

by Mark G. Haley, CHTP

What Makes a Good Hotel Web Site Good?

At first blush, answering the question what makes a good hotel Web site good seems a lot like attempts to define what is beauty? But on further analysis, if we start by understanding the various purposes a hotel Web site serves, we can break down the factors defining a successful hotel Web site into major categories. Examination of the major categories brings us quickly to specific attributes that we can use to evaluate and improve the Web sites for which we are responsible. The sidebar to the right offers some key purposes of a hotel Web site.

After reviewing these points evaluate the revenue production objective. Tracking booking engine production growth represents the most efficient and rigorous measure to chart progress on the revenue objective. Tracking production requires consistent, reliable reporting from the booking engine, whether it is hosted by the property, the brand or a third party. Also the number of visits to the booking engine must be measured.

Attributes of the Web site itself that can affect or drive the revenue production function include:

- An availability query to the booking engine on every page, ideally in the same location and “above the fold” so users needn’t scroll down to find it.
- Property name, address and telephone number on every page, ideally in the same location (there is a theme here: users like consistency).
- Show images of the room types available on the pages you are selling rooms on – it helps.
- Prominently feature special offer and e-mail registration pages on the site—and use them.
- Offer themed packages based on rack rates on the specials page.

Also, don’t forget that the Web site has a key purpose in driving off-line booking as

well as online. Promote your group capabilities and dining with floor plans, menu excerpts, supporting images and merchandising-driven copy.

Speaking of merchandising-driven copy, that is an attribute associated with the second objective, projecting the hotel’s brand identity on the Internet. Some of the other attributes supporting this objective include consistent use of the hotel’s proper name and logo, with images that accurately suggest and reinforce the hotel’s value proposition. That is actually the easy part. The challenge lies in “on the Internet”, meaning what do we do to make the site as hospitable to search engines as we are to our guests? A full discussion of search engine optimization is beyond the scope of this article, but some of the basics to evaluate your Web site by include:

- Enough copy to give the search engines something to find and index.
- The copy must contain the keywords that people should expect to find your hotel by searching on.
- Page titles should describe the contents of each page accurately.
- Limit the use of Flash and other rich media to accents rather than foundations. Search engine spiders have challenges with Flash.
- Are the navigation elements (menu items) in HTML text (good) or in graphic images (bad)?
- Seek out inbound links, but be jealous with outbound ones.
- Use internal links embedded in the copy to help the search engines know what the linked-to pages are about.

Once the search engine has found the site, the site must be equally hospitable to the user. The first thing to offer your visitors is intuitive navigation that always tells them where they are in the site. A simple

site can do just fine with a single tier of navigation, either across the top or down the left side. More involved sites may require an “inverted-L” approach, where the left navigation elements change according to what element of the top navigation is selected. Select easy-to-read fonts that are installed on almost all computers and break up the text visually with bullet points, effective use of H1 and H2 tags for paragraph headers and lots of white space.

And there is more. Lots more that one can evaluate on any given Web site and improve upon. This article merely provides a business-based framework that anyone can use to evaluate a site: what are the main purposes of the site and what attributes support those objectives. If your site isn’t measuring up, on the visible aspects, then there are likely more challenges in the code that you might not see, but are also impeding the performance of your site. You may need to make some changes.

Mark G. Haley, CHTP is a partner at The Prism Partnership, LLC, a Boston-based boutique consultancy servicing the global hospitality industry. Mark also chairs the AH&LA Technology Committee and is the president of the New England Hospitality Finance & Technology Professionals. He can be reached at (978) 521-3600 or at theprismpartnership.com.

The key purposes of a hotel Web site

- To create incremental revenue through direct online booking or stimulating direct offline booking
- To project the hotel brand identity and value proposition to the traveling public and press on the Internet
- To provide information about the property to enhance the guest’s stay
- To provide a vehicle for a continued dialog with guests and potential guests