

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

How should Trump Hotels navigate the political backlash?

February 1, 2017



Trump International Hotel, Washington, D.C.

By SARAH JONES

Now that President Trump has officially begun his term, his eponymous hotel group is finding itself on the receiving end of partisan dissent.

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The social media accounts for the Trump Hotel Collection are being used as a platform for those who disagree with Mr. Trump's policies to publicly air their opinions, turning the marketing channels into a place of political debate. Now that the reactions to its namesake founder's actions in office are extending to Trump Hotels, how should the hotelier react?

"Trump Hotels can't win this battle," said Al Ries, founder and chairman of **Ries & Ries**, a Roswell, GA-based marketing strategy consultancy.

"Responding to dissents will only generate additional dissents," he said. "They should ignore all negative comments on social media accounts.

"As a general principle, a brand should not take sides in a political campaign. Unfortunately for Donald Trump, the Trump Hotel brand is automatically classified as a right-wing brand. That will benefit the brand with some prospects, but hurt the brand with many other prospects."

Mr. Ries is not affiliated with **Trump Hotels**, but agreed to comment as an industry expert. **Trump Hotels** was reached for comment.

Platform for protest

During Mr. Trump's polarizing presidential campaign, Trump Hotels remained largely out of the crossfire on social media.

Since the inauguration, as protests reached peak numbers and Mr. Trump began to act on promises made during his campaign, the online conversation surrounding the president made its way onto Trump Hotels' profiles. Individuals are using the comment section and reply option to respond to the hotelier's upbeat posts about occasions such as the 20th anniversary of its New York property or promotions about spas and in-room dining to share their disapproval.

One tweet in particular is drawing lots of attention, as noted by The New York Times. Dating back to 2011, long before the campaign, the message solicits consumers' response to the question, "Tell us your favorite travel memory was it a picture, a souvenir, a sunset? We'd love to hear it!"

Tell us your favorite travel memory - was it a picture, a souvenir, a sunset? We'd love to hear it!

Trump Hotels (@TrumpHotels) **October 11, 2011**

With Mr. Trump's executive order that institutes a ban on refugees from seven Middle Eastern countries entering the United States newly signed, many took this tweet as an opportunity to discuss this particular action.

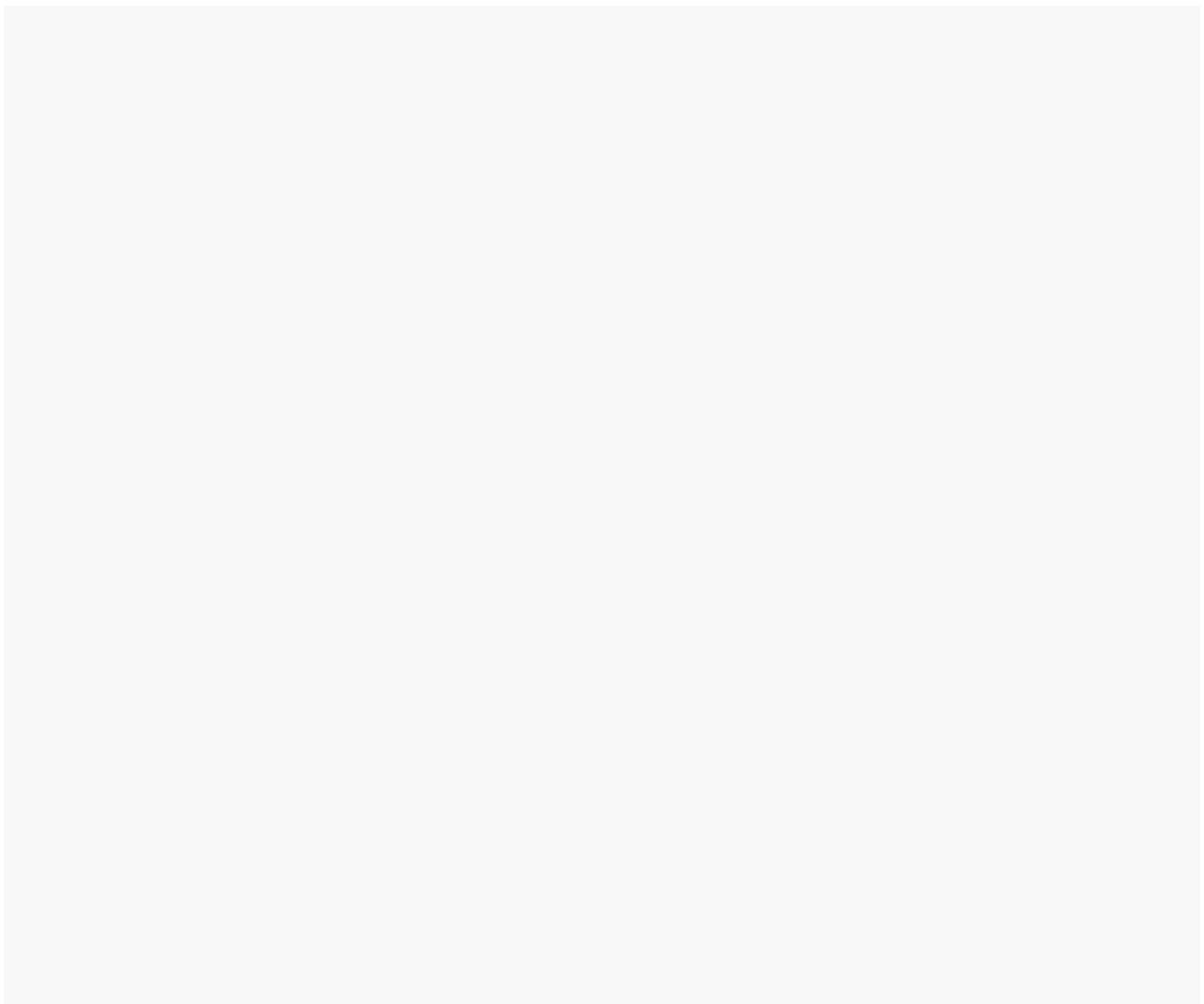
Among the more than 7,000 replies as of press time are stories of refugee ancestors who came to the U.S. following World War II or those who immigrated decades ago or more recently.

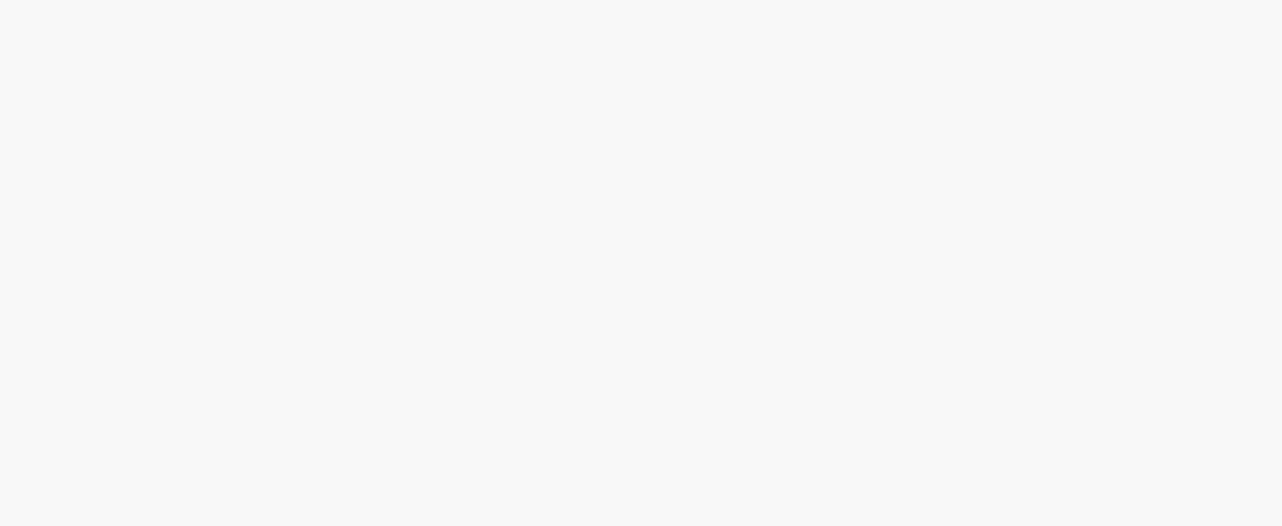
One tweeter shared a story of traveling to Syria in 2010, describing it as "a country full of warm, welcoming people." Syria is one of the nations that Mr. Trump's order covers.

Aside from disparaging remarks about the policy, some attacked the hotels themselves, or were outspoken about their preference for other chains. Airbnb got a shout out from one commenter for offering free accommodation to stuck refugees.

Others recalled recent memories of protesting, either at the Women's March or other gatherings.

While Trump Hotels' Twitter has become a space for rebuking policy, the brand's Instagram and Facebook feature more brand fans engaging with posts than dissenters.





Best way to start the day! ?#TrumpHotels #ExperienceTH #TrumpCentralPark @trumpnyc

A video posted by Trump Hotels (@trumphotels) on Jan 26, 2017 at 8:41am PST

Politics and properties

The impact to Trump Hotels extends beyond social media.

Before he was the Republican Party nominee, Mr. Trump's hotel in Washington, then under construction, was the site of protests surrounding his controversial statements on Mexicans ([see story](#)). This same property was vandalized shortly after it opened with graffiti supporting the Black Lives Matter movement.

This Washington hotel was also decorated by Women's March participants, who left their signs outside the property after they demonstrated.

Other hotel chains have faced backlash for their owners' actions.

As more influential figures join the boycott against the Dorchester Collection, the brand is distancing itself from the homophobic actions of Brunei, a country with deep ties to the brand's ownership.

Following the news that Brunei would be escalating its punishment of homosexuals from 10 years in prison to death by stoning, calls for mass boycotts emerged, led by prominent figures such as fashion designer Brian Atwood and talk show host Ellen DeGeneres. Whether or not the brand's apologies will curb the boycotts and mend the rift that is forming remains to be seen ([see story](#)).

"Short-term, it's a big problem," Mr. Ries said. "But long-term, people forget and move on to other issues.

"Look at Bill Clinton," he said. "He was impeached while in office, but today enjoys a good reputation as an elder statesman.

"Long-term, the Trump Hotel brand will benefit from Donald Trump's term in office."