

Making **GUESTS** the Center of Your Mobile Strategy



The mobile revolution is here, and the hotel industry is in a prime position to leverage its value as a booking and guest communication channel. As more and more consumers use their mobile phones to surf the mobile Web, chat with friends—and companies—on mobile social networks, and purchase products and services, the implications for hotels are huge and the statistics, compelling.

Today, nearly two-fifths of smart phone owners are researching leisure travel on their mobile devices, according to Web analytics company Compete, Inc., while more than 25 percent have used their phone to book a hotel room. What's the bottom line? Hotels will see mobile booking revenue surge to \$76 million in this year alone.

Despite the many reasons for jumping into the world of mobile commerce (m-commerce), crafting an approach to this uber-fast, ubiquitous, and often uncertain space can be overwhelming. The sea of options is vast. One thing, however, is certain. You will need to put your guests at the center of your mobile strategy by succinctly meeting their needs and aligning with their expectations to keep them returning directly to you versus third-party intermediaries.

A guest-centered strategy can help you understand how and when your customers want to interact with your brand—and provide the tools to genuinely engage them, 24/7. The following four strategic elements can serve as a starting point:

1. Optimize your Website for mobile use. Keep in mind that the mobile Internet follows different rules than the traditional Internet—and attracts a different kind of consumer than stationary PC and laptop users. Mobile users, typically on the go, have an even shorter attention

span than their PC predecessors. They are more likely to abandon your Website, and the booking process, if they can't find what they need instantaneously.

As a first element in your m-commerce strategy, make sure your Website is mobile ready. Traditional Websites can look miniscule on mobile devices and can be painfully slow to load. For visitors to read text or find the link they want to click on, they need to zoom in on a particular area and do more scrolling.

A mobile-optimized Website—a streamlined version of your site that is set to display on smart phones and mobile devices—eliminates these problems and enhances the user experience. Content is succinct and designed to fit the space provided on a small screen. Images are resized to load quickly for visitors, who are not likely to wait for a large download.

With a mobile-optimized website, business and leisure travelers alike can readily find key information about your hotel, such as address and phone numbers, photos and maps and directions. Use branded display of your hotel logo and colors to ensure your brand is carried throughout the mobile universe.

2. Implement a mobile booking engine. The ability to book from a mobile device is no longer a luxury, but a necessity. Guests who find your hotel on their hand-held devices will want the option to book their stay—as well as view, modify or cancel, their reservations—at any time, from anywhere, in an instant. A mobile booking engine, as a part of your reservation system, provides this function and gives you a cost-effective, additional channel for direct-to-hotel bookings.

In selecting your mobile booking engine, make sure that guests can quickly see real-time rates and room availability, seamlessly book their stay, and immediately receive confirmation of their reservation. Once they are confirmed, they will want to view their reservations from any channel, and modify their stay if needed. Make sure your booking engine has these capabilities, as well as phone number click-and-dial compatibility. And users should have the option to quickly share their booking information with friends on social networks.

Again, the guest experience should be at the center of this part of your strategy—in a few words, mobile booking should be engaging and effortless. Make sure, too, that you can track return on investment, with analytics that show how well your hotel is connecting with mobile users and driving conversion through the mobile channel. An integrated booking solution allows you to maximize your mobile commerce presence and take advantage of inventory that otherwise would not be sold.

3. Find bookable mobile applications that target your guest niche(s). A third element to consider in penetrating the mobile traveler market is hotel mobile applications, specifically one that enables you to display full best available rates versus lower margin wholesale rates. Downloaded from app stores and other mobile software distribution platforms, these mobile apps can help hotels reach on-the-go and mobile-centric travelers with lightning-fast information on their offerings.

In implementing a mobile app, hotels have three options: 1.) build your own, a highly expensive undertaking, 2.) connect through one of the travel mobile apps available today

promoting thousands of hotels and risk minimal exposure or disintermediation, or 3.) join with an app that fits your unique niche and is poised to attract your target audience. TRAVELCLICK®, for example, recently developed StayHIP™ exclusively for boutique, unique experience and small luxury hotels. Users have multiple ways to search for the world's coolest hotels, find the hotel that best suits their needs; view rates, room types and availability; and book their stay, all directly from the app. Finely tuned mobile apps like this one enable hotels to reach customers in a highly targeted and personal way.

As you build a mobile app or become part of an existing one, find ways to make the app experience not only easy for busy guests, but useful, informative and fun. According to Complete, Inc., more than four in 10 mobile users would find trip planning apps useful if they notified them of schedule and rate changes, consolidated itineraries, or helped manage loyalty programs. Use location-based services, such as GPS, to determine where guests are located and then provide relevant information, such as city guides, neighborhood events and happenings, and weather, airport and traffic alerts. Add excitement with coupons or contests. Include social media options so that guests can share or post details of their stay on Facebook or Twitter.

4. Invest in mobile advertising. As your mobile presence matures, consider adding a mobile advertising program to your overall strategy. Research shows that mobile marketing campaigns are outperforming online campaigns across key metrics. Mobile ad campaigns are five times more effective than online campaigns, according to a study from digital marketing research firm InsightExpress. High levels of engagement and low levels of clutter—typically only one ad in sight at a time—contribute to increased brand impact.

Consider attracting mobile consumers directly to your mobile site through SMS text messaging-based ads, banner ads, or application branding. Lead prospects to your mobile site by communicating specials, promotions and last-minute discounts that will fill real-time cancellations and openings. Marketing these special offers can be a prime way to enhance guest engagement, trigger spontaneous bookings, and increase hotel revenue.

As the mobile channel continues to surge, a mobile Internet presence is no longer an option for hotels. It's a necessity. Any hotel that wants to be where their customers are will need a holistic mobile strategy, one sound enough to maximize return on investment, yet flexible enough to adapt to continuously emerging technologies and changing consumer needs.

Reassess your business and target market. Choose the services, applications and marketing programs that will have the greatest impact on your guests today—and provide the most potential for your hotel's ROI tomorrow. Use the mobile channel not only as a tool to generate room bookings, but as a conduit for dialoguing with your guests, delivering to them a pleasant and time-saving experience, and securing their loyalty in a world of unlimited choices.

ROBERT POST is the president and CEO of TRAVELCLICK, Inc.



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