

—by Debra Kristopson

MARKETING to the Next Generation of BUYERS

Do you fondly remember the days when you were considered the young kid on the block with all of the new, radical, ideas about how to make a difference? And now?

For most of us we're not one generation out of school but two, even three. The good news is we're only as old as our ideas; however, it's time for our ideas about reservations processing to change, and change dramatically.

Profiling the Up and Coming Generation

Let's talk about this up and coming generation, not as potential future employees, but as our next generation of guests. This group is currently 15-24 years of age and beginning to enter the workplace. Their school curriculum has required computer proficiency.

They've grown up with: cell phones, pagers, laptops, PDAs, the Internet, e-mail, instant messaging, chat rooms and gaming. Statistically, they are one of the highest users of the Internet. The fourth quarter 2005 Internet statistics reported 75 percent of this group as regular Internet users averaging 11 hours/week on the Net.

And Our Reservation Systems

While we may have added some color and pretty photos to a Web page, in reality our approach toward how we require a guest to book a reservation hasn't really changed in the last 20 years. In essence, we took our call-center user interfaces, simplified them a bit and web-enabled them. While this was a major step forward

for the time, it's not even close to where we could, and should, be going.

What we haven't done is stepped back and rethought the actual process of booking a reservation based upon current technologies and our new-technology literate (addicted) guests. In reality, if you look past the brand logo and the signature brand colors, would you even know whose reservation system you were in? We've focused on leveraging our legacy systems and reservations booking efficiency (usually ours); that's not going to be enough going forward.

The following is a test.

Score your reservations system on a scale of zero to 5.

Score of 5: the functionality described is already present in your reservation system

Score of 4: some of the functionality described is present

Score of 3: You're currently in the process of adding the functionality and will be complete within 12 months

Score 2: You're in the planning process to add this functionality

Score of 1: We're thinking about adding this functionality

Score of 0: We haven't considered adding the functionality



Q1: Is booking a reservation at your hotel fun? No, this isn't a silly question. Why shouldn't it be fun, even entertaining? Can I choose a sound track to listen to while I shop? Is my interface graphical? Is my interface themed to my preferences? Or, are all guests faced with the same interface, regardless of their demographics or needs?

We all worry about bandwidth. But, we have the ability to perform a bandwidth test, upfront, with each reservations session and tailor our approach to meet our guest's capabilities. If our guest is on dialup – then the existing text based approach might be the only option offered. But if we find a high-speed connection then we have the ability to offer a more personalized shopping experience.

Q2: How dynamic is your reservation system? Do you allow your guest to build the "stay" that is perfect for their needs or do you force them into your preset stay patterns and preset packages? Does your guest "feel" as if they are limited if they choose to book their stay online? Is your reservations system as flexible as your front desk?

Q3: How interactive is your reservations system? Does your system allow for a middle ground between the traditional call center and the Internet? Do you allow your Internet guest to instant message a call center agent if they have a question during their reservations booking?

Do you go one step further and allow them to layer in a voice conversation with a call center agent where both the guest and the call center agent can both see and access the reservation that's being booked? Can a guest partially build their reservation and then request a call center agent to complete it?

Or is your call center an island separated from your Internet guest by a vast sea of technology barriers?

Q4: How considerate is your reservations process? Do you allow "fast-pathing" or do you torture the person interfacing with a PDA or BlackBerry? Have you assumed in your reservations process that your guest will be working from a traditional workstation or do you "sense" what type of device your guest is using and tailor your interface to their needs?

How many of us have received the reservations confirmation that was a full page long and explained everything from check in times to pet policy when all we really needed was a confirmation. Try dealing with these confirmations when you're on a BlackBerry!

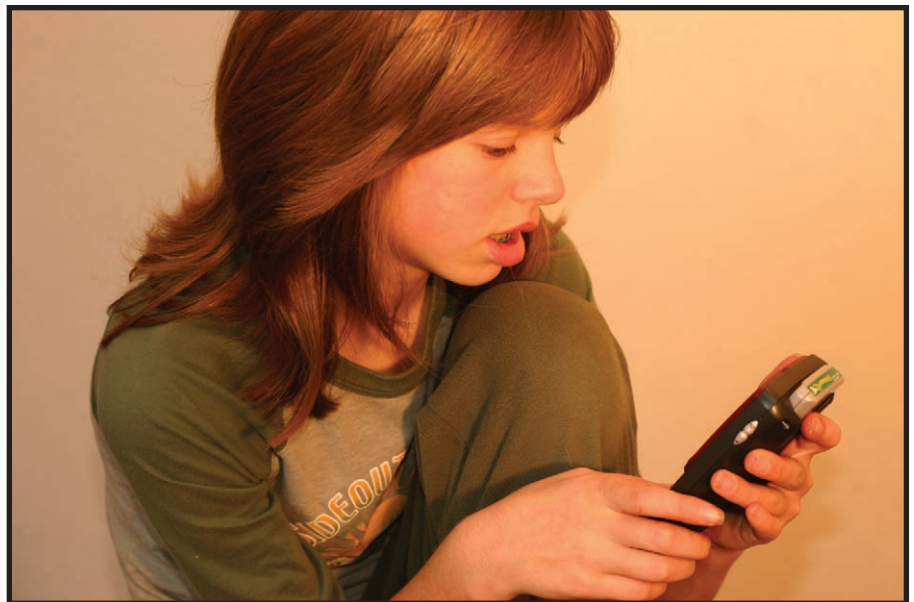
Q5: How proactive is your reservations system? Does your reservations system have the capability to manage a "request" list by location, date and rate? Can a guest request to be notified if your hotel offers a stay which meets their desired parameters or do you require your guest to keep checking back with you?

How did your reservations system score?

There's a possible total of 25 points.

If you scored 20 or above...

You're well positioned for this next generation of guests. You'll not only be prepared to handle their needs but attract their business. You're leading the industry in how you conceptualize the reservations process.



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However, don't become complacent and lose your edge. There are emerging technologies which are setting the stage for incremental capabilities. Pay close attention to voice interactivity and call center PBX technology. Continue to diversify and customize your Internet front end.

If you scored between 10 and 19 ...Then you have work to do and time is running short. The questions asked in our test are based upon existing technologies. Nothing in our quiz was "bleeding" edge. Your key is to prioritize and bring incremental functionality into your reservations system as quickly as possible.

If you scored less than 10 ...Stop and reevaluate your approach to reservations processing. Ask yourself why you're where you are. Your reservation system is, in my opinion, your most important technology investment.

Leveraging Legacy

Existing reservation systems are often referred to as legacy systems – meaning that

they have been around for a long time and are built on older technology. If you have a legacy system which has a strong internal architecture then the additional functionality described above can be "added-on" to your already tried and true reservations processing engine. A legacy reservation system doesn't have to be a negative – it can be turned into your most important asset as you approach the technology referred to in our test. You may only need innovation and incremental change to accomplish bringing your legacy system into the superstar range.

One Size Doesn't Fit All

Being Web-enabled with a single Internet interface for your guest isn't enough. Yes, it may have been a hurdle to get to where you are but you can't stop and rest for long. While you may have conceived developing an Internet Interface to your reservations system as a single project that you've now completed; in reality you've just begun. In the Internet reservations world, it's true, one interface won't properly service all of your guests. Emerging technologies and this next generation of Internet guests will continue to place pressure on you to innovate and move forward.

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Hospitality Upgrade Web Survey RESULTS

The newest generation of Internet buyers is technically sophisticated. Some of their needs include: personalized interfaces tailored to their preferences complete with music and graphics; fully functional dynamic packaging; Instant Message-based support; fast-paths for hand-held devices; and auto-notification wait listing. We asked respondents to score their reservations system. Following results are posted on Hospitalityupgrade.com.

50% said the functionality described is already present;

25% said the functionality will be complete within the next 12 months;

and 25% said, "We are in the planning process to add this functionality."