



Reservations

by Eric Barber

Effectively managing user generated content to yield more reservations

*Another great article from The Rooms Chronicle[®], the #1 journal for hotel rooms management[®]! ***Important notice: This article may not be reproduced without permission of the publisher or the author.*** College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Niagara University, P.O. Box 2036, Niagara University, NY 14109-2036. Phone: 866-Read TRC. E-mail: editor@roomschronicle.com*

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There appears to be significant doom and gloom in the hotel industry at the moment, and although this has not affected every market or every hotel, it remains in the back of hoteliers' minds. Whether your market is already in a downturn or it is looming, contingency plans must be set in place to maximize opportunities.

The perceived economic downturn has definitely had a substantial effect on how consumers shop and their booking habits, and hotels must be certain to ensure they are now doing everything possible to leverage business to their properties by staying astutely in touch with these habits. Specifically, user generated content (UGC) continues to grow in its prominence among travelers, and hoteliers must understand the basic essentials in dealing with UGC and using it to increase conversions from relevant channels.

This may be a challenge to some properties, as there are still hotels that have no grasp of the very fundamentals of electronic distribution, and other essentials such as rate parity between channels and poor revenue management techniques that continue to negatively impact hotels when not managed properly.

About UGC

User generated content is most commonly found on very well known travel review websites such as Tripadvisor[®]. Additionally, it is the foundation for the myriad of blogs generated by individual travelers and posted online. UGC has also become very prominent with the many Online Travel Agencies (OTAs).

Essentially, travelers write feedback about their stay at a hotel, whether positive or negative, and give information that may benefit other travelers researching accommodations in a city or area. Many OTAs also ask respondents who have booked their travel on that website to rate their satisfaction for various aspects of their hotel stay, using a numerical scale. As a result, consumers have embraced this feedback, trusting that content generated from a regular consumer is going to have more validity than a brand or hotel's marketing message.

Surprisingly, sites such as Tripadvisor[®] or the OTAs have seen overwhelmingly positive content posted from the UGC and it has not become a platform for negativity. Hotels must learn to grasp that this provides an excellent opportunity for them and they cannot be complacent in using this to increase bookings to their channel, no matter how the guest ends up booking.

Actionable tips for managers

Here are some basic tips managers should consider when devising their hotel's UGC strategy:

- Review sites such as Trip-advisor[®], IGOUGO.com and the major OTAs such as Expedia, Travelocity[®], Orbitz[®] and Priceline weekly; read any new content that has been posted by guests.
- UGC is an excellent methodology to engage guests – and potential guests. Hotels should take every advantage of using tools such as management response forms on the various sites to post responses to the content. This should be used to respond to both positive and negative reviews posted. An adept reservation manager will choose to respond to positive reviews, and thank them for the business and ask if they enjoyed their stay in the hotel and/or city. When a prospective guest is looking at UGC and considering their options, especially when product and price are very similar between the hotels they are considering, a hotel that is well engaged with its clients is going to stand apart from the pack.

- Likewise, for any negative feedback, the hotel should make every effort to apologize to the guest, leave contact information so the guest can contact the manager and discuss further, and demonstrate their concern for the perceived issues. Guests who read user reviews generally don't have the expectation that every single guest will be satisfied and will not normally cast judgment when the majority of feedback is positive.
- Remember, OTAs that feature UGC often use the feedback rating from their guests as a factor in their algorithms that determine placement, which ultimately is one of the most important factors in a hotel getting bookings off the partner. Speak to the market managers of the OTAs and investigate what sort of response options are available. Make sure to respond to the comments when available. Over the long term this will start to improve placement on the relevant site.
- On a weekly or monthly basis, go to www.hotelchatter.com and search the hotel name, and see if there are any references to the property on blogs or articles and what the content is. In certain cases there may be content deserving of a response as would be the case on a more traditional travelers' feedback forum.
- Remember that UGC is an excellent source of information straight from your guests, and it is extremely useful to compile both the positive and negative feedback and use it as a tool to increase the guest experience at the property by addressing any issues.
- Don't forget that UGC is very valuable for conducting research about the competition. Evaluate what their guests like about the property, what they dislike about the property, and use this to increase your hotel's competitiveness in the market. This may necessitate updating property content, if necessary.
- For larger hotels, there is third-party software available from vendors such as TravelCLICK that assists properties in consolidating the UGC across the web. It delivers notifications if there has been a position change on a site like Tripadvisor® or if negative feedback has been received, so the hotelier can immediately react. The fact that UGC has become so prominent and important to generating bookings is a testimonial to the success of launching this sort of software.
- Reservation managers from branded hotels should speak to their brand representatives for guidance and assistance for managing UGC. There are some good resources available to ensure the user-generated content and brand support tools are maximized to the benefit of the individual property.

Conclusion

Although this is meant to be a grassroots quick guide on how a hotel can first start to manage Web 2.0 on its own, it is very important that hotels realize this is already well upon the lodging industry now. As an industry, it is important hotel managers stay ahead of and well informed about industry changes, so they never find themselves in a situation like they did after the fall out of events in 2001 and SARS in 2003. Hoteliers must understand this all has very real significance in the present and is going to become even more important in the future. It's time to act now. ✧

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