A Primer's Guide to Understanding and Maximizing Your Hotel Web Site

By Brenda Fields, President, Fields & Co. & Michael Parkes, President, Michael Titus Parkes Design

Ms. Brenda Fields

Regardless of the size of the marketing budget, the web site has evolved into the most important component of the marketing plan. Properly developed, executed, and maintained, the web site will, at a minimum cost, effectively reach local, domestic, and international markets. The web will create a level playing field, allowing the small independent property to compete successfully against the large chains and third party providers.

In understanding and getting the most from your web site, it is especially important to understand the difference between the two key components, i.e. the artistry of the design and the technology; and how to successfully integrate the two. Many times, web sites are created by technology professionals who do not understand the nuances of marketing; and vice versa, marketing professionals who design a web site only from a visual perspective, without considering how key technical components can drive demand.

An effective web site design and effective an on-line distribution strategy require expertise. The average hotel professional is bombarded with many ideas and is left wondering which approach to take. Therefore, if relying on expert advice, it is important to have a goal to accomplish specific short-term goals, as well as ensure that the web site is well positioned for future technological advances and for advancements with the search engines, in order to minimize financial risks.

In order to achieve the most from your web sites, it is important for owners and managers to re-think and evaluate the following key areas before and during their web site development and implementation:

Find the Right Interactive Resource

There are as many providers of interactive services as there are hotel sites on the internet. They all come with different specialties and price ranges - many which are a perfect match with your needs, and many that are not. It is important to ask as many questions as you can about their past work and billing methods. Also, don't expect them to give you a quote for your specific project right away. Instead, ask for two or three projects that may have been similar in scale and size to what you think you need, and ask what they charged their clients for those. This is an easy way to see if a resource fits your budget.

For smaller properties with limited budgets, an agency may not be the best resource. Instead consider hiring an individual designer or consultant who comes recommended by other professionals. As a smaller, single property, you might find you can get more mileage out of your budget and an even more innovative approach from an individual qualified professional. His or her ability to personalize and to think about your specific business needs in a more tailored way might enable you to get better work at a reduced rate. Sometimes the close proximity between you and this resource can lead to ideas that are much more successful than you would create with an agency which has many layers and internal bureaucracies.

Don't Treat Your Website Like the Golden Egg

One area where smaller, independent properties have an advantage over the large chains is their uncomplicated infrastructure. Large chains typically must accommodate numerous properties worldwide with a vast bureaucratically driven web-presence. These websites are huge digital matrices which have to resist change for fear of potentially hurting sales for their individual hotels in any corner of the world. Ironically, some smaller properties try to imitate this paradigm by creating websites that become their very expensive magnum opus - never to evolve throughout the life of the business.

To avoid this pitfall, take advantage of your size, and make flexibility a priority in your new design. Make sure that your website is easy to update and has pre-determined functional spaces to run online promotions and current specials. Include seasonal opportunities for content changes in your design. Customers want to see what you have going on during the time they intend to be there. A user who visits your site wants to

see information that is current and looks like it, too. If you can visit your site and see that nothing has changed much since the last time you were there, just imagine what your potential customers are thinking.

Make Sure Your Site Doesn't Just "Look Pretty"

There are a variety of ways that properties sell their properties on the internet, and for each one, there was a designer who felt theirs was the best design. The true test is to put yourself in the position of the average consumer. Stroll through the web comparing many different hotel sites, and you will be left with a confusing variety of experiences. So how do you decide what is the design that fits your needs and also lives up to the important standards set within the industry?

Devise criteria with which you and your interactive provider will judge their work for viability. Some of the work is of course subjective and depends on taste. But much of the important aspects of the site can be gauged. Ask the designer to help you to come up with some ground rules and measurement concepts for their solutions before they begin to present ideas. For example, to judge any given webpage concept, develop a list of questions such as...

- *Where did the user come from to get to the current page? Is this the expected result of their previous choice?*
- *Is it easy for the user to see where they can go from here, and where they came from? Is there any way for a person to become lost or confused?*
- *Is the text comfortable to read? Are key elements emphasized correctly with size and color?*
- *Does the online experience give the user a true sense of the property? Can the property live up to the promises made by its site, either written or visual?*
- *Does the photography reflect the real guest experience? Is all the relevant information current and up to date?*

The kind of web designer you want is the one who will willingly provide back up of their design with some real tenets and guidelines. In fact, the more a designer winces when you question the work or the facets of the idea, the more you know you have a novice on your hand. Or worse, they might be re-selling you a pre-designed template, rather than giving you a specific, custom design to fit your needs and fulfill the criterion you set for your site. The best interactive providers will back up their thinking with relevant, industry-specific reasons for why they are proposing any given solution and will customize your solution to get the most from the website. It doesn't matter if it looks nice if it doesn't "work." Only by asking tough questions can you determine if a design is both aesthetically pleasing and also functional for your specific needs and goals.

Don't Reinvent the Wheel

There were things you did when you built your business which were standard for the industry. Every day we see innovations in the hospitality industry. While we know it to be a lively and constantly evolving arena, we also know that certain things remain constant. At the end of the day someone is in a hotel room somewhere and they are paying a certain rate for that room. That is the result of all marketing efforts, and many times is exclusively the result of online marketing.

So when you set out to build or re-build your website, pay attention to what has been done and what is done well. If you want to build the next best hotel website, you may just have to look around and compile good ideas that already exist. Much of the best projects executed on the web start this way, with a round-table discussion of what we love and hate on the web. Part of an interactive provider's job is to cull this information for you, and to steer you through the variety of solutions that are available today. Similarly, don't assume that the best resource is one who does only hotel websites. They may have an entirely different clientele, but by investigating their solutions and by checking out their references, you might find they are your ideal resource for your property and can get you the results you want.

Get an Email List Going Today!

It is important to continually expand your online mailing list. Make it a priority to start this as soon as possible. Also put in place a long-term plan for supporting your email list and ridding it of duplicates and defunct email addresses. Sites will sometimes use incentives like an e-newsletter or special perks to get information, but just remember when you offer a potential guest something in return for their email, they will expect it! If you can't keep a newsletter or monthly mailing going, don't offer it and then back out.

Why is an email list so valuable? A user who is willing to submit their email online for you to contact them with information or promotions is someone who already knows your product. Nobody will be likely to type in their email and send it to you unless they have already navigated your website first and liked what you have to offer. That means they require even less effort to sell to. Many times your list will be made up of people who have stayed with you before and love your property. Imagine how much easier it is to convince these

people to come back then to pull in a new customer. Also, it is very easy for a fan to forward your promotion to a friend when they already have received it in an email. Add a "Tell a Friend" bonus to your promotion for the individual who spreads your message, and watch your efforts double their returns.

Track Everything!!

Although interactive specialists shudder to admit it, online promotions can be as scatter-shot as direct mail campaigns. With direct mail you have a mailing list, and you know exactly who is included. With the web, it is virtually impossible to always know exactly where and who the people are who are seeing your online promotions. Due to the expanse of the internet, online promotions are even more random because they reach a wider audience for less money. After all, you don't have to pay for mailing a promotion from your Website to your potential customers. They come to you to see what you are offering.

Here's the catch... While online promotions can be cheaper when you consider how many people might get your message, the returns from web-based offers can be even more difficult to predict or analyze. Like any growing business, your hotel will need data to decide how best to spend your time and money on the web. No matter what you and your resources dream up for promotions on the web, make sure to always ask "how is this track-able?" Build this requirement into any contract or specification you may sign into for an interactive project. It may cost a little more for back-end coding to have a campaign that is measurable, but consider how valuable it is for you to learn what specific efforts actually work on your specific customers. Imagine how much more focused next year's budget for web-based promotions will be if you actually can precisely survey this year's returns.

By gaining a better understanding of some basic concepts of Web site development, owners and managers are well positioned to allocate marketing resources wisely; chose the best practitioner; and ultimately, cost effectively general demand for their properties.

Brenda Fields is a sales, 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 Hotel in New York City by developing and executing a direct sales and yield management program as well as a national and international marketing campaign. Paramount Hotel was one of the first "boutique hotels" developed by Ian Schrager. The strategies and structure developed and implemented are used as the prototype for new acquisitions. She resides in NYC and enjoys her cottage in Millbrook, New York. Fields and Company is located at 500 E. 77th Street, #1101, New York, New York 10162. She can be contacted at 212 734 2152 or brenda.g.fields@verizon.net or www.fieldsandcompany.net

Michael Parkes is an award winning designer and an information strategy consultant from Austin, TX. For the past two decades, he has held senior level positions in graphic design from small shops in Pennsylvania and Miami, to larger agencies, including SicolaMartin in Texas. He was a senior designer during the tech boom for the predominant online home furnishings e-tailer, Living.com, and has worked on serious website reconfiguring for Compaq, Vignette, and others. He can be contacted at 512-468-7888 or austxmtp@aol.com

Back to Hospitality Forum