

_____by John Burns

Do You Know What They're Saying About Your Hotel?

How guest review Web sites may be impacting your bottom line

The Internet has been an evolving challenge of hotel managers and marketers. The first hurdle for hoteliers was to gain a presence on the Web. The next issue was to be able to take reservations online. No sooner did hotels and hotel chains have that under control when along came low price sellers (the Merchant Model sites) that required hotels to rethink their whole Internet pricing strategy. Now that hotels seem to have gained some control over their e-marketing along comes a new challenge: guest review sites, traveler forums and travel blogs.

The Internet has always been a place where individuals could express their opinions on virtually anything. Online forums where people could post brief (and sometimes not so brief) text messages about a particular topic have been a fixture of the Internet from its early days. By and large, these forums were hard to find, difficult to maneuver through, and largely text-based.

A busy hotel manager might be tempted to disregard these sites as irrelevant nuisances. That would be a mistake.

That has changed. An array of customer review sites—including TripAdvisor.com, IgoUgo.com, Mytravelguide.com and Travepost.com—have gained notoriety and millions of users. These consumer-oriented sites offer user-friendly navigation, search functions and graphic information. They enable guests to easily post hotel reviews and, even more important for hoteliers, for potential guests to compare fellow travelers' reviews as part of their online shopping process.

The Web sites listed above are not alone. More seem to be appearing almost daily. In a significant development, many major travel booking sites have now added customer reviews and ratings. Expedia and Travelocity offer guest reviews and ratings while Priceline, Hotwire and Hotels.com provide customer feedback by numeric rating scales (e.g., 4 out of 5 or 7 out of 10).

The Internet community including travelers has also embraced the blog (short for Web log—an online form of magazine) with “articles” written by the blog's owner/editor — who can be just about anyone. Blogs include links to information on other Web sites that the blog owner/editor thinks would be of interest to their readers.

The information available on review and blog sites to potential guests ranges from simple text messages to detailed graphical rating systems as well as demographic information that can assist a guest in determining if the reviewer might have similar taste.

Recently some sites began offering reviewers the opportunity to post their own photographs—good and bad. A claim of a tiny or unkempt room might be inconsequential until it is accompanied by a photo. Then the claim's impact soars.

In a recent development, some sites now offer users incentives to post both reviews and photographs. IgoUgo, for example, gives points-style incentives for free gifts from companies such as Target, iTunes and Amazon to users who post reviews or photos.

It is difficult to be certain of the number of travel Web sites available that provide opportunities for customer feedback. A Google search yields thousands of potential sites. During the research for this article, we found new sites (although some with only a few users) turning up every day. There is also considerable “cross pollination” among sites, with one site using reviews provided by another. Hotwire, for example, which uses a five-point scale, bases its reviews on the number and level of ratings posted on TripAdvisor. Zuji (an Asian travel site) uses reviews from Travelocity.

Generations X and Y, who reportedly feel comfortable exploring their world through the Internet, are certainly not the only ones who are confidently using these tools. We came across many reviewers in the age range of 56 to 72. Clearly, reviews come from travelers of all ages and demographic groups. Moreover, use of these sites to research buying travel options crosses all generational and geographic boundaries.

Hotel Awareness Grows

Growing awareness of these sites by hotel chains, franchise organizations and representation companies has resulted in some cases in these groups developing guidelines on how individual property managers should respond to negative criticism. Increasingly hotel corporate offices will intervene on behalf of individual properties particularly when criticism is unfair or misdirected.

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

A busy hotel manager might be tempted to disregard these sites as irrelevant nuisances. That would be a mistake. There is now a clear body of research which confirms that prepurchase research online has become an integral part of the shopping process for many of today's travelers. Potential guests are using available Internet information — be it favorable or not — about a hotel or destination to select their travel options. This process is unrelated to how they ultimately place their reservation — be it online, through a call to a toll free number, or by contacting the hotel directly.

Obviously, positive comments or complimentary photos are not a problem for hoteliers since they encourage return visits and new guests. Review sites are a benefit to hoteliers with a sound product and good service. They offer satisfied guests the opportunity to share their stories with other travelers and to reassure potential guests who are uncertain about booking an unknown product online. The explosion in the number of sites will be a decided benefit for hotels offering an attractive facility and a competent and friendly staff.

That is not the case for less well maintained or managed hotels. Poor reviews will quickly send potential guests scurrying to another property in the same area with a similar price range. I speak from experience: our family has changed hotel reservation plans based solely on poor guest reviews posted on the Internet.

Before offering some advice on how hoteliers should manage their hotel's presence in these sites, we need to address the issue of how reliable the reviews actually are. The reviews sites are open to abuse from former employees and hotel competitors posing as guests, from travelers who are never satisfied, and from mistaken identity (posting a poor review to the wrong hotel name or location).

Many sites recognize this as an issue and take a variety of steps to curb it. TripAdvisor has extensive reviewer guidelines, for example, that limit both who can post a message and message content. Another example is Expedia, which uses their sign-in process to determine if the user posting the review has actually booked that hotel through Expedia within the last six months. Some sites will contact the individual hotel after receiving a poor review in order to determine the validity of the issues raised in the review. Sites, at a minimum, require a valid e-mail address from a reviewer and many require much more demographic information used in categorizing the reviewer.

Good News

Sites seem to understand the challenge facing hotel managers/owners who need to respond to poor reviews. As a representative of IgoUgo, Jim Donnelly said, "A traveler may not know the whole story or may be unfair in their review; allowing the resort to provide an answer clears up some of these issues."

Trip Advisor regularly publishes responses from hotel management and provides detailed instructions on how responses should be phrased. Many sites appear willing to make corrections to blatant errors or misleading reviews and most see their role as a partner with the hotelier in correcting unwarranted criticism.

The problem for hoteliers is finding and dealing with poor reviews. With the number of sites posting reviews and rates, it is a challenge for a hotel manager to find what people are saying about a hotel. One way to address the challenge is to assign a staff member to frequently review ratings/reviews for the property on travel partner sites (such as Expedia, Travelocity, Orbitz, Priceline and Hotwire). Similarly, reviews on TripAdvisor, Mytravelguide.com and Travel.post can be checked on a frequent basis. Another option is to enter the name of the hotel in a search engine such as Google together with the words "reviews" or "ratings" and check out the listings.

From the beginning hoteliers have understood that the Internet was going to present its positive as well as its negative moments. The emergence and growing popularity of guest review sites, traveler forums and travel blogs are a case in point. The challenge they pose to hotel professionals is to identify them quickly, respond decisively, and ultimately to use them to our advantage.

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Review Responses

The challenge to a hotel (and its bottom line) does not end when reviews are identified. Hotel management needs to promptly and effectively address valid criticisms. Here are a few common complaints we see repeatedly and how they can be prevented

Guest comments: **"The photo on the Web site doesn't look like the room we stayed in."**

Hotels should use and distribute reasonable photos of standard or most common room categories. In addition, management should respond (when possible) indicating that additional photos are being added to the Web site.

"The rooms are smaller than we expected."

Consider including square footage in your room descriptions to avoid confusion and, again, use appropriate photography. Show your rooms, not just your suites.

"The room wasn't ready." "We were walked." "We didn't get everything we thought was included."

Hotel Web sites should clearly indicate check-in times, package contents, and circumstances under which a guest may be walked, perhaps by having a FAQ section that explains some common problems, how they occur, and how they are generally resolved.

"The rooms were shabby and in need of renovation."

If a renovation is planned, let potential guests know on your Web site and in response to the review site. Consider posting the designer's renderings of the new décor. When renovations are completed let your potential guests know by responding to a positive review on a site. (For example, "We're glad you enjoyed your stay. We've spent many hours and substantial funds to enhance the XYZ Hotel. We're glad our guests appreciate those efforts.")

Multiple complaints generally ending in comments such as "Don't stay here" or "I wouldn't recommend it to my worst enemy."

Responding to "rants" on guests review sites, although challenging, must be done. Because of the negative impact such poor reviews can have, it may be best to work with your public relations firm or Internet consultant to write a response that will reassure potential guests as they evaluate your hotel.

An important word of caution: Internet users place a high value on honesty. Be specific about how a reviewer's experience is not the norm. Describe any steps taken to address legitimately raised issues, and explain that the appropriate changes are being made to the hotel's Web site, with the physical plant or with staff training, as appropriate.