COLUMNS

Luxury hoteliers' mobile apps become adolescents

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By Carol Banks Setter

Luxury hoteliers are cautiously moving into the mobile application space and the results are widely divergent. They have taken their baby steps but are in an adolescent phase, lacking a mature offering. It is reminiscent of the early days in Web site development where there was a great deal of experimentation that resulted in an equal amount of consumer confusion.

First, let us recognize that companies may not have the same digital objectives for their mobile apps, but at the lowest rung, they likely expect apps to promote their brand and drive ecommerce. Even these two basic actions are often poorly handled and should meet minimum guidelines to encourage user engagement.

Four common errors
Hidden branding. Many apps use few visuals of the hoteliers' properties, and the visuals they choose are often not illuminating.

Options need to be made available for individuals to see the public spaces of a facility as well as room-specific differences.

Without these visuals, the apps seem to be representing budget properties. Additionally,

few hotels featured their unique differentiations and often did not highlight amenities.

Buried relevant details. This was a major deficit noted in several apps—lack of user cues.

At times, a picture could be clicked to show more examples, but there was no copy or icons to indicate the possibility of doing so.

The Chesterfield Hotel, within the Small Luxury Hotels of the World app, has wonderful pictures, but there are no indicators on screen telling users how to access them. Only by accident are they found by clicking the primary visual.

Mobile experience that is not self-contained. Several apps combined their mobile and Web site functionalities but not always with the best experience.

The Four Seasons Maui app has an exceptional display of options and makes it easy to delve into content and get assistance through a concierge option.

However, if one makes a selection such as a spa appointment, it bounces the user out of the app to a Web site that does not scale to a smartphone. This makes the experience inconsistent and more difficult than it should be to accomplish tasks.

Lack of coordination between the app and Web site audiences. Hoteliers are often specific on Web sites who they are attracting, whether they are corporate businessmen, luxury family travel, destination weddings or leisure travelers.

These distinctions are lost in app copy and, frequently, it feels like one-size fits all. The copy and choices tend to stifle users from exploring or feeling any affinity for the app.

Three appealing consumer strategies
Give users control. The Mandarin Oriental uses a multi-layered technique in allowing individuals to interact with brand-rich visuals.

A slide show technique, which cycles through relevant pictures for a selected hotel, is coupled with the option to see many more pictures with the click of an icon.

In addition, the user can also minimize picture space and optimize the screen text area for reading.

Build an intimate relationship. A few hotel apps are stripped down to basics where customers can book a room and move on.

Other apps allow an individual to link to Open Table or spa reservations so that more planning is possible.

The Accor Hotel's Sofitel app takes the opportunity a step further. It offers meal packages during the checkout process that can be added to the bill, and then itemizes the total cost of the stay including meals and any additional city and local taxes.

Pricing feels out in the open between the hotel and the customer with no hidden charges, strengthening a trusted relationship.

Make the app as valuable at the hotel as for planning a visit. There are few apps that really

seem to understand digital travelers who live on their smartphones.

Las Vegas' Bellagio hotel, however, excels. There is no need to reach for a room phone – it is all available on the app.

That app makes experience feel very personal, and visitors can rest assured that they can reach the right person and resolve any issue quickly and efficiently. It comfortably optimizes users' smartphone behavior and makes it easier for users to share their experience through social media.

Two effective customer approaches
We know and value you. While most apps considered the visitor as an individual without history to the brand, a few did not.

A notable example of this is SPG. The first screen encourages the individual to log into the loyalty program or join. From that point on, the user could enjoy a more personalized experience.

Be surprised and delighted. Some apps tucked in a few fun functionalities.

The Ritz Carlton app includes a QR scanner that encourages the individual to find hidden content at the hotel and on the grounds. It also features a link to its magazine and invites visitors to post stories of their experiences at the hotel.

One final insight
In their current early "adolescent" stage, hoteliers' mobile apps seem committed to telling visitors about themselves in a one-way conversation. They are geared toward teaming an outbound conversation with a transaction, but the consumer voice is not heard.

As they mature, apps need to foster two-way conversations in a firm, ongoing way.

In future versions, they could provide valuable, real-time customer service insights by encouraging consumer dialogue and feedback and taking advantage of mobile capabilities. That is what the "adult" app will need to do—listen, engage and use the benefits of the mobile medium to optimize customer experience.

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