MERCHANDISING –
THE NEXT WEB GENERATION

by John Burns

We see many hotel and hotel chain Web sites. Over the past five years we have watched them evolve from one generation to the next. (Yes, those generations pass quickly – here we're still in "Internet time.") And now they are about to enter the fourth generation. The first three generations looked something like this:

Generation 1 – Basic Internet Presence – basic descriptions with an e-mail form or an 800 number to call for reservations

Generation 2 – Adding Online Bookability – real-time rates and availability and instant confirmations

Generation 3 – Upgraded Content – describing all facets of the product while improving search capabilities, adding maps, local attraction information and more

What is starting to take shape and will become widely apparent in 2004 is the fourth generation. Let's call this the merchandising generation.

We Inform But We Don't Excite

To date the priorities in building and maintaining hotel Web sites have been to place plentiful information on Web sites and to permit real-time bookings. We have yet to focus, and more importantly to take action on, ensuring the appealing presentation of the product(s) we offer. For example, looking at hotel descriptions on Web sites we read:

*164 rooms * 2 floors * old rehata rest * lounge * coffee makers/hairdryers/iron & board in all rooms * free local calls * hbo/espn * comp breakfast buffet with room * fax/copy ***

Sometimes the situation is little-improved by the photos that accompany the hotel and guestroom descriptions. How often is visual confirmation of the appeal of a hotel left to a distant exterior shot of the property or an unstaffed front desk?

Agreed, in some cases more appealing

detail may be presented later in the booking process. The danger is that the shopper – who we must never assume will feel compelled to read on – will judge the lodging we offer based on the lackluster initial description we have just displayed to them. The danger is that that they will believe our lodging to be as bland and spartan as we describe it to be and decide not to book.

And sometimes when they do read further, they find descriptions that, rather than enthuse them, discourage them. Here is an example of a well-intentioned but inadequate description of a guestroom:

1 bedroom, oversized room, 1 king bed, 550 sq ft, fireplace, balcony or patio, amenity tray, tissue box, soap dish, bath tub shower with handrails, bath bowls, qtip holder, iron and ironing board, ice bucket, corkscrew holder, coffee mugs, note pad and pen holder, sugar caddies, ash trays, small vase, accessories are in black natural pottery, waste basket, new throw for leather chair, large candle for the bathing area, bedside table lamps, re-upholstery desk chair cushion, re-upholstery of bed pillows, new artwork over the beds, cordless phone

The Fourth Generation

The current, too-often tepid portrayal of our hotels cannot be the long-term situation. Our priorities have been elsewhere. As electronic distribution becomes a major source of bookings our attention is turning

to consciously and actively applying the principles of merchandising to hotel Web sites.

The Oxford American Dictionary defines merchandising: *to promote sales of goods.* In the context of hotel Web sites, merchandising means not only the complete and accurate description of the product – the property, the room, the F&B facility – the amenity but it also means all of this plus appealing presentation that promotes the product.

Late last year I moderated a strategic planning retreat. We were offsite at a competitor hotel. Next door, the sales staff of a snack food distributor was preparing for a meeting as well. They were setting up product display stands – end cap displays, cardboard shelving units and freestanding floor displays.

The intense attention that the snack food company had devoted to shape, color and ease of access, to the emotional and psychological triggers to selecting their product was immediately apparent. It was obvious that they did not consider opening a cardboard shipping box of potato chip bags, nacho chips or pretzels and laying that box on the shelf to be sufficient. They understood that portraying the product in a thoughtful, eye-catching, customer-friendly manner is key to winning the sale. They understood the importance of identifying those sales triggers and then targeting them through carefully chosen words, photos and graphics. That should be our next step in hotel Web sites.

But We've Already Spent So Much

Some hoteliers will disagree. They may say that their company has spent millions of dollars on the design and promotion of their Web sites; they might say that they are already successful. And in some cases they will be correct. They have created beautiful Web sites.

We may have concentrated (yes, successfully) on the forceful promotion of the brand, but have we brought that same intensity to describing the hotel experience we are offering? The weak link in our electronic sales effort is that once we attract a shopper to our Web site we too often fail to communicate the character-

istics and satisfying qualities of our lodging. We are failing to communicate how good the facilities and experience we offer really are – and in doing so jeopardize and sometimes lose the sale.

Making the Shopper Buy

Effective hotel Web sites clearly exist. They capture the shopper's attention from the outset and then hold it through a clear, informative and steadily more alluring shopping and buying process. Their developers have definitely asked themselves, "Why do my guests choose to stay at my hotel?"

They have worked hard to convey in a positive, attractive and compelling manner with both words and pictures those "sale closers" in the descriptions of their properties. They have put themselves in the shoes of the buyer and have equipped their site to inform, stimulate and give the shopper a reason to become a buyer.

What Can I Do?

First, the ability to act is not limited to brand or chain staff. The vast majority of property and guestroom descriptions are written by on-property staff. Generally they are not revised by corporate-level staff. So hotel and room descriptions will be as weak, or as strong, as property staff chooses to make them. Yes, the number of spaces available may be limited: There may be only five lines rather than the 10 you would prefer. But those lines can contain 15 mediocre words, or 15 carefully chosen words that forcefully convey the selling strengths of your hotel. Which of the following is more representative of your room descriptions on your brand Web site and in the GDSs today?

** *Rooms feature air conditioning, tile baths and sleeper sofas. Our large, clean rooms include a hairdryer, telephone with message light and nearby parking.***

or

** *All rooms feature lofty ceilings, convenient temperature controls, full soundproofing, tile baths, full-length mirrors and queen sleeper sofas. In a return to classical tradition, our hotel combines spacious and stylish accommodations, splendid bed linens and impeccable housekeeping. The unique Americana design, combined with modern elegance is perfect for business travel or vacation. ***

If it is the former rather than the latter, now is the time to develop the descriptions that your hotel and your guestrooms deserve. Review the hotel and room descriptions that appear for your hotel both on the Web site and in the booking engine used for reservations. The descriptions may be dramatically different in those two locations. If you are less than satisfied, prepare revised descriptions with the current content and give it impact. Then deliver the revisions to your chain or representation company's Web site and GDS data maintenance teams today.

Why send your revised descriptions to the GDS staff? Not only do these systems continue to deliver 50 million hotel reservations a year but also they serve as the databases for many large third-party Web sites such as Travelocity and Orbitz. Clear, compelling and targeted hotel and room descriptions are every bit as important in the GDSs as they are on your brand Web site.

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