

A Thoughtfully Crafted Message: WILL I BE GETTING ONE ANYTIME SOON?



Ten years ago this edition, I wrote an article for *Hospitality Upgrade* entitled, “Where’s my Feather Pillow?” Just a short decade ago, I listed a number of points I thought were crucial in creating a state-of-the-art guest care database. Here, ripped from the pages of history, is one of those points:

Make sure guests understand the advantage of sharing personal information with their host. Ask me for my e-mail address and I’ll pretend I don’t remember what it is; invite me to select some thoughtfully crafted, custom-tailored insider benefits and I’ll spill my guts.

As I pointed out then, gathering data but failing to use it effectively is a failed promise of technology as well as an annoyance to those of us who expected something better from the hotels we patronize. However, the promise of technology is not simply an IT responsibility. The technology promise, the meaningful application of electronics and data to deliver better products and services that help make the world a better place to visit, is the province of those who use the information that we collect on their behalf. It is the operational result that redeems or vilifies those of us who enable their efforts. So let’s take a pulse on this issue and see where a decade of practice makes perfect has gotten us.

From my chair, I think the IT component of the information process has succeeded beyond our wildest dreams. We’ve gotten good at getting the goods and we are no longer taken in by lame excuses like, “I forgot my e-mail address.” We know you’ve got one and we’re coming after it. The public’s affinity

for electronic communications has become obsessive; it looks less like a love affair and more like a stalking. Everyone wants in on it – business folk, text-typing tweeting teens, kindly old grandmothers – everyone. You might think that you can hold out on us but you only have to do something as innocent as ask for a confirmation please and wham! You’re ours.

So once a hotel has enough people in their e-mail club to populate a Baltic fishing nation, does it begin using electronics to craft meaningful customer-centric messages that separate them from the spammers we all so righteously detest? I’m going to go with the jury is still out on this one. The travel and tourism industries don’t generate the most spam I’ve ever seen but we do manage to take a fairly healthy swing at the ball. I spent one night at a so-so hotel in Florida two years ago and every two weeks since then they ask me when I’ll be back. (I actually feel so bad about breaking the news to them that I pause briefly over their e-mails before I hit the delete button. It’s a small act

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of kindness but that’s just the kind of person I am.) I saved up for two years to take a Mediterranean cruise last year, and the cruise line asks me each week if I’m ready to go again. (“Great fares on cruises leaving this weekend!” Who actually can take an emergency cruise on no advance notice? My best guesses are the idle wealthy and the unemployed, neither of whom seem like the best target

demographic for this promotion.)

Worse by far is online shopping, an activity that is like opening the gates to that lovely wooden horse that the Greeks left as a gift for people of ancient Troy. Amazon.com writes to me every 48 hours to remind me that I have a Kindle and they have the books that can go on it. I hear from the Pottery Barn, Crate and Barrel and Williams-Sonoma at least once a day each, and sometimes more if something really dramatic is going on in housewares. (“Terrific news from the bamboo forests!”) Best Buy checks in with me at least twice a week to make sure I haven’t forgotten about my \$5 reward certificate that I can use toward a \$7,000 home entertainment system.

Recently I purchased a new mattress and box spring set, which I really love and would happily endorse. (“Ask me about my new bed!” Now there’s a cocktail party icebreaker.) The product comes with a 25-year warranty so it would be logical to assume that I would not be shopping for another much before 2030 or so. However, like a fool, I provided them with my e-mail address so that I could be instantly informed of important bed innovations at the factory. Little did I suspect that bed updates would be issued on a daily basis. I am kept fully apprised of price deals, general bed availability in my area and major trends in lying down in the dark until you fall asleep. I wish I could tell you this is an atypical experience with e-mail marketing, but it is in fact the great new norm that our modern world has created.

It’s not so much the fact that vendors and suppliers are writing to me – it’s



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the deadly combination of pointlessness and velocity that gets to me. This relentless stream of e-spam mimics the worse moments in mass communication today: social media’s obsessive need to say nothing but to do so frequently and urgently. (Follow me on Facebook! I’m not doing anything important and apparently neither are you.) In the good old days of telephone solicitors, you could gently signal your disinterest in a company’s continual pitches: one or two short blasts on an air horn and their calling frequency dropped dramatically. There is no air horn option on spam; it’s an all-or-nothing proposition. You can unsubscribe and get nothing or you can stay in the club and get electronically pelted to death. The lack of choice is yours.

I really do try to make some practical suggestions once I’ve come undone

about some great social issue. In recognition of that lofty goal, here are my e-spam coping mechanisms: First, get yourself an e-mail address that you can use when you think you’re about to break open the wooden horse. (Thank you, Google, for those terrific free mail services.) Use it so you have an address to remember on those occasions when you really need to give a vendor or online sales organization something, but prefer not to get quite so much in return. It makes your life much easier if all your vendor spam goes to one place that you only have to check when you start to feel lonely or forgotten.

The second practical suggestion is somewhat less practical and more philosophical: it is that we, as technicians and hoteliers, should hold ourselves to a higher standard than simply adding to the noise because e-mail is cheap and easy.

E-mailing is a very necessary part of the 21 Century marketing effort and it’s the way we should expect to do the business of the future. Nonetheless, my message is that your message needs to be thoughtful: precisely targeted, well crafted, meaningful to the recipient, differentiated so that it’s not just the next message in the queue, and delivered on a schedule that won’t make me hate you.

Don’t mess up – I have an air horn and I’m not afraid to use it.

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