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### E-strategies Focus On Engagement

Ongoing customer interaction is more valuable today than interruptive advertising asking for immediate action.

By Derek Gale, Senior Associate Editor -- Hotels, 5/1/2008

Understanding your customers, their behavior and how to best serve them has always been at the core of great hotelkeeping. In today's connected world, understanding how your customers and your potential customers use the Internet is no different—it is a must if you want to attract and retain business and keep your guests engaged with your brand.

Ultimately, those who best serve customers in the second life of the virtual world are most likely to win the chance to serve them in person, on property. And the combination of these service experiences, of course, will determine whether one-time guests become repeat guests.



So where should hoteliers start? Arguably at the places consumers start—search engines, travel Web sites and hotel brand Web sites (“brand” is used here in the broadest sense—representing both big hotel brands and individual hotels representing their own individual brands). A key first step in any hotel e-strategy is ensuring that the brand has a strong online presence optimized for search, along with search marketing and linking strategies to help augment the driving of traffic to brand Web sites.

This is no small effort, of course, so if your brand has no expertise in this area, consider developing some or working with an online marketer to establish these basics.

With the basics out of the way, you can move on to the fun—deciding which online channels and initiatives to spend on. This differs by hotel brand size, segment and needs, of course. The key is to listen to your customers and spend on giving them what they want online.

“We’re trying to keep in mind the [big] picture: What will best achieve our goals and engage the consumer?” says Irene Rigos, senior e-commerce manager, Wyndham Hotel Group, Parsippany, New Jersey. “If that is blogging, great, if not, OK. We’re focused on achieving our desired outcome with whatever tools best lend themselves to the task. We need to be cognizant of what [guests] want, when they want it and where they want to get it.”

For this article, the focus will be on rich media and social media content strategies being undertaken by hoteliers around the world in an effort to drive traffic and increase customer engagement, which, in turn, drives brand affinity and, ultimately, bookings.

“Today the end goal is still to make reservations or RFPs, but to do so, you really need to have conversations with guests and create a site that they are going to research and utilize,” says Jennifer Long, assistant vice president of e-commerce, Destination Hotels & Resorts, Englewood, Colorado.



Bill Marriott, chairman and CEO of Marriott International, has been blogging for a year and a half. The success of

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David Godzman, vice president of marketing and business development for Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, White Plains, New York, agrees. “The Web [offers] an engaging means of meeting guests and providing them with the content they need. And through that conversation the transaction comes—we have seen that work successfully for us.”

### Content Is King

For hoteliers not yet focused on Internet marketing involving rich and social media, the only reasonable advice is to do whatever it takes to get here quickly—because if you lag behind for much longer in this area, it is likely you may never catch up, as technologies are ever-evolving. That said, an even better reason to catch up is found in the latest consumer research, which shows that both rich media and social media have most certainly arrived, and that both are going to be important components to the future of hotel Internet marketing.

According to a recent Travel Industry Association/YPartnership TravelHorizons study, two-thirds of online adult leisure travelers in the United States consume online video and audio clips, and four in 10 read blogs, share photos and take virtual tours. One in four also posts responses to blogs and participates in social networks.

Another recent survey by Sherman, Connecticut-based travel research firm PhoCusWright shows that nearly 20% of U.S. travelers visit six or more Web sites while shopping. While some of this may be attributed to price comparison, these travelers also are motivated by a desire to read peer reviews and research destinations, the survey shows. They are familiar with Web 2.0 technologies and are more likely than others to find offerings like podcasts, videos and interactive maps influential in making travel purchasing decisions.

“For travel shoppers, seeing really is believing,” says Cathy Schetzina, director of research at PhoCusWright. “[This] suggests that online rich media will be an increasingly important part of the travel-planning process.”

This is clearly true for Marriott customers, according to George Corbin, vice-president of e-commerce at Marriott International. “Marriott’s customers spend, on average, about 10 minutes on the Web site,” he said in a recent interview with the Singaporean newspaper *The Straits Times*. “They check driving directions, browse hotel photo tours and redeem loyalty points.”

So what does all of this mean for hoteliers? It means that content is king for today’s consumers, and if they can’t find it on your site, they’ll go elsewhere to find it. So the more destination information, peer traveler perspective and interactive media you can incorporate and offer, the better when it comes to keeping travelers on your site. And because of this endless consumer appetite for information, a site rich in content may actually capture more traffic and in turn more reservations than one offering a bare bones experience and a low-price room. “It’s the evolution from customers seeking to find the lowest price to finding the perfect trip,” says Phillip Wolf, president and CEO of PhoCusWright.

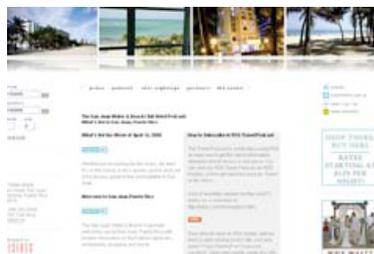
### Tools Of The Trade

With the knowledge that customer engagement can ultimately drive conversion, what can hoteliers do online to capture and keep the traveler’s attention?

**Blogging:** Hotel companies like Starwood do it (with [thelobby.com](http://thelobby.com)), and so do hotel brands, like InterContinental ([travel.intercontinental.com](http://travel.intercontinental.com)). A number of concierges and some general managers do it, and at least one CEO—Bill Marriott—does it ([blogs.marriott.com](http://blogs.marriott.com)).

So why shouldn’t you or your brand blog? The answer is, you should—unless you don’t have anything to say (still, even then, you can usually find someone else to say it for you, as Phoenix, Arizona-based Best Western International plans to do with its new leisure travel spokeswoman, Gen-X mom Amy Graff, who will blog about destinations, family travel and how to make the most of a vacation). If you can offer travelers any type of interesting content at very little cost, where’s the downside? Even better, solicit guest feedback in the form of comments, so that you learn what type of content they like or do not like.

his blog prompted the company to launch another blog authored by corporate executive chef, Brad Nelson.



Miami, Florida-based Desires Hotels offers podcasts with destination information in its property Web sites, such as The San Juan Water & Beach Club site.

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**Podcasting:** Miami, Florida-based Desires Hotels has been offering weekly destination information podcasts on many of its property Web sites for a couple of years now. “We wanted to have a way socially to communicate with customers about individual destinations,” says Doug Carillo, senior vice president and partner, Tecton Hospitality (Desires’ parent company). “It has helped increase the number of visitors to our Web sites and helped with our conversions and revenue as well.”



Motel 6’s goin6.com offers travelers information about a series of American road trips highlighting historic or culturally significant destinations, along with rich media like video clips, and the opportunity to post their own notes and videos showcasing their experiences.

**Incorporating Video:** Whether on YouTube (which, according to Reston, Virginia-based Internet information provider comScore Media Matrix, accounts for about one-third of online videos viewed each month in the United States) or on your individual Web site, brand site, or dedicated microsite, you are lagging if you are not logging video clips these days. Consider Washington, D.C.-based Marriott International, which has two brand channels on YouTube, or the company’s Ritz-Carlton brand, which has its own series of slick, short films housed on its brand Web site as well as a dedicated microsite. Other luxury brands, like Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group and Fairmont Hotels & Resorts, also incorporate video into their Web sites.

**Adding Interactive Trip Planning:** Trip planning is an ideal focal point for interaction with consumers as more and more people take charge of their own travel plans.

“Travel marketers need to incorporate some trip-planning functionality into their social media toolkits to satisfy customer demand,” writes Cindy Estis Green in *“The Travel Marketer’s Guide to Social Media and Social Networks,”* a joint effort between the Foundation of the Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International and the Travel Industry Association.

Mid-scale, limited-service and budget hotel brands are doing an especially noteworthy job leveraging this method of connecting with consumers. Some examples include Best Western’s Trip Planner tab, the Hampton Landmarks microsite, Holiday Inn Express’ Smart Show initiative and “webisodes,” and Motel 6’s goin6.com microsite. In addition, many of the other tools mentioned in this article, like blogs, podcasts or videos, are dedicated to destination information or include content designed to assist travelers in planning their trips.

**Fun & Games:** Earlier this year, Starwood’s Sheraton brand started an online worldwide pillow fight and splash fight with its [sheratonplay.com](http://sheratonplay.com) microsite and rich media banner advertising (people perusing the Internet could get involved in the pillow/splash fights through the banners, without leaving the page they were on).

“It’s all about connecting,” explains Jeff Mirman, director of interactive marketing for Sheraton. “Starwood and Sheraton understand how to utilize new technologies to connect with consumers and potential consumers. There’s a lot of noise out there with advertising, and this, since it’s interactive, and not interruptive, plays out nicely. It’s a fun way to get our brand across.”

Mirman notes that while the games were intended as a brand awareness campaign only, the high interaction levels and times likely meant some translation to additional bookings.

**Contests Involving Rich Media:** Wyndham’s Ramada brand is about to start an online contest for which guests will be encouraged to submit a one-minute video clip of them “doing their thing.” Doing so will make them eligible to win a grand prize of US\$10,000. “The contest builds on the brand’s message of ‘you do your thing, leave the rest to us’ and [engages] the target audience,” says Wyndham Hotel Group’s Rigos.

Direct comments to: [derek.gale@reedbusiness.com](mailto:derek.gale@reedbusiness.com)

## GIST

- Understanding how your customers and your potential customers use the Internet is a must if you want to attract and retain business and keep your guests engaged with your brand.
- A key first step in hotel e-strategy is ensuring that the “brand” has a strong online presence optimized for search, along with search marketing and linking strategies to help augment the driving of traffic to brand Web sites.
- Advanced e-strategy should be focused as much, if not more, on interaction and

engagement with consumers (providing relevant content and information) than on transactions. Information and perspective can trump best price, and conversation rather than immediate conversion can bring better long-term, sustainable results.

- Listen to your customers and spend on giving them what they want online.
- The use of rich media and social media is high and growing in all customer segments, from the youngest to the oldest, all around the world. Therefore, rich media and social media must be an integral part of any successful e-strategy.
- Hoteliers must not underestimate the power of online travel communities and user-generated content, whether feedback and reviews or simply vacation photos. Word-of-mouth is more powerful than ever, so reputation management is key.
- Trip planning is an ideal focal point for interaction with consumers as more and more people take charge of their own travel plans.
- Blogging is a low-cost method of offering travelers interesting and useful information and content, as well as soliciting guest feedback.

### Keeping Tabs On Community Chatter

Hoteliers must not underestimate the power of online travel communities and user-generated content, whether feedback and reviews or simply vacation photos. Word-of-mouth is more powerful today than ever.

“People have any kind of travel experience, great or terrible, they tell TripAdvisor, Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, the blogosphere—they tell their online community,” writes Vicky Brock, co-founder of Highland Business Research, Inverness, United Kingdom, in a recent blog post.

To keep abreast of what’s being said about your hotel or brand, “I suggest subscribing to one of the many available social media monitoring services,” writes Scott van Hartesvelt, president of gCommerce Solutions, a leading hotel and resort eMarketing firm, in his eMarketing Muse blog on [hotelsmag.com](http://hotelsmag.com).

Companies ranging from Destination Hotels & Resorts to Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group work with such “reputation management” partners to listen in to online chatter. By doing this, trends can be identified and problems can be addressed.

“We find the reporting valuable because it can provide insight into consumers’ perceptions of our brand as they pertain to everything from service to value to the physical products themselves,” says Mandarin Oriental’s vice president of consumer marketing, Kristin Ruble. “Being able to tap into guest feedback online only furthers our drive to continuously improve.”



### Starwood Brands Capture Fans On Facebook

The number of worldwide visitors to social networking sites has grown 34% in the past year to 530 million, representing about two out of every three Internet users, according to comScore Media Matrix. Within those users, Facebook is attracting more than 100 million visitors per month, so it’s not a bad place to find your guests or potential guests. Perhaps that’s why nearly every Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide brand, plus the parent company, has a page or a group on Facebook.

In terms of size of the “fan” base, so far it seems Sheraton is the most popular brand, with more than 900 fans.

“We were somewhat conservative in entering the Facebook space—we wanted to see how the community evolved,” says David Godsman, vice president of marketing and business development at Starwood. “When we put St. Regis and The Luxury Collection on Facebook, we wanted to make sure the users were there.”



And indeed they are, to the extent that Starwood “will probably develop shortly some applications for Facebook,” Godsman says. “We are strong proponents of social networking, social media and the social community. There is a great opportunity [in that space] to really extend the personality of a brand.

### Some Brands Create Their Own Social Networks

Hyatt's recent launch of yatt'it, an online travel community designed for members of the Hyatt Gold Passport loyalty program (but with content available to all travelers), makes the Chicago-based company the latest to dive deeply into social media and online travel communities. But Fairmont Hotels & Resorts isn't far behind—and with its pending dive set to show a high level of difficulty, the travel world will eagerly await the Canadian hotel company's upcoming announcement of its own online community, [everyonesanoriginal.com](http://everyonesanoriginal.com).



That site is set to debut in early July, featuring content in 12 categories ranging from hotel history to green initiatives to food and wine, according to David Doucette, Fairmont's director of Internet strategy. The initial content (a minimum of five to eight stories in each category) will be pre-populated from Fairmont's archives by the

company's public relations and marketing staff, Doucette says, but users also will be able to post their own stories, photos and videos, all of which will get tagged so that the content shows up by property or by category. Users also will be able to suggest new categories, and Fairmont will continually add to the site to ensure that there is fresh and interesting content in each category, Doucette notes.

The domain name comes from the tagline Fairmont has been using in all of its recent brand advertising—"Everyone's an original." Doucette says it is a perfect way to position Fairmont's new online community "because our hotels are unique, and they've got such character, and our guests are similar—they have unique needs and perspectives and are very much originals."

Hyatt's yatt'it, meanwhile, offers travelers a combination of candid, fellow-traveler advice and insider knowledge from local Hyatt concierges in more than 40 destinations worldwide. Add to that content like destination information and flight updates through partnerships with [frommers.com](http://frommers.com) and [flightstats.com](http://flightstats.com), and you have a valuable online resource for travelers.

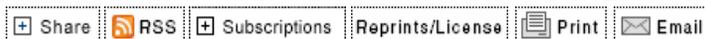
One of the primary differences between the sites will be that only Hyatt Gold Passport members are able to contribute content to yatt'it, whereas anyone willing to create a user profile will be able to post content to Everyone's An Original (Fairmont President's Club members simply validate their credentials to post). Another difference is that Fairmont's site will be customized for users based on their category interests, or based on how they arrive at the site (if they link to it from the Fairmont Copley Plaza page, for example, they will arrive at the Boston section of the new site).

But there are many similarities as well, including the companies' reasons for developing these communities in the first place. "Today, more and more people rely on social networking and the authenticity of user-generated content for credible advice and information," says Rene Mizwicki, director of Hyatt Gold Passport. "With yatt'it, we are employing Web 2.0 techniques to create a means of strengthening our relationship with current customers and engaging future customers by providing valuable information."

Doucette shares these sentiments. "In terms of engagement, we are always looking for new ways of having discussions with guests, and this just seemed like the perfect opportunity," he says. "This is not only seen as a Web 2.0 initiative, but also a loyalty opportunity for guest feedback and satisfaction."

Also similar is that both companies have the capability built into their new online community platforms to add features like direct messaging, internal grouping and friend linkages.

"We thought phasing things in would have value in terms of keeping interest in the site," Doucette says. "If we came out with everything at once it would be tough to build on that. We're keeping things in our back pocket so that we have the ability to announce new functionality as the site matures."



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