



Marketing

by Dustin T. Personius

Interactive marketing is a low-cost/high-impact positioning tactic for hotels

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Use of interactive social media as a marketing tool has become an increasingly popular tactic by businesses to further engage their existing consumer base. Dubbed “interactive marketing”, these media can also assist in building brand awareness among a constantly growing pool of potential new customers.

The hotel, resort and restaurant industries are no exception to this growing trend. Many lodging establishments and restaurant venues, from independent properties to large nation and worldwide chains, have begun participating in some form of interactive marketing. Some entities have even created positions dedicated exclusively to growing the social media presence of an organization.

In an economic environment that has been especially trying in recent years, the low-cost/high-impact potential associated with interactive marketing tactics represents an attractive option to supplement or even replace more traditional marketing efforts as many companies have been forced to cut budgets in order to sustain operations.

While powerful, wildly popular and extremely economical, there are several considerations related to the execution and maintenance of any interactive marketing efforts that should be taken into account prior to initiating this type of tactic via any social media platform.

Considerations include ensuring that the message of any interactive marketing tactic is in-line with established brand standards, that the audience being courted via this media represents a demographic desirable to the organization, and that all applicable accounts and pages associated with any interactive marketing effort are well-maintained, accurate and up-to-date.

Understanding the limitations

Conflicting research has been presented from a variety of sources regarding the average demographic data relating to users of various social media outlets. This can make it difficult to determine whether or not any one platform is more appropriate or effective than another to a given organization. Duplicate or inactive profiles (those in which the user’s account is still active, but the subscriber no longer logs in to the system) may be a reason for some of the confusion, but there are virtually countless others.

In any case, given the many variables, it must be understood that interactive marketing should not be viewed as the end all in marketing strategy. It is, at best, an imperfect system from statistical and data collection standpoints, and like all other marketing tactics, will reach only a percentage of its target population.

Consider the audience

While many a compelling argument can be made in favor of including an interactive marketing component as part of a hotel’s overall marketing plan, caution should be exercised in first determining whether or not communication over a given social media platform is appropriate and, if so, that it is done in concert with the hotel’s brand standards and desired demographic.

Many sources recognize Facebook and Twitter as two of the most widely-used social media outlets. There is also some agreement as to the relative demographic



information of active users of these media versus other popular platforms such as MySpace. Given that there are no concrete statistical findings, though, individual companies must independently research each social media entity to determine which platform or platforms would be most effective for their specific purposes.

Interactive marketing is not by any means a one size fits all concept. Each communication or special offer should be targeted specifically to the social media platform followers that it is meant to be received by. Communications should also not cannibalize the offers or relationships the hotel has with other market segments or business partners.

This may seem a simple concept; however, consider that some of the “friends” of a hotel’s Facebook page, for example, may be travel agents. Many properties are offering incentives such as room rate discounts or special packages for social media followers in exchange for booking directly with the hotel. In bypassing the travel agent channel, the property is running the risk of alienating these valuable business partners and could easily find itself the unfortunate subject of an online forum, etc.

The above is one example of how a well-intentioned effort to engage and show appreciation for its social media following can have unintended and undesirable results for the property. An alternative suggestion may be to offer a special amenity at check-in or a complimentary cocktail in the hotel lounge at check-in by the guest mentioning that he or she is a friend or follower of one or more of the property’s social media channels.

Continuous updates and fresh content

As powerful and interactive marketing can be, this media has a notoriously short memory. It is extremely important that any applicable social media content is not only accurately maintained, but updated regularly with new and exciting content.

Consumers are faced with a constant barrage of messages from friends and other entities they are following. For this reason, each update should be unique and ideally offer some form of value. If consumers are forced to read through too many “empty” updates or direct messages, they may make the decision to stop following that particular business.

Whether content comes in the form of a special offer, notification to followers of a celebrity sighting on property, the “you heard it here first” announcement of a new restaurant opening, or even a tandem message highlighting a local event, the information must be fresh and invoke excitement or exclusivity to the reader. For example, a hotel in New York City might congratulate participants of the NYC Marathon on their accomplishment or an Orlando property may wish to congratulate a neighboring theme park on the addition of a new attraction.

Appropriate content and messaging updates at regular intervals will help to maintain the property’s image in the minds of their target consumers who are all essentially opt-in subscribers. These followers want to hear from those they are following; but there is a balance.

Be found easily

As with any element of pop culture, every social media outlet, or at least the way we communicate through it, will eventually give way to the next best thing. It is important for hotels to stay on top of these trends and, whenever possible, get ahead of them. If a property was to determine that it was losing followers to another social media site, then it would make obvious sense to establish a presence in that channel and be easily found by current and potential followers.

It is also a good idea to align a social network page or followed/follower account to other local, national or international entities that it commonly does business with. For example, a hotel in Dallas might link itself to its sister property in Seattle. A convention hotel may connect with local destination management companies. A Chicago property may find it valuable to connect with the local CVB or Chamber of Commerce. Aligning in this way can assist with being found by potential followers and customers who may not have otherwise known that the property’s page existed.

Conversely, it is entirely possible that the business model of the property is simply not conducive to social media interaction at all. If this is found to be the case, it may be in the property’s best interest to cease these efforts so as not to alienate a higher value consumer base.

Don’t forget to interact

The element that makes social media and interactive marketing so unique in contrast to other forms of marketing is that it is, after all, interactive. Posting updates, notifications and promotional offers is only part of the job. While these elements are all important parts of the interactive marketing process, the focus should be on interacting, one-on-one, with followers.

If a follower “tweets” a message about a great stay they had at the property, the hotel should respond with a note of thanks and well wishes, etc. The same is true if a future guest mentions their upcoming arrival or an in-house guest comments on their stay.

This interaction shows not only the commenting follower but all followers that the property is actively engaged in the experiences of its guests. Sending birthday and/or anniversary messages, if time allows, is also a great way to keep in touch and engaged with followers.

When sending a private message to a follower or posting on a message board or “wall” for others to see as well, it is important to be genuine. When sending a birthday greeting, it probably does not make sense to include a reminder of the property’s “special rates for friends and followers”, etc. Social networking is a way to give personality to a property apart from the strictly business element.

Interaction is not strictly limited to social networking websites. Industry related sites such as TripAdvisor.com offer hoteliers the opportunity to interact with past guests and respond to the accounts of their stay.

While the individuals who post hotel reviews on websites such as TripAdvisor or other similar online forums cannot always be counted on to provide truthful or accurate reviews, if the hotel has an opportunity to respond to such feedback, both good and bad, it shows future and potential guests that the property has a vested interest in guest service and satisfaction.

Regardless of the situation, active responses are a must. Ideally, a hotel marketing representative should be checking all applicable inboxes and public wall or forum postings for comments, questions, and notifications. Same-day responses are the goal as social media suggests a desire for instant gratification.

Social networking and interactive marketing, if not here to stay, is a powerful force in today’s markets and should be respected for its abilities. These media present opportunities for lodging professionals to extend the direct interaction with past, future and potential guests beyond the limits of their stay, which would otherwise be difficult if not impossible.

A successful Internet marketing campaign involves market research to determine the best platform and tactics for the individual property, a dedication by the property to constantly update content, and consistent interaction with followers and associates to allow the efforts of this channel to come full circle. ✧

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