E-Commerce for the Hospitality Industry

By Andrey Smirnov

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Andrey Smirnov
Director of sales and marketing for Moscow Marriott hotels — Marriott Royal Aurora, Marriott Grand, Marriott Tverskaya

The Internet has consolidated itself as a very powerful platform that has changed the way we communicate, and the way we do business. Over the last decade the population of Internet users has increased rapidly. The hospitality industry has always been among the first to capitalize on new technologies. Costumers are constantly seeking new sources of information to help them make decisions before purchasing services. E-commerce has been defined as "the buying and selling of products and services by businesses and consumers over the Internet." With hotel e-commerce, the landscape of the hospitality industry is forever changed. Online sales are an important part of the business. The growing importance of e-commerce in the modern hospitality industry has created an urgent need for simple solutions to manage companies' online presence. Now that each hotel is involved in e-commerce, why is hotel e-commerce so important today?

- Accelerating Internet usage worldwide
- The Internet is the lowest cost hotel-booking channel
- Most travelers research hotel reservations on the Internet
- Social media and online hotel reviews are an increasingly important decision factor
- The web is the preferred media source for travel information, favored 17:1 over television and 6:1 over newspapers and magazines.

Smart hoteliers need to keep a sharp focus on the fundamental shift in ways customers are seeking information and channels that drive maximum return on investment. Here is a list of the basic e-commerce strategies that will help to get the best from the Internet world.

1. Search-friendly web site design. Site download speed is one of the most important ranking factors in organic search. Search engines want users to have a good experience. A good experience translates into a site that has relevant and compelling content, is quick to download, can be found easily and is compatible across all browsers. Heavy graphics, animation and flash demos cause your site to perform slowly. Sites that are built keeping these guidelines in mind will deliver better user experiences, will perform better on search engines, and ultimately drive higher ROI.
2. Improve conversion and usability. With the increasing volume of information that hoteliers are trying to provide travelers, it is key for hotels to focus on usability and conversion. Hotels tend to keep adding promotions, banners to promote offers and special deals. We forget that the human brain can only consume limited information. It is important to take a holistic approach and prioritize information. Good web site architecture and organized content improves site usability and its efficiency when used with search engines.
3. Paid search. This instantly drives targeted, qualified traffic to the web site and increases conversions. Locally targeted paid search campaigns are a great option. Most of the search queries related to hotels include location as a modifier (for example, Moscow hotels). Identifying top feeder markets and targeting campaigns specifically to those markets will help to increase conversions. It is also important to optimize all aspects of your campaign to maximize conversions. Here are some tips: make sure your ad has

a call to action and offers value to customers; make sure your ad groups are made up of tightly knit keyword themes and that those keywords are reflected in your ad copy; ensure that your landing pages clearly reflect the offer promoted in the ad copy and includes clear calls to action and conversion factors.

4. Real time search — natural ranking. Building strong sites with compelling fresh content, and quality incoming links will always be essential for any site. With search engines launching real time indexing, it has become crucial to treat their site as an information platform for fresh content. Adding real time search functionality to your site, capability to generate user reviews, launching contests helps to build fresh content and quality links. Maps, photo galleries, videos and press releases are creative ways to distribute content on different channels.

5. Mobile. As things stand now, mobile queries represent about 10% of all queries made on Google. People are using mobile devices to conduct searches, as well as share content, connect with friends and browse the web. Google has recently announced that the mobile market is their priority. We are seeing a steady growth in traffic coming from mobile phones and smart phones. Hotels can leverage the mobile market by optimizing their site for mobile phones, improving the download speed of their site by avoiding heavy graphics and flash, making sure their site is mobile compatible, and promoting mobile sites across all platforms including paid, social and local. Location based services such as Foursquare and Facebook Places can also help to reach sets of customers who are active on these channels in their local community. Offering mobile specific coupons and specials helps to connect with a different set of customers who are active in the mobile space.

6. Embracing social media. 93 percent of social media users expect companies to have a social presence. 85 percent of social media users want companies to interact with them on social sites. A well-planned social initiative can turn fans into brand evangelists.

7. Test, test, test. Top e-commerce sites are continually testing new things. It's the only way to achieve continual improvement. I've seen examples where changing one word in a headline increased sales over 3 times. What difference could a seemingly insignificant change like that do for your web site?

Hoteliers need to ensure that they are using the full potential of the Internet. If someone walks up to you today and claims that they are an "Internet expert," walk away ... fast! The web as we know it today has only evolved over the last 18 years, yet no other technology has impacted humanity so radically in our history. We have to constantly learn and look for ways to harness the power of new developments and trends. "For tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today," in the words of a famous proverb.