



Is All Lost for HOTEL BRAND WEBSITES?

The way that travelers shop for flights, hotels and rental cars has massively changed. There is no question that the hotel industry has recognized the shift as our customers moved from the traditional research and reservation paths to much different sources and methods.

We know there has been a behavior change and we have a sense of what that change has been. I do not believe, however, that we have asked ourselves the most important question: why did this change occur? Why did travelers become dissatisfied with our brochures, annual directories, Websites and reservation office staff? Why did they move to new ways of looking for travel services? As it relates to the hotel industry the dismissal of the traditional shopping tools by many of our guests is something to consider.

Why Did Travelers Stop Trusting Us?

Understanding why travelers changed behaviors begins with identifying their priorities. Once the guests priorities are identified hoteliers can consider how well these priorities are being addressed. What characteristics do travelers seek in a hotel and expect to find information about when they shop for accommodation? In my experience they are four characteristics: convenience, comfort, security and value.

Guests want lodging that is conveniently located, offers the desired level of comfort, meets their needs for physical security and, in its facilities, services and pricing, delivers what they consider to be good, acceptable value.

The failure of the hotel industry to

describe and confirm that our hotels satisfy these needs has allowed travelers to move away from our Websites, our 800 numbers and our sales collateral. The industry has failed to give them sufficient information to allow them to feel comfortable with our services and reserve with us in confidence.

As our the standard promotional efforts fell short of answering important questions—think convenience, comfort, security and value—travelers turned to the comparative new, Internet-enabled alternative to access what they perceived to be more extensive, accurate and honest information: other travelers.

New Information Sources for a Skeptical World

This replacement of traditional hotel information sources has occurred in two phases. The first was the emergence of traveler feedback sites, the best known arguably being TripAdvisor™ (now an operating company of Expedia, Inc.).

Despite hotel operator fears about bogus reviews, this site and its emulators quickly gained credibility and users. TripAdvisor™, together with a proliferation of travel blogs, offered both deeper detail and what were generally seen to be, in total, valid and useful opinions on all matter of travel services, including hotels. These so-called user-generated content Websites, providing greater detail and traveler verification of key facility and services as either acceptable (or inadequate) have filled a vacuum that hoteliers allowed to develop.

Further eroding our credibility glamour photography of our properties, too few

guestroom photos (sometimes with the same shot used for multiple room types or even used for multiple hotels), and too little information from us (how deep is the swimming pool, what are the dining room hours, what is on the room service menu, is there 24-hour security on property) has left these and many other questions unanswered. The shopping resources that we offered to our potential guests fell short of addressing information needs. As a consequence travelers happily embraced the alternative information sources.

If widening awareness of sites such as TripAdvisor was phase one in this progression, phase two consisted of several incremental but important developments. First, traveler feedback Websites became more numerous and better known. Second,

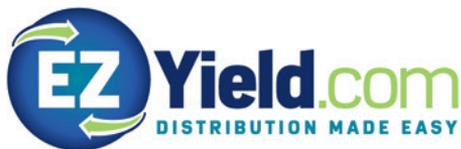
these sites added more and more useful features, including maps and booking opportunities, the latter (to the dismay of hotel operators) selling merchant model (e.g. relatively low revenue) rates.

Next, the value of fast-emerging social media for discussing travel options and seeking community feedback became widely apparent. Travel service suppliers, including hoteliers, grappled to understand if viable promotional opportunities were present, and if so, how to capitalize

Understanding why travelers changed behaviors begins with identifying their priorities.

Less Time + More Channels = Increased Revenue

*EZYield.com: The formula for
online distribution success.*



The solution is simple. Managing more channels in less time equates to increased revenue and added profitability. For the answer to your distribution challenges, contact EZYield.com today and schedule a **FREE DEMO** of our industry leading solutions. It's pure genius!

**CHANNEL MANAGEMENT | WEB BOOKING ENGINE
RESERVATION DELIVERY | GDS CONNECTIVITY**

**SALES@EZYIELD.COM | +1 407 629 0900
WWW.EZYIELD.COM**

on them. Finally, some hotel brands sensing the undeniable influence of the travel discussion in which they were increasingly inactive established blogs that they managed or added traveler feedback Website reviews of their hotels to their branded Website.

As I survey the hotel reservations landscape I believe that we are well into phase three, which I think of as the era of the super search engine. In the contest between Google.com and Bing.com, lodging search processes have become steadily more informative – maps, room rates, nearby attractions and events, dining options, neighborhood view, etc. were added to enrich the search process.

For the moment their expanded and enhanced search activity and information delivery is the goal of these ubiquitous – and valuable – utilities. Many people believe this will not always be the case. As phase three draws to a close, I expect super search engines to add tightly integrated booking functions to their results displays. In doing so they will have come a step closer to one-stop shopping for travelers, while hotels and travel suppliers will be further challenged to remain valid and vital participants in the travel shopping process.

Is All Lost For Hotel Brand Websites? Not Necessarily

Yes, the hotel industry has lost the confidence of some lodging shoppers. They have found the more detailed information that they want elsewhere. But I do not think this loss of relevance (and relationship) is irretrievable.

The hopeful news is that many hotel brands are working to deepen and enrich their Websites. The blogs that I mentioned earlier, the addition of mapping, more (and more honest) photography for every room type – entire galleries of photos and videos, neighborhood tips and community calendars – will restore some of that lost confidence and reclaim some of those lost shoppers. They are ours to welcome back, or lose, depending on how well we address their information needs related to convenience, comfort, security and value.

JOHN BURNS is the president of Hospitality Technology Consulting. He can be reached at John@burns-htc.com or by phone at (480) 661-6797.