

By Shane Etestad



Easy Travel 2.0

Strategies Hotels Can Implement Today

The hospitality industry is just beginning to understand and embrace the potential of Travel 2.0 and social networking—the interactive phenomenon that is sweeping the online travel industry—is a major influencer. Driven by user-generated content including the ability to share photos, videos, comments, and travelogues with other readers, Travel 2.0 has been viewed primarily through the lens of guest empowerment. Yet, it is also a prime vehicle for hotels to engage potential guests, increase their property's presence on the Internet, and lead to greater online revenues.

Here are six things you can do today to leverage this new generation of Web sites, techniques and user-generated content.

1 Engage with consumer review Web sites.

TripAdvisor, TravelPost and VibeAgent, to name a few, enable travelers to share information and advice and to research thousands of hotels through reviews posted by other travelers. Find out what content is available online about your hotel and what you can do to respond to it. A good place to start is to complete a detailed profile about your hotel for posting online. Add photos, videos and as much dynamic content as you can to present your property in a compelling way. Monitor these sites regularly to see how guests are reviewing your hotel. If you find any negative reviews, submit a management response immediately, if the site allows it. Although you can't have negative content removed, you can proactively present your side of the story. Use guest reviews to better understand what your guests like and don't like about your hotel—and about your competitors'.

2 Leverage the new social media to increase your hotel's Web presence.

Once the domain of youth, social media is rapidly moving into all demographic groups as huge numbers of consumers set up profiles in these information-sharing forums. Join the exchange. Create a page with a unique twist for your hotel on MySpace.com or enlist your concierge to sign up as an agent on VibeAgent.com to share his own travel experiences, as well as become an expert on your own city and hotel. Although this is not necessarily going to drive reservations to your hotel, it will increase your Web presence and establish high value links back to your home page, increasing your SEO rankings. Put your hotel video on the travel channel of YouTube, the popular video-sharing Web site for uploading and viewing video clips. Post your hotel photos at such photo-sharing sites as Flickr.com and PhotoBucket.com.

3 Make it easy for your guests to say positive things about your hotel online.

Guests who love your product are your best endorsement. Enable them to spread the good word. Add review Web site links to your Web site and in-room high-speed Internet default page. Provide a link to TripAdvisor in your post-stay thank you e-mails and encourage guests to submit a review. Make it fast, simple and even help encourage topics. Some hotels even put a comments PC right on their front desk so guests can post comments right as they checkout when the experience is fresh in their minds.

4 Recruit guests to do your marketing for you. Integrate ePostcards into your hotel's Web site—photographs of your hotel and your hotel's location that your guests can e-mail family and friends to showcase their trip. Use e-mail for viral marketing that can build name recognition and generate qualified prospects with like consumers. Plus, provide a section on your Web site where guests can recommend restaurants, excursions or amenities based on their visit. Encourage guests to post recommendations through a thank-you e-mail with a special offer redeemable on a return trip.

5 Build trust in your hotel with a Web site best rate guarantee.

It's essential that prospective guests trust you and your Web site. If they believe they can find a better rate for the same product on a third-party site, you'll forfeit as much as 25 percent profit for that booking—if not lose the booking completely. Best rate guarantees and rate parity are widely discussed in the industry, but their value is often overlooked. Both are essential parts of a good marketing strategy to build confidence and convert more bookings direct. So place your rate guarantee prominently on your home page so when shoppers are ready to book, they know your site is where they should do it.

6 Monitor and protect your online brand.

With the proliferation of user-generated content today, it is becoming more important to monitor your brand online regularly. Not just placement on search engines and what guests have to say in consumer reviews, but for use of your product or brand name in trademark infringement. Using a top competitor's name in key words or search campaigns online as a way to attract shoppers is becoming increasingly common—and less discouraged by online marketers. Proactively track your brand marks online so you know who is using it and how.

With the advent of Travel 2.0, hotels are no longer alone in creating and distributing content about themselves. Customers have an equal—and arguably more credible—say. Forester Research reports just 6 percent of today's consumers trust mainstream marketing, while more than 50 percent prefer the opinions of friends, family members or even complete strangers on the Internet. Consumer reviews have become a bigger influence than price on travel decisions. They can make the difference between your hotel getting the booking or losing it. With so many avenues for your customers and potential guests to tell their story, connecting regularly with them and providing them with a positive experience of your hotel has never been more critical. Use these new tools to build customer relationships and encourage your satisfied customers to be your cyber advocates.

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