

MULTICHANNEL

Experiential currency drives digital and social landscape: Starwood exec

July 5, 2011



By KAYLA HUTZLER



NEW YORK — Starwood Hotels and Resorts employs a localized

infrastructure for all digital and social media to provide a 360-degree customer experience, according to an executive at the Luxury Interactive conference last week.

Starwood creates separate personalities for each of its hotel locations and equips them with personal social media sites, Web site pages and tabs in mobile applications. Unique brand identities are extremely important and must be recognizable across all three platforms.

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“The new economy that drives the digital and social media landscape is based on experiential currency,” said Stephen Gates, senior creative director of global brand design

for Starwood, New York.

“People want to have unique experiences and they want to pay to be part of and experience something that is not the same as what everyone else does,” he said.

Starwood Hotels and Resorts owns high-end hotels and resorts such as The Luxury Collection, St. Regis and Le Meridien, as well as the W, Westin and the Sheraton brands.

Stink bombs

The three overall platforms that Starwood focuses on for all of its properties are Web sites, social media and mobile.

On the Web, the most important factor for brands to remember are the core values of the brand and highlighting them through the Web site design.

For example, Starwood’s Le Meridien hotel site is based around the brand’s core brand positioning: “Discovery starts with you.”

To embody that in digital form, a feature on <http://www.starwoodhotels.com/lemeridien> allows guests to choose photos they like, and drag and edit them to create a collage on the screen.

Based on the images that a consumer finds appealing, Le Meridien suggests personalized vacation destinations that she would specifically enjoy.

Each Starwood property also has personal social media sites that are monitored 24/7.

From these sites, real employees can interact with current and potential guests to offer suggestions, follow-up on complaints and respond to questions in real-time.

In one extreme example from a Starwood property, someone tweeted a bomb threat to the hotel.

The social media employee saw the tweet within eight minutes and alerted hotel security, who then cleared the glass-encased front lobby.

Fourteen minutes later, a bomb went off across the street and no guests were harmed.

Starwood’s localized infrastructure approach helps the brand to truly use the pages to provide a great customer experience.

“In a digital world, people like to complain eight times more than they like to compliment,” Mr. Gates said.

“If someone posts a complaint and we do not respond to it, then we make a bad experience even worse,” he said.

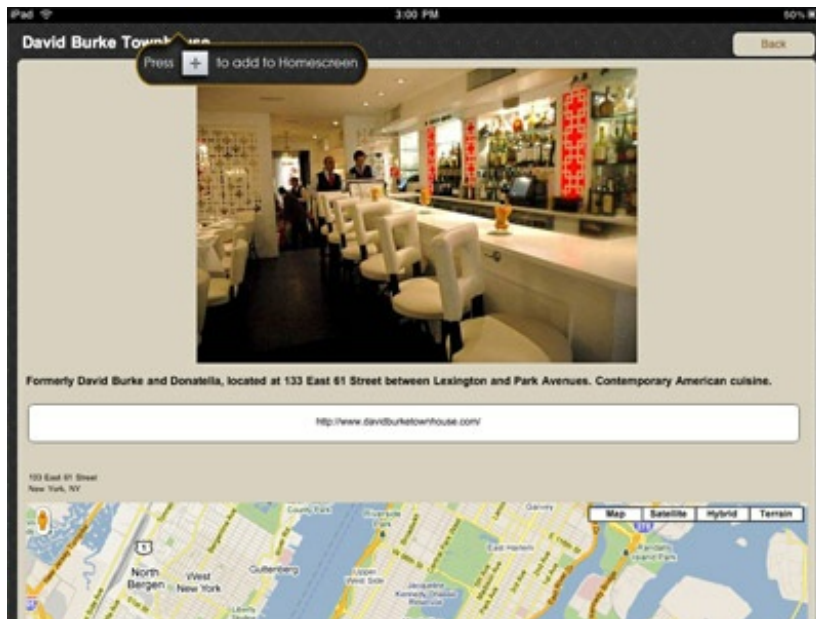
Starwood implements the same ideas within its mobile apps. Each hotel line has its own app, with subsections for each location.

The new St. Regis butler app gives guests and potential guests content information on the surrounding area, with suggestions from employees on the best activities to do (see

story).

Current guests can also use the app to order room service, request new towels and make reservations.

At any point during this process guests can also connect with a hotel representative on the phone.



Post, not ghost

The overall thing to remember when creating a digital and mobile strategy for a luxury brand is that each consumer is expecting something new and innovative that not everyone gets to experience, according to Mr. Gates.

Starwood uses the metaphor of experiential currency.

First, brands must earn currency by providing exceptional customer service on all platforms, and the currency is then spent by consumers when they share their experiences with friends.

This is driven by unprecedented interpersonal transparency in a world where if there is no documentation of an occasion on Facebook, then it did not happen, per Mr. Gates.

“Starwood is capitalizing on how we can create information and content to earn this currency for people to go spend,” Mr. Gates said. “This is unpaid marketing.”

The main goal for Starwood through all platforms is to marry brand-centric experiential content with revenue-generating transactional content.

All brands must remember that if they are going to leap into the digital world, then they must have an infrastructure in place to support it.

“The golden rule of digital branding is that technology isn’t an idea,” Mr. Gates said.

“Nobody cares what version of Flash your site is, no one cares if you are on Twitter if you

have nothing to say and no one cares if you are on Facebook if you don't interact through it," he said.

"If you go into a platform with something to say, then you can be successful."

Final Take

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