

# IT'S A FOUR-STAR RESORT OUT THERE

## USE TECHNOLOGY TO MAKE YOUR HOTEL SHINE



by Carol Verret

**Why should you invest in your Internet presence in today's competitive market.**

Innovation and imagination are used to manipulate and maximize technology applications for everything from revenue management to customer relationship management. Why then has the industry not given more thought to the creative uses of technology in the hotel sales process?

One answer is that while we have provided upgraded technology access to our guests, the sales department and administrative offices usually get hand-me-down hardware and are often not included in the high-speed Internet equation. Often the sales departments of relatively sophisticated hotels are still on a manual system. They may have an automated contact management system that no one has ever trained them on because the sales staff has turned over several times since it was installed.

The same amount of creativity needs to be applied to technology in the sales function as in other functions of the industry, and it needs to be done at all levels of selling—especially at the property level. The use of technology in sales is then only limited by the imagination of the sales staff.

In my seminars, participants are asked how they use their Web site and virtual tours in the sales process. Those that have Web sites indicate that they refer clients or e-mail a link to their site or virtual tour if one is posted. They use the site as their primary fulfillment collateral. Save money on the three-fold color brochures and invest it in Web site development; however, pictures only tell, they don't sell. Pictures depict features not benefits.

Hotel Web sites should have tabs that are geared to the different market segments of a hotel. In this way, the copy and photography can be geared to the specific benefits of each market segment. Current Web sites are often like the old cover letters that sales people used for every inquiry and follow-up. Those were the letters that 'feature spewed' (pardon my

language) by having a list of every conceivable feature in bullet points regardless of the type of client to which it was addressed.

The following are a few of the ways that hotel sales can use technology tools to sell the benefits of the hotel, not just tell customers about its features.

### Voice-guided Virtual Tours.

Virtual tours are great tools; however, those that spin in a 360-degree view of a guestroom make me a bit dizzy. As busy as most people are today, it is often difficult to get potential customers even from the same city to a hotel for a site inspection. Rather than have the customer log onto the Web site or take the virtual tour alone, consider establishing a telephone appointment so that the client and the sales person can walk through the site together. This allows the sales person to highlight the features that are true benefits to the customer and to sell the hotel's services. The sales person should prepare for this site presentation in the same way they would for a live site inspection. The good news is that with a virtual tour, you don't have to pre-inspect the rooms and it usually doesn't cost you lunch.

In developing virtual tours on the Web site, keep in mind that the average attention span of most people is relatively short. Pick the most representative photography, but limit your selections to those that will have the broadest appeal. One hotel's site had 80 pictures posted which is too overwhelming for most visitors. Even with a large hotel when you have seen one boardroom, you've pretty much seen them all.

### Bank of Digital Photography.

The manager of a reservation office kept digital photography of all the properties and the destination on the hard drive of the computer,

The Boston Harbor Hotel uses a variety of colorful photographs to entice site visitors. The Web site, designed by Thayer Interactive Group, uses rollover links to create a dynamic look and feel that highlights the hotel's distinct features.

*Captures courtesy of Boston Harbor Hotel and Thayer Interactive.*

or a "bank" of digital photography. While on the phone with a potential guest, she would discover what benefits the prospect was looking for in the destination and property selection. She would then ask them if they were online or if they could go online and receive e-mail photos of the features that fulfilled their expressed desires. Then she would describe the picture in terms of the benefits to the potential guest.

The bank of photography was the same as the one used to build the Web site; however, there were some that were not used. Most of the phone calls were from potential customers who had visited the site but had questions or concerns or simply wanted to speak to a live human rather than making their reservations online.

Photography sells more often when it in-

cludes people using a feature of the hotel. For example, rather than simply having a photograph of the children's camp or playground, photos of children playing and having fun using these facilities sell the concept rather than just telling that the facility is there. Recall those stock photos of a hotel restaurant where people are sitting at the table staring at each other but not actually eating or drinking or appearing to have fun. The people in those photos appear more like the furniture.

Photography of your destination and area attractions can assist you in making the sale and promoting offsite activities. This is more powerful than simply referring them to the local tourist organization's Web site where they will also be exposed to other properties and perhaps rates.

**E-mail Postcards.** Sales people are always looking for creative ways to stay in touch with accounts. E-mail postcards can fill this requirement if kept fresh and not overused.

Everyone understands by now that unsolicited mailings in envelopes never get opened. Postcards, on the other hand, receive a glance prior to being thrown away. You at least have a shot at gaining the recipient's attention.

Unsolicited attachments to e-mails are like unsolicited mailings in envelopes. Busy people trying to manage their inboxes delete them prior to opening. In addition, people are loath to open attachments that they are not expecting due to viruses.

An e-mail postcard opens automatically. The visual appears in the recipient's inbox and is at least glanced at prior to deleting. Be very careful not to use this medium in a manner that could be considered spam. It should not be blasted to anyone who hasn't given permission to receive information about your hotel.

E-mail blasts to large number of recipients are extremely useful in informing past and potential customers about new developments or promotions at a property to those who have indicated a desire to receive them. An e-mail postcard can be a way to approach a prospect when telephone contact has failed. This is a tailored communication to one person vs. a mass communication to many.

E-mail postcard templates are available on newer versions of the Microsoft Office suite. They can be modified to contain your message or approach (remember to sell benefits to the prospect) and can contain a stock image or use an image from the bank of photography. If you don't have access to this software, have someone, perhaps the Web site designer, design an e-mail postcard template into which you can drop an image of the property. This can also be used to keep in touch with existing clients in a new, fresh way.

It's a tough market out there. Sales people need creative tools to push the process forward. Those that are able to relate to their clients in a technologically sophisticated way exemplify that the property and the sales staff are prepared to offer their clients the services required in a high-speed environment.

Sales is the engine that drives revenue. The property's exposure is enhanced by investing in technology tools, training sales people to use them and ensuring that they have access to them. Through the teaming of the sales department and technology the tools are available to sell—not just tell.

*Carol Verret is president of Carol Verret Consulting and Training, a company offering consulting and training seminars to the hospitality industry in the areas of sales and marketing and customer service. She can be reached at [carol@carolverret.com](mailto:carol@carolverret.com).*