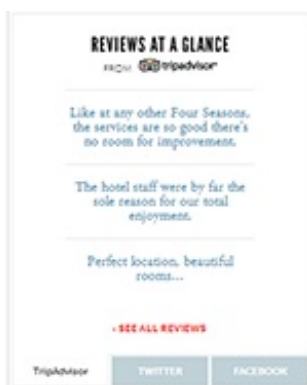


INTERNET

Hotel brands look to strike right balance with travel reviews

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Reviews at a Glance for Four Seasons New York, provided by TripAdvisor

By JOE MCCARTHY

Hotel brands are increasingly at the mercy of travel reviews, but this does not have to be a cause for alarm.

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According to TripAdvisor, 89 percent of travelers say that reviews are influential, and Web in Travel found that 53 percent of consumers will ignore a property if reviews are unavailable. Rather than ceding further digital ground to online travel agencies keen to the power of reviews, hotel brands should actively promote guest appraisals on their Web sites.

"Control is a difficult thing to maintain but it's an even more difficult thing to let go of for brands," said **Taylor Rains**, Charleston-based luxury brand consultant.

"Traditionally, luxury hotels maintained equity in their brands by tightly controlling the channels of communication," he said. "The nature of communication has changed, though, and it's necessary for these hotels to adapt to meet consumer expectations.

"People do their due diligence before travel, be it in the luxury market or not. Part of that research means that they will come across reviews. While showcasing them may run the

risk of coming across as self-promotional, it is important for these brands to support the review process."

Friend or enemy?

A new report by L2 describes just how powerful reviews are in shaping the consumer journey.

Anybody who has ever searched for a restaurant on Yelp understands the stakes at play: decisions can be reached in mere seconds based on a Yelp score.

However, a certain volume threshold must be passed before average rankings can be trusted.

Too few reviews can mean that outliers hold too much sway, a surly or elated person distorting the score. After a certain number, quirks are flattened out and a credible ranking is usually achieved.

Oftentimes, a poor Yelp score will repel consumers before they even read the user opinions. A positive score often motivates a consumer to pore over reviews, looking for good menu options and other suggestions.



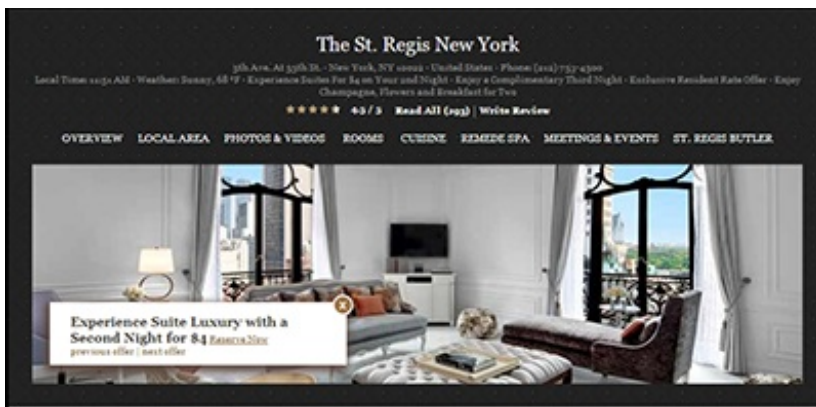
Mandarin Oriental Paris restaurant

For travelers, reviews hold more sway, since travel decisions are much more thought out than the decision of where to eat later.

So, what does this mean for luxury hotel brands?

First, although negative reviews can deal a heavy blow to revenue, reviews should not be feared. If a hotel meets the brand proposition it made to a traveler, also known as providing great service, then reviews should be positive.

Second, brands should make consumer review sections visible on their Web sites. Of course, some consumers may be skeptical of reviews presented by the party that stands to benefit from those very reviews. For this reason, a largely uncensored review policy should be adopted.



St. Regis lets consumers access reviews from the top of its property Web sites

If consumers know that they can get reliable reviews directly from the brand, then property Web sites can regain some of the digital traffic lost to online travel agencies.

Hotel brands are increasingly squeezed by the metasearch dominance of OTAs and Google, according to an accompanying report by L2.

The Metasearch Insight Report argues that hotel brands must invest heavily in the big metasearch players, TripAdvisor, Kayak and Google, in order to stay relevant. Brands that gain top placement within these search engines see dramatic increases in Web site traffic ([see story](#)).

This leads to the third point. OTAs have a staggering amount of travel reviews and these mountains of consumer feedback shape metasearch results, which impacts revenue in big ways.

In particular, TripAdvisor dominates the consumer review landscape, accounting for 43 percent of reviews among OTAs for luxury hotels, according to Revinate.

Drilling further down, TripAdvisor has reviews for 100 percent of luxury hotel brands, 93 percent of properties per brand and an average of 746 reviews per property, also according to Revinate. In other words, travelers-to-be are left with little doubt about their travel plans after visiting TripAdvisor.

Not alone

In addition to the data pointing to the impact of reviews, qualitative research also supports this conclusion.

When luxury consumers are deciding where to stay as they travel, reviews posted online have more influence than similar appraisals delivered in magazines, newspapers or television, according to a new report from Unity Marketing.

Similarly, advertisements for travel experiences that run in print or on television make less impact than reviews. Since online reviews from other customers pull more weight than even word of mouth from friends and family, hospitality brands need to find ways to give their guests a voice online ([see story](#)).

As brands find better ways to cope with reviews, they will likely improve relationships with

consumers by coming across as approachable.

"Negative reviews are an inevitability," Mr. Rains said. "Rather than trying to shield them from public view, brands need to make a concerted effort to respond to them in a timely manner.

"A timely and effortful response is more valuable to the brand than the negative review is damaging," he said.

Final Take

Joe McCarthy, staff writer on Luxury Daily, New York

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