

MOBILE

## Starwood taps location-based social network Jiebang to engage Chinese travelers

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By KAYLA HUTZLER

Starwood Hotels & Resorts is looking to engage its guests in Asia-Pacific through a partnership with Chinese social media platform Jiebang to offer added benefits to mobile users who check-in to any of the hotelier's Asia-Pacific properties.

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Using the Chinese version of foursquare, Asian guests can use their mobile devices to check-in to the hotel and earn extra Starwood Preferred Guest points. In addition to earning points, Jiebang users will receive a virtual badge they can display on their social networks and have a chance to win special prizes such as free nights and weekend rewards.

"We look to build deeper relationships with our Chinese members in ways that are relevant to their lives," said Janice Chan, director of digital distribution and marketing at Starwood Asia-Pacific, Singapore.

"Starwood Preferred Guest's partnership with Jiebang allows us to localize and redefine the check-in for our Chinese Starwood Preferred Guest members, enabling rewarding experiences beyond their hotel stays," she said.

## Suite rewards

Through its partnership with Jiebang, Starwood will be rewarding guests who check-in to any of the 200 Starwood properties in Asia-Pacific with extra Starpoints.

The hotel is aiming to leverage Starpoints as a new form of social currency, per the company.

Between Dec. 1 and Jan. 31, 2012, Starwood Preferred Guest members will earn bonus Starpoints when they check in with a confirmed reservation.

Starpoints can be used for free nights at Starwood properties and special experiences such as sporting event and concert tickets.

Mobile users who sync their Jiebang account with at least two other social networking sites and share their Starwood check-in will unlock a virtual branded badge to display on all three accounts.

"I think anything you can do that is mobile is helpful for brands, not just luxury, but all brands looking to engage in China," said Sage Brennan, cofounder of [China Luxury Network](#), San Francisco.

"In general, my opinion is that mobile in China and people's relationship with mobile is far more advanced from what we see in the U.S. and Europe," he said. "The badge is a great thing and it's a new concept, but I think it's a really interesting one.

"That kind of iconography is already there, badging yourself with a brand is huge in China and I love the concept of linking it to mobile."

The look of the badge will be based on which property the mobile user checks into, with specific badges for the St. Regis, Luxury Collection, Westin hotels and each of the non-luxury properties.

Additionally, every guest who unlocks the virtual badge will be automatically entered to win a free weekend stay at any Starwood hotel or resort in Asia-Pacific.

Starwood preferred guest members who unlock all eight of the badges will be entered to win the grand-prize, a five-night vacation at The St. Regis Sanya Yalong Bay Resort and domestic roundtrip airfare to the hotel.

"Mobile is fast becoming the primary means by which Chinese consumers are accessing the Internet and by virtue of that the primary means by which they will make purchases and engage with brands online," said Danielle Bailey, research lead at L2 Think Tank, New York.

"[Additionally], social media is twice as likely to influence the buying decisions of Chinese as Americans," she said. "Social media is where the masses learn from the elite what to wear and where to shop.

"For many Chinese consumers social media is where they first learn of luxury brands and products."



## Star guests

In addition to earning bonus Starpoints and being entered into the prize pools, the mobile user with the most amount of check-ins will receive Jiebang “mayor status.”

Starwood will declare one mayor each month who will receive special preferred guest perks.

The Starwood mayor will also be interviewed and highlighted on the landing page of the Starwood Jiebang account.

The mayor will also be asked to contribute travel tips to the Starwood Jiebang tips page which is located at <http://www.jiebang.com/spg>.

Starwood ran a similar campaign in the United States using the foursquare platform. The success of the U.S. program was a major catalyst for the Jiebang campaign, according to the brand.

By requiring Asian consumers to register for the Starwood Preferred Guest rewards program before they can check in, the hotel chain is increasing its reward program membership.

Starwood is also gaining important consumer information that it can use to contact travelers in the future.

The company is also creating a feeling of community among its Asian guests through the network and the mayorship election which could lead to increased brand loyalty.

“What Starwood is doing well is mixing online and offline locations,” Mr. Brennan said.

“With this campaign, you have a real-world location and support on the back digital end,” he said. “These kinds of concepts work really well in China because of the way China’s offline social system is set-up.”

“The check-in stuff works as long as you can stay little bit platform-agnostic.”

## Final Take

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