

MULTICHANNEL

Ritz-Carlton responds to consumer desires with redesigned Web site

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Exterior of The Ritz-Carlton New York, Central Park

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The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company is helping consumers plan new vacations and remember old ones with a redesigned Web site.

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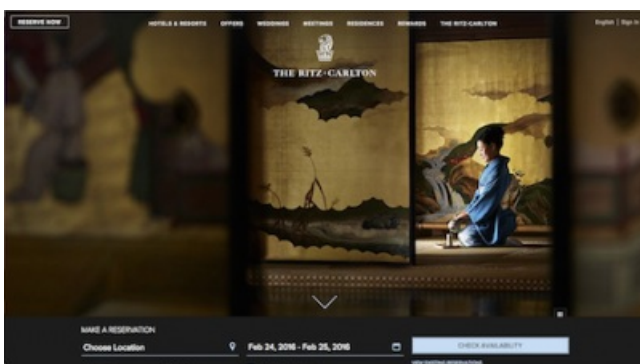
The new RitzCarlton.com includes user-generated content, an exploration hub and a more dynamic design in the interest of a user-friendly and more personalized experience. Consumers long ago began turning to brand Web pages to book vacations, but Ritz-Carlton's redesign encourages spontaneous trips and lets consumers explore options without having to look to other sites.

"This new generation of luxury traveler is far more globally mobile than previous generations and they want richer, more genuine experiences with more meaningful connections to local culture," said Kyle Murdoch, Head of Digital for **The Ritz-Carlton**. "They value beautiful design and intelligent comfort, all of which drove the direction in which we have taken the site.

"Customers expect their online experience to be tailored to their past behavior and interests," he said. "The new capabilities of Ritzcarlton.com allows for increasing amounts of personalization."

New and improved

The Web site's home page is now a slideshow of Ritz-Carlton destination photos with a more visible booking widget in larger type, thus encouraging the eventual conversion.



RitzCarlton.com homepage

Further down on the homepage is the new Ritz-Carlton Memories section. Photos posted and hashtagged #RCMemories are automatically sent to this section of the site, where the user can click to see the full post or peruse through a series of photos. Each hotel's page also contains #RCMemories specific to that destination.

In addition, any social media user making a post with #RCMemories or #RitzCarlton may find their photo on the new Web site or on any of Ritz-Carlton's social channels.

The benefits of highlighting user-generated content are multiple. The prospective consumer sees authentic endorsements from other consumers rather than manufactured images or other brand-created collateral designed to push the sale, while users posting the content are made to feel like valuable customers as well as co-creators in the brand's image.

"We have always believed that transparency is a critical element toward securing the trust of consumers," Mr. Murdoch said. "In order to be true to that core brand belief, we seek ways to obtain third party endorsements that are unsolicited about The Ritz-Carlton experience.

"The rise of social media and user-generated content gives us an opportunity to supplement the photos we take and the text that we write with snapshots and words from people who are walking in and out of our hotels every day," he said. "I hope site visitors enjoy real customer views of our hotels and will even take the opportunity to involve themselves in the conversation through our hashtags."



Ritz-Carlton Memories

Ritz-Carlton is also facilitating discovery and helping consumers plan their next vacation with a feature that lets them search by interest. Users can examine hotels by categories such as beach resort, golf resort, mountain resort, family hotels, honeymoon resorts, ski resorts and more.

The feature fits into Ritz-Carlton's service-fixated ethos. Whereas normally the consumer might pick a destination and then look for hotels in the area, the new feature allows travelers to choose among locations based on what they want.

Other hotels offer the same feature, meaning consumers interested in looking specifically for ski resorts or beach resorts might not consider Ritz-Carlton. The new feature helps travelers plan and also keeps their selection options to Ritz-Carlton hotels.

"Customers are already searching [this] way," Mr. Murdoch said. "We know from analyzing vast amounts of global search data and have responded with this functionality to simplify the experience for the user. By pairing relevant content, not only do we benefit in search engine rankings, but we can also educate customers on the types of vacations they may not know that we offer, such as ski holidays or desert escapes."

The consumer will be able to pick out exactly the room she prefers, not only by its classification but also even by the view that it offers, a feature that incentivizes early bookings and pre-planning.

At the bottom of the homepage is a more visible link to Ritz-Carlton's magazine, while scattered throughout more than 30,000 pages of imagery, information and videos. The content encourages users to explore the brand through a number of pathways that are not directly sales-oriented, wisely empowering the consumer who has already expressed interest in the brand by visiting the site.



Room at The Ritz-Carlton, Macau

"Digital environments can be overtly functional or transactional, which does not represent who we are as a company," Mr. Murdoch said in a statement. "Success has come from pairing what we know about our guests and providing them with messaging and destination information that we believe will match their needs perfectly."

RitzCarlton.com receives more than 50 million unique visits per month. Changes were made based on focus groups and research.

Because so much of travel researching and planning is done online, a strong Web site is essential both to converting first-time consumers and bringing back loyal ones. Even those who have had good experiences at a Ritz-Carlton in the past might consider booking elsewhere if the difference in information and planning tools were big enough.

Two hearts

Other hotels also leverage user-generated content specific to destinations.

According to a senior executive from Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts at Luxury FirstLook: Strategy 2016 on Jan. 20, consumers will also have a clearer idea of the brand if they help to create it. Accordingly, Four Seasons displays user-generated content in the form of photographs on the homepages of more than 60 of its hotel's Web sites ([see story](#)).

Beyond the hotel sector, brands are looking for creative ways to engage consumers and showcase the role they have in the brand's life and image.

For example, last April Italian fashion house Valentino reached out to the artistically inclined with a call for illustration submissions from consumer fans.

Valentino teamed with blog Draw A Dot. for a social contest surrounding the spring season's Mime bag collection, with a grand prize of having a drawing featured on Valentino's Instagram. This unique take on user-generated content rewarded quality and enabled Valentino to potentially garner careful submissions and artwork ([see story](#)).

"As a customer-centric organization, we think it's critical for consumers to have choices," Mr. Murdoch said. "As a brand that is widely known in the luxury realm, we have a responsibility to make sure we are running a company that not only delivers what a guest expects, but exceeds their expectations.

"We need to do that in every forum in which we are present," he said. "In 90 physical locations around the world, through 40,000 Ritz-Carlton ladies and gentlemen and in the digital space.

"Through the new site today and as we continue to add more and more travel/localized content, visitors will increasingly feel like they are part of a virtual world of The Ritz-Carlton."