posting to some mailing lists. It is considered acceptable to use a signature file for advertising purposes, but it should be kept to fewer than five lines. It should contain the employee's name, title, telephone, and fax numbers, company name, a brief product or service description and the website URL. Special events or promotions may also be included.

Classifieds are market

Internet classified ads should have an embedded link to your website (see Exhibit 2). Both traditional newspapers and upstarts are pursuing the online version of this multi-billion dollar market.[38] A traditional classified ad costs about 10 cents to reach a thousand people. On the Internet, ad costs range from free to about eight cents per thousand people[39]. Internet classifieds are typically 25 to 200 words. The Internet may be the most cost-effective advertising yet to enable

Table 3
Example of an internet classified ad

Let's Go Camping! 3/days-2/nights. Just $29.95

For just $29.95 you can visit our beautiful 266-acre oasis for 3 days/2 nights. E-mail reservation at: soledad@as.net. We also have vacation trailer rentals.
Call today for more info at (800) 342-3630.

Thousand Trails-Soledad Canyon <soledad@as.net>
Acton, CA USA - Content-type: text/plain Thursday Jan. 18 13:34:53 MST 2001

an advertiser to test any product, service, or information inexpensively and instantly.

Hundreds of classified websites receive over 10,000 visitors per day. Placing an ad at multiple sites increases its response rate. Ad submission services, such as Ad-Submit (www.ad-submit.com), place ads quickly at a large number of websites. Visit Excite (http://www.classifieds2000.com/) for examples of classifieds with embedded web links.

Visitors must stay

Although website statistics identify the popular web pages, it is important to have a few road signs directing visitors to these popular areas. Plain old text can create links to pages needing promotion. People visiting the Coronado Visitors Bureau recreation page (www.coronadovisitors.com/recreation.asp), for example, might also be interested in the accommodations page (substitute accommodations for recreation) to discover hotels and resorts located in Coronado, California.

The home page (http://www.

coronadovisitors.com/) is the place to showcase a website's main areas. It is also important to list the main areas on the top-level pages within the site, as many people may not begin their visit at the homepage. Anyone visiting the Coronado Visitors Bureau recreation page should also be pointed toward the accommodations page and vice versa. Promoting both areas increases page views and gives readers a better understanding and appreciation of the website's offerings.

Once a strategy for directing traffic to popular pages is developed, examine the less popular pages. If the page content has value, consider combining it with a popular page. First, however, determine if the road signs directing visitors to an unpopular page are clear and informative.

When visitors encounter errors at a website—such as the dreaded "404-File Not Found"—they may leave and never return. The server's access and error logs identify trouble spots. Common problems include dead links, excessive load times (due to graphics or other bandwidth-hogging features), and

faulty HTML coding.

Bad links are the primary cause of the "File Not Found" error which occurs when a link has an incorrect URL (uniform resource locator), an address that points to a specific page or site on the web. The address may simply be misspelled (e.g., www.hilto.com rather than www. hilton.com) or have the wrong mixture of uppercase and lowercase letters.

While all links work perfectly initially, moving, deleting, or combining pages often triggers an avalanche of errors. Any link (e.g., search engine) to a changed page inadvertently directs people to dead ends. This is easily fixed by creating a placeholder document, a page that redirects the visitor to a different location on a website. A better solution is programming the placeholder page to use client pull technology that automatically redirects the visitor to the correct page.

Lost connections are often impatient visitors not willing to wait for a page to load. According to the *Website Journal*, if a site does not load within 20 seconds, 50 percent of the surfers will hit another site.[40] Since 40 percent of consumers browse the web using 28.8K or slower modems, it is critical to consider each page's load time.[41] A page with a large number of lost connections should be changed to load quicker.

To save time diagnosing or fixing problems, purchase troubleshooting software or have the site serviced at a "website Garage"

(websitegarage.netscape.com), where a cyber mechanic performs diagnostic tests, including a load time check, dead link check, spellcheck, html (hypertext markup language) design check, and browser compatibility check. Some sites solicit visitors to e-mail any technical errors they encounter.

Content is impotant

Although a variety of methods attract visitors, compelling and current content is the best way to keep visitors and keep them coming back. "Make sure the site has value-added content and interactive features that will encourage visitors to enjoy and return to the site."[42]

The Outrigger Hotel is "currently tweaking our site to make copy quicker reads, standardize format for facilities and services information, and eventually structure to involve the site visitor even more — more interactivity... updating information is a continual, on-going process... users seem to like the detailed information, hotel schematics, photos, and destination guide."[43] The South Seas Resorts, now part of MeriStar Hotels and Resorts, updates and adds content weekly—keeping its information fresh and accurate on an easy-to-navigate and quick-to-load site.[44]

Similar to marketing a "real-life" hospitality establishment, the ongoing website marketing task is repeat visitors. Two basic approaches to attracting repeat visitors are "pull or push." The pull approach offers content compelling enough to entice

repeat visitors. The push approach sends information to the user.

The Hyatt website's (www. hyatt.com) "Hot Deals" exemplifies the pull technique. Visitors may check special offers and promotions available at Hyatt hotels and resorts around the world. Visitors may also subscribe to the Hyatt Extras e-mail newsletter, a commonly used push tactic.

Obviously, the best approach to attract repeat visitors is a mixture of push and pull techniques. Both of these, for example, are used in the Hilton.com membership program (www.Hilton.com). Members can sign-up for e-mail notices on important site updates, instantly check Honors (frequent guest program) account information, and review future reservations.

A guest book asks visitors for personal information (e.g., name, address, e-mail address, etc.) and comments. It may also ask if they want to receive promotional materials such as press releases, advertisements, clips from recently published pages, contests, page updates, and highlights of interesting website areas. South Seas Resorts, for example, has a form that permits visitors to request brochures online, resulting in 40 to 70 prospects per day. They have collected over 20,000 e-mail addresses by having site visitors voluntarily complete an interactive form.[45]

Every website needs an e-mail link for communicating with visitors and for obtaining valuable feedback. Answering all inquiries promptly and fully is important in cultivating long-term cyber-relationships. Setting up a referral system, a button that lets a visitor send e-mail to a friend suggesting the site, should also be considered.

Customer service necessary

Depending on a website's e-mail volume, purchasing an e-mail management system, might be useful. This software provides tracking, a database to store e-mail addresses and messages, an automatic e-mail acknowledgement or auto-responder, and advanced reporting capabilities. This system, for example, can track average response times and maintain customer communications histories.

Average response time seems to be the bane of most commercial websites. Studies show that although e-mail holds phenomenal potential for the coveted "one–to–one" relationship, most websites fail miserably in responding to e-mail.[46] Furthermore, the heavy demand over the 1998 Christmas holiday season highlighted that customer service was sorely lacking in e-commerce.[47]

"Budget and staff the Internet department to be able to respond quickly to e-mail inquiries."[48] Dickinson suggests "providing as many ways as possible for your visitors to communicate to you," but emphasizes to "make sure that you respond to them quickly and professionally."[49] At the Colony Hotel, "all reservationists are trained to answer e-mails" and respond immediately.[50]

Websites, however, should tread lightly gathering personal information. Although no mandatory guidelines exist yet, Congress is considering legislation that covers what information may and may not be gathered via the web.[51] Guidelines already exist for gathering information from children, yet few websites comply.[52] At a minimum, operators should review the guidelines of the Online Privacy Association, a global coalition of almost 100 corporations and organizations.[53]

Converting visitors into loyal customers includes frequently updated information, a simple purchase process, time-saving self-service options, and solid, one-to-one customer service. Enabling customers to set up their own pages personalizes the customer service process (e.g., Hilton.com membership program). A personalized web page, for example, could provide customers links to their favorite site areas or details on their current and past reservations.

A downloadable screen saver from the website can help visitors remember the site and may bring new ones if the screen saver is on a high visibility work station.

The first step in marketing hospitality websites is selecting and registering a memorable URL, preferably in the .com domain. Companies should also consider registering the same domain name in country domains, such as .fr for France or .au for Australia, as well as the new global domains—.biz and .info.

Sites need promotion

Once a website is fine-tuned, 90 percent complete, and functioning properly, a focused promotion campaign toward targeted audiences should be launched. This includes researching the competition, adding the proper meta-tags and registering the website with search engines—the principal billboards in cyberspace. Next, the site should be registered with guides and directories for visitors seeking specific types of information. Web marketing should integrate with standard marketing in order to amplify the effects of marketing dollars and to establish a universal identity for brand and message reinforcement.[54] Other ways to drive traffic to a site include banner ads, strategic links to related sites, e-mail promotions, e-mail signature files, and classified ads.

Once the site is fully registered and promoted, performance objectives and follow-up performance evaluations are the requisite next steps. Do visitors arrive predominantly from search engines, links, or other means? Who are the visitors? What areas do visitors find appealing? Do visitors enter the site through the home page or through secondary pages? Based on an analysis of visitor and page usage statistics, what areas need improvement?

Finally, and most important, a website's content should be relevant and fresh in order to garner repeat visitors. In the bricks and mortar world, a huge promotional budget makes it easy for restau-

rants to drive first-time visitors to their front door. But repeat visits depend upon quality food, quality service, and reasonable prices.

Similarly, website promotions drive first time visitors to a site. But the goal is repeat visitors that bookmark a bookmark site and refer the site to friends and associates via "word of mouth."

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