



SURF's UP

INTERNET MARKETING FOR DESTINATION PROPERTIES

"The annual growth rate of online hotel bookings is estimated at 26 percent per year through 2006."

—Pam Streeter, VP electronic distribution and marketing, Interstate Hotels & Resorts

Does it seem as if everyone wants to book online reservations for you?

But is the Internet truly your friend?

For good or for bad, the Internet is here to stay and it's growing. The number of online users grew an estimated 7 percent in the last six months.

The question then becomes, "How do I appeal/sell to these potential guests?" Well, if all you're selling on the Web is rate then rate sensitivity is how people will respond. However, we've all been down this path before and we know that we can't survive by rate alone. In the end rate wars hurt everyone in the market.

The burden then becomes to sell more than rate, to sell your full-featured property and your destination. You've done this for years in your printed materials and with your reservations functions; however, many destination properties have not taken this same initiative on the Web. Well it's



by Debra Kristopson

time. In fact, if you haven't already created a stand-alone Web site for your property then you're behind the Internet marketing curve.

Compare the Difference

Force yourself to take two hours and surf. Shut your door, forward your phone and research where and how your property is located on the Internet. Use more than one search engine: Google, AOL, Alta Vista, MSN, etc. Search by your property name, your destination city/area and local attractions.

What did you find?

If you're a branded property, you'll be located on your brand's Web site with a paragraph of information and rates. On Orbitz, Travelocity, etc. you may have slightly more information; however the focus is again rate.

Now, compare these impressions to the following properties that have stand-alone Web sites:

- Arizona Biltmore – www.arizonabiltmore.com
- Crystal Mountain Resort – www.crystallmountain.com
- The Briars – www.briars.ca

These sites vary tremendously in their look, feel and functionality, but each of them offers something which normally isn't achieved via a brand Web site or a third-party reservations processor. By the time you walk through these sites they have given you a strong idea of what you can expect and enticed you to try their property. Reservations processing and rates (if present at all) are in the background. The primary message is that these properties are phenomenal places to stay. These Web sites first sell the property and then sell rate.

But What About the Branded Property?

If you're a branded property, you may encounter resistance from your brand if you decide to create a property Web site. Historically, many brands have discouraged their properties from stand-alone sites and attempted to solve the Internet marketing need with the brand site. But as you have seen, the wealth of information that you can offer about your property is not within the framework or objectives of most brand Web sites.

The balance between brand Web sites vs. destination property Web sites is changing. The important thing to realize is that the two sites can be complementary. Use the property site for marketing and property-specific functionality (tee-time or spa scheduling) then link to the brand site for reservations processing. Leverage both sites for what they can do best.

Getting Your Fair Share

You want a Web site but don't know where to start?

You looked at one several years ago and it was too expensive?

Much has changed. Most importantly the costs for a stand-alone

Web site have dropped tremendously.

A typical property Web site cost should be within these ranges:

- Registration of Domain - \$20 to \$35 per year
- Hosting of Web Site - \$180 to \$400 per year
- Development of Initial Web Site - \$150 to \$500 per page

If needed, start with a small site and add pages as your budget permits. You can achieve a nice impression with a beginner Web site of five to six pages of information.

Plan on three to four weeks for your site to be developed.

Being a destination property, you'll want to focus on your site's look and feel. This will be achieved primarily through the use of photography and color. Your goal will be to use photography which will stimulate all the senses. If you have pictures of the ocean on a sunny day, is the photography bold enough that a part of your brain smells the salt air and feels the warmth of the sun on your skin?

When shopping for a Web site designer and host there are two major pitfalls to avoid. First, you may find a designer with a lower cost who will propose a template Web site – plug and play. Don't go this route. Your Web site should be unique. Secondly, there are lower cost hosting alternatives which involve adding banner advertising or pop up window advertising to your site. Again, don't do it. It destroys your image and infuriates your potential guests.

Being Recognized on the Web

One of your goals needs to be optimum search engine ranking. Not all Web site designers understand or perform search engine optimization. When looking for a Web site designer, make sure that your designer knows how to perform search engine optimization and submission. For instance, splash pages, flash animation and inline frames are eye catching, but they work against you with the search engines; unfortunately designers love them.

Your designer needs to understand your requirement for search engine optimum ranking and avoid any "bells and whistles" which are not search engine friendly. Upfront, before you make a commitment to your designer, discuss search engine optimization. If they can't satisfy you with their approach find a different designer.

Once complete, your designer should submit your site to the search engines for ranking; it then may take six to eight weeks before your site is ranked by the search.

Achieving optimum search engine ranking is an iterative process. It may require Web site modifications and multiple search engine submissions. This is not a guaranteed outcome process.

The Internet can be either friend or foe for destination properties. You have the ability to take control and make the difference. With the projected growth of both Internet users and online reservations, make sure that your property is fully Internet marketed.

Debra Kristopson has over 25 years in hospitality and is a leading industry expert on the practical application of technology for the industry. She can be reached at dkristopson@ndtc.com.