

Advertising: How to Create Award Winning Ads (Yes, Even on a Budget) - By Brenda Fields

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The role of advertising in independent hotels can be full of conflict. In the right circumstances, it can be effective and drive business to the property and it can create awareness in the marketplace creating future demand. If not effective, then a lot of money was just pored down the drain!

We know the challenge for independent hotels is to evaluate the best use of its marketing budget, ensuring the greatest return on the investment. Therefore, for owners and operators to ensure that money is spent wisely and that any advertising ensures the greatest ROI, a few basic pointers are in order.

Define your position in the marketplace:

The very first step, whether a new build or a repositioning, is to decide what you want to be. Are you a modern, boutique hotel; a traditional or historic hotel; a convention hotel; or a small, budget hotel? Once you've decided what you want to be, look in the market place to determine what the standard service, amenities, and overall product are in your category. Then, decide where you want to be relative to your competition. In the budget category, do you want to offer the greatest value, such as offering complimentary breakfast, when your competitors do not? Do you want to be the rate leader in the market place or the best price? Try to come up with something that sets you apart from the pack.

By defining your position and understating all the elements to communicate will lead you to designing and determining the best placements the most effective advertisements.

Establish your target market(s):

The next step is to identify your customer. Segmenting your target customers will lead to a better understanding of their specific needs and how to effectively reach them. The weekend package guests have different needs than the mid-week business traveler. So, by having a thorough understanding of who the potential customers are and what they require, will help you in shaping your marketing message or advertisements to reach them. Many times, hoteliers try to be all things to all people, with the idea that they will get more 'bang' for the marketing 'buck'. But in actuality, if the message is not specific to one audience and the placement of an ad is not conducive to reach that market, then valuable resources are wasted.

Lastly, not all segments respond to advertisements. By understanding who you are, who your customers are, and how to reach them, will assure you of spending your advertising dollars wisely. 'Image' advertising is a strategy to position a property to create awareness in the marketplace and does not target a specific market. This type of advertising is costly and difficult to track as it does not typically have an immediate impact on business. Therefore, with limited funds it may be wiser to choose a specific market to target to ensure the greatest ROI.

Commit to 'Image Integrity':

How many times have you been contacted by a local community member selling ad space in an awards dinner booklet, a special event, or any one time event? So in order to be a good citizen, you buy the space and have your printer set up an ad with the appropriate message. You have done a good deed for the community or helped out a good cause. But, does the ad, even if it only says 'Congratulations' maintain the same look, feel, and tone of all your other printed messages/advertisements or is it totally different? If your style is modern and contemporary, then keep that style in all your market communications whether it's a printed ad, web design or wedding menus. The font type immediately conveys an image as much as a full scale ad campaign. So it is important to use these image makers to your advantage.

It is a subtle, but powerful way to create awareness in the market place, by committing to consistency. By maintaining consistency in the look, feel, and tone of the message and reinforcing one image, you are communicating credibility and creating greater awareness.

Hire an Advertising Agency?

The natural and most logical place to go to create effective ads is to an experienced advertising agency. But many agencies only work on a monthly retainer. The monthly fees combined with production costs can be too costly for an individual property. The high costs are usually the reason many operators or managers have the local printer design the ads, as it is more affordable.

But it is important to keep in mind that advertising design and placement is a skill and expertise not generally seen out of the advertising arena. Many times, a small creative shop will agree to project work vs. a monthly retainer. This works well if you, the client, have a good idea of which markets to target and which media is the most effective for placement. Placing the ads directly will result in a net price compared to a gross price charged by an agency. Additionally, the best ads come from collaboration. The agency needs all the critical information on positioning, market differentiation, and target markets. Many times, an agency is very skilled and qualified, but not that experienced with the nuances of hotels. Therefore, make sure the agency is very well indoctrinated about the industry and to your property. Then, let them come back to you with fresh ideas. Find the right balance between 'over-directing' and a 'hands off' approach.

One way to find an experienced and well qualified agency to handle project or ad hoc work is through referrals or by tracking down an agency who designed an ad that caught your eye. Even if the agency doesn't work on this basis, they can refer to a noncompeting agency that does.

Think about Barter:

Barter provides the opportunity to trade goods for services, with no cash outlay. There are barter companies which specialize in placing ads for hotels for a commitment of rooms at an agreed-upon ratio. Many aspects of this arrangement can be negotiated, so it can be important to ensure that rooms used for barter do not displace revenue rooms. A barter company has relationships with various media i.e. newspapers, magazines, and TV, so make sure that they can use the media that you need, before entering into agreements.

By understanding some key components of marketing and how to work with advertising and barter companies, will place owners and managers in a great position to ensure that their valuable marketing dollars are well spent.

About the Author

Brenda Fields is a marketing and rooms specialist in the lodging industry. Her twenty-four year experience includes senior marketing management positions in luxury, boutique, and convention hotels.

With extensive experience in pre-openings and repositionings, Brenda was responsible for the successful opening and stabilization of Paramount in New York City, one of the first boutique hotels by developing and executing a unique direct sales and yield management program as well as a national and international marketing campaign.

Brenda serves as a member of the Editorial Board of National Hotel Executive; is on the Advisory Board of Boutique Hotels and Resorts; serves on the NYC Board of HSMIAI; is a member of the Real Estate Board of NY; and is a regular contributor to the international publications Hotels Online, Hotel Resource Weekly Network News, and 4Hoteliers.

Contact Fields and Company at www.fieldsandcompany.net or phone 518 789 0117 or email brenda@fieldsandcompany.net.

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