

Hospitality in Focus – 14th September 2007

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THE SOCIAL MEDIA AND TRAVEL CHATTER

There are a number of false assumptions by some hospitality managers and hospitality consultants that managing a hotel's online reputation is as simple as looking at what has been written on Trip Advisor.

This is akin to believing that because one watches a 24 hour news channel that one possesses all of today's news that one needs. That channel would certainly like you to think so, but there are different perspectives and information sources for the news as much as there are for travel chatter.

Recently it has been suggested that all that a hospitality business needs to do to manage their online reputation is to monitor sites such as Trip Advisor and to purchase advertising on social media websites. In the opinion of Lodging Interactive this is way too short sighted! This approach limits the true commercial benefits of social media to those hotels and brands that can afford advertising and there is the question of the value of advertising where people are going for social comments and non-commercial information. The shoppers who go to social media websites and blogs are seeking unbiased reviews and chatter to help them make their buying decision. The buyer's path will normally go from there to the search engines and on to the hotel, brand or third party websites for additional information and to conclude their reservation.

One also has to address the problem that all contributions to social media websites and blogs may not necessarily be written objectively nor without malice. Could such content be generated by commercial competitors, for example?

Lodging Interactive has taken a distinctive approach to such problems as a provider of Internet Marketing Services to the travel and hospitality industries including businesses such as hotels, resorts, timeshares and bed and breakfasts worldwide. Their clients include branded properties such as Marriott, Sheraton, Hilton, Radisson, Crowne Plaza Hotels, Doubletree Hotels, Candlewood Suites, Best Western, Wyndham Hotels plus numerous independent properties.

They recognise that there are millions of social media websites and blogs, and that this number is increasing. Certainly not all of these sites or blogs specialise in hotel or travel reviews, but they present social discussions and postings about hotel experiences by all types of travellers, business, family, groups and holiday makers. How often a particular hotel will generate consumer chatter is dependent on a number of factors for example, the size of the business and its various services.

The source of the online chatter depends on a variety of factors. For example what percent of your guests are international visitors compared to local or national? What are the average ages, sex and nationalities of your guests? What percent of your guests are leisure compared to business? Each of these factors represents different cultural elements and the social media websites and blogs are designed to appeal to cultural and social interests which may or may not include chatter about travel experiences and preferences. It is a common mistake to think that there is no chatter about travel experiences on MySpace, YouTube, Hotel Chatter, FaceBook, Expedia and thousands of other websites and blogs whether they target travel or not.

The growth and impact of the social media on travel and hospitality cannot be ignored or simplified. It requires monitoring, response or interaction by the hotel and a means of monitoring your online reputation. For the average hotel or hotel company, it is far too time consuming and abstract to think Yahoo or Technorati data can be sorted analyzed and measured to tell just how your business is viewed in the social media world and what is your online reputation.

A recent statement by Jonathan Tisch, Chairman of Loews Hotels, during his keynote address at the 2007 HITEC conference put social media into perspective. Mr. Tisch said that, 'We are using technology to break through the clutter and noise and reconnect with the customer.' Mr. Tisch was referring to using technology to build brand loyalty by learning more about their guests and recognizing the

consumer wherever they go. And, what better way to know your guests than to join in on their chatter about your hotel and your services, not to mention monitoring what is said about your competition.

As you plan your 2008 marketing budget, ask yourself these questions:

- How do you manage your online reputation across multiple social media websites and blogs?
- How do you offset negative chatter about your hotel?
- How can you capitalize on positive social media chatter about your hotel?
- How do you measure your social media online reputation?

It is important today that you truly understand the social and community aspects of the Internet equally as much as you do the commercial. Another way to justify the importance of social versus paid advertising is the fact that search engine shoppers respond to organic search listings as much or even more than to the paid listings. So we might assume these same shoppers will rely on online chatter from friends, relatives and unsolicited consumer input as much or more than to a paid Internet advertisement.

The simple truth is that the Internet is evolving into a variety of open forums for consumer generated media and this will inevitably grow in its value for the online shoppers. This should not, though, be misunderstood as there is no diminishing of the importance of a business' search engine rankings, brand web pages and the rich content needed for an effective website. Nor should one believe that social media will totally replace the value of online advertising. The point is that it is equally important that one knows what your online reputation really is and how you can affect your return business and generate new business by interacting with the social media websites and blogs. To interact you need to know all of the sources of online chatter and you decide which to respond to and how to respond.

You need now to seriously consider social media management (SMM) as part of an overall marketing and public relations strategy going forward. Consumer chatter will have as much or more impact on your sales results as any other marketing activities.

Lodging Interactive might well be a good source of help as they offer online tools and services such as ChatterGuard.com which is an online social media monitoring and reputation management system. Also within their portfolio of solutions is CommentCards.com which provides a full-service business-2-consumer comment card service. Lodging Interactive's ProposalSystem.com is an online RFP response system of interest to Sales Managers whilst RFPLink.com is a group RFP lead generation and reporting system customised and interactive with Google mapping services.

Links:

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Chatterguard: www.chatterguard.com/

CommentCards.com: www.commentcards.com

Expedia: www.expedia.com

FaceBook: www.facebook.com

Hotel Chatter: www.hotelchatter.com

Lodging Interactive:

Loews Hotels: www.lodginginteractive.com

MySpace: www.myspace.com

Proposal System: www.proposalsystem.com

RFPLink.com: www.rfplink.com

Technorati: www.technorati.com

Trip Advisor: www.tripadvisor.co.uk
Yahoo: www.yahoo.com
YouTube: www.youtube.com