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## Have luxury hotel Web sites lost their way?

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As the economy begins to improve and the travel industry increases spending for digital advertising and mobile applications, hoteliers are trying to adjust the role each channel plays in their digital marketing playbook.

But as hotel chains spend funds to open new channels for social and mobile, their Web sites are often left to languish and now have become brochureware with a reservation engine slapped on to the menu.

Recovering Web site vitality through five means

If hoteliers are going to have a vibrant digital platform, they are going to need to revisit their Web sites and take a candid look at how they are communicating and what needs to be done to make sites work harder for customer engagement.

Hoteliers' Web sites are often detracting from engagement and messaging instead of attracting their most valuable customers.

1. When you talk to yourself, what do you say?

The first strategy is so fundamental and yet so ignored.

Web site copy constantly speaks of what "we can do" and not what the user can

experience. It is heavily tilted towards trying to convey differentiation through self-description and does not portray the benefits of the visitor's physical and emotional satisfaction.

Additionally, the copy is just not that interesting.

In an effort to be informational, Web sites have become tone deaf, and it is becoming rarer to find entertaining copy that makes a visitor want to read.

It is as if when updates were made, tone was matched to brochureware copy and no one asked the question of why. Or, someone was assigned to write copy who was not really a copywriter. If copy does not catch the visitor's attention, what benefit does it have?

Because you are a luxury brand, please do not make yourself more important to yourself than your visitor is to you.

2. What do pictures of your bathrooms tell you?

For many luxury buyers, cost is not the primary purchase decision factor but instead it is the feeling they get from visuals.

Consumers want to look at the details, see the quality of bedding, the brand of toiletries—even down to the brand name on the coffeemaker. They do not want an experience that is less than what they have at home, and they use visuals to assess the environment in making a decision.

When a Web site features only small visuals, it is blocking a major pathway to conversion.

This is especially true of hotel management Web sites that promote many of their luxury hotels within a common structural frame and use smaller referent visuals of each. There is no ability to double-click visuals for enlargements or to view them through a zoom mechanism.

Too often, visuals start to look like a bed in a room with a window, and often when placed in a column of room options, they all seem eerily similar.

View your site as if you were a director constructing a cinematic movie. Enlarge your visuals, tell a story and encourage visitors to explore your uniqueness through details.

3. If your visitors yell, can you hear them?

When you visit many luxury hotel Web sites, what is missing is very conspicuous—it is the welcoming integration of the customer's voice. This can take on many forms.

First, common communication tools are missing, ranging from newsletters to email sign-ups to rudimentary logons.

Web sites are being positioned as a reference document with only the obligatory "Contact Us."

Secondly, the majority of work done on hotelier's social and mobile Web sites does not integrate into its main Web site. There are icons to jump to those channels, but the consumer voice integration into the Web sites is missing.

Even when a few customer comments appear on a Web site, they are often unattributed or dated—making new customers suspicious of veracity.

Overall channel integration does not feel synergistic or aimed at getting to know and dialogue with consumers. It is as if in a down economy, there were fewer marketing personnel to handle eCRM, and visitor communication tools were eliminated. Web sites became theatrical “set pieces”—fixed and nailed into place.

Review your platform and ask users how they feel about how you are communicating with them on each channel. Do not jeopardize your eCRM opportunities on Web sites when it is a valuable tool to building long-term relationships and advocacy.

4. How hard do they have to work to do business with you?

These days, the majority of luxury hoteliers have incorporated some form of reservations capability into their Web site.

Now take a moment to think about how difficult it is to change a reservation on most Web sites? With a few exceptions, there is no link to do so. Customers are left to trying to figure out if they are missing a link or if it is just not there.

Pathways need to be more explicit and usability testing is crucial to identify what works and what does not. Functionalities consumers would put up with years ago are now unacceptable.

It is important to remember that consumers are visiting other luxury sites, especially automotive sites, which let them design an experience, save it, come back to refine it, and act upon decisions.

In their eagerness to be transactional, hoteliers are not understanding that visitors have unmet needs that may send them to competitors.

Minimum transactional guidelines are often not being met. Score your site against guidelines and talk with customers about additional services they need to further differentiate yourself.

5. Do you make networking between your channels easy?

An interesting finding about luxury/premium buyers is that they are proficient in many channels, moving easily between them for task completion.

However, in looking at hoteliers' Web sites and other channels, seamless linking between mobile Web sites and social channels is missing. Nor are there easy transactional parities.

If customers can make reservations on the site, can they do the same on Facebook? Can they modify reservations on both?

Hoteliers need to recognize users across channels, especially their preferences.

Customers prefer not to be single-threaded for task completion. Do not make them learn

to transact with you, but add redundancy so they can complete tasks in multiple channels to create a behavior that is familiar to them.

THE POOR STATE of luxury hoteliers' Web sites could be a result of a number of factors.

Funds for Web site updates could have been diverted to other channels.

Marketers may have tried to use inside resources instead of professional resources for economic reasons and the results show. Or, strategic planning for channel integration may not have been recently updated and roadmaps were overlooked.

Whatever the cause, hoteliers who better integrate this channel into their digital planning will have a greater opportunity to engage customers than those who continue to ignore it.

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