

COLUMNS

6 under-utilized Facebook opportunities for luxury hoteliers

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By **Carol Banks Setter**

Between Twitter and Facebook, consumers are increasingly engaging with high-end hoteliers, posting observations from everything to the amount of time required for check-in to quality of poolside towels.

And hoteliers typically either stand politely aside as if providing a Facebook forum is enough for them to do or post information about themselves in a silo without engaging consumers in ongoing dialogue.

This stiffness in the relationship has started to be cracked by a few more progressive hoteliers, but the possibilities are largely untapped. Here are a few suggestions to guide hoteliers' Facebook approach.

1. Match your hotel to audience needs

On Web sites, many hoteliers work to provide copy and visuals for each of their primary audiences, but that approach is lost in Facebook. Photos are added without a plan in a jumbled manner, requiring the visitor to scan and sort to find anything applicable.

Take a more organized approach. If one of your audiences is couples planning weddings, provide within the photos' option an album of gallery pictures of your wedding facility locales (indoors/outdoors), cuisines served and examples of bridal couples enjoying the celebrations.

Allow individuals to experience how visually unique each wedding is suggesting their wedding can stand out compared to other couples who also use the hotel.

Do the same with other audiences such as business executives, families or vacationers. Help them visualize themselves enjoying your exclusive hospitality.

2. Emphasize your distinctiveness

Many Facebook entries feature food and beverages served. But consider how to make this more immediate and provide greater differentiation.

For example, Affinia (Liaison Capitol Hill) posted a picture of food it had bought that morning at a farmer's market with a picture later that day of a dinner plate using some of its purchases.

The connection of freshness and wholesomeness between the raw food and meals was made in a very compelling way. And if your chef skills extend to guest pets, include photos of their treats also especially if it is likely to bring a smile and affinity.

3. Make it easy to plan in advance

Hoteliers such as the Rosewood Mansion on Turtle Creek make it not only easy to do reservations through Facebook, but also to book meals through Open Table.

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Consider linking through Facebook to spa appointments, golf and tennis court times or special events attendance. This helps visitors enjoy their time with you instead of using their time scrambling to put together an onsite schedule.

4. Engage or others will

Recognizing that every negative comment cannot be rectified, consumer statements do need to be monitored and intervention provided as possible in real time. Consider these two situations:

A California hotel posted a special spa treatment for \$180. However, it was followed by a string of comments that not only protest the price is too much for the service, but even recommend that others go to a competitor with a better price.

There was no response from the hotel describing their value to price, not arguing, but providing additional detail that provides benefit statements. With the hotelier's silence, the consumer's view could be that the hotelier cannot defend the price.

Compare that to another situation where the hotelier responded. The Breakers in Palm Beach, FL, responded quickly to patrons' concerns about the new rules around the South Pool.

Such intervention tends to reduce the negative churn.

Sometimes a misunderstanding is corrected, a gift is awarded or an explanation provided to address the concern. Whatever the response, the consumer is signaled that someone is listening.

5. Showcase experience

For many travelers, a hotel is another night's accommodation in a busy schedule. Challenge that mindset. Build into your picture gallery and posts local things to do.

New York's Thompson 60, in its posts, strongly celebrates its neighborhood. It makes posts feel current, validates a reason for staying in that location and suggests good ways to enjoy the surroundings and make the stay more than a bed in a building.

6. Form a partnership that extends beyond a buying relationship

Build a relationship that go beyond the simple act of staying at the hotel.

The Bellagio in Las Vegas invited visitors to the Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art and gave free admission with donations of canned goods. Persons of high net value tend to monitor the charitable contributions of companies they select and promoting charities on Facebook helps to tell your brand story.

Is Facebook worth the effort?

Many marketers, not only hoteliers, ask about the benefits of having a more structured approach to Facebook. Is it worth the time and ongoing investment? The benefits can be substantial.

Facebook can be used for acquisition, loyalty and buzz.

Visitors previewing a hotel can get a feel for the experience others are having and the tone of the experience prior to booking. It can be used to extend the relationship of a visitor and engage them in upcoming promotions and events. And the conversations broadly can be used to influence others, to provide concrete examples of why a particular hotel is worthy of recommendation and price.

Additionally, as eMarketer recently reported, affluent individuals are on Facebook, so the target audience is there and reachable.

And finally, the content derived from Facebook is a great source of consumer sentiment for hoteliers' Web sites and little used. Take advantage of Facebook commentary by feeding it into Web sites and inviting individuals to engage in the dialogue.

Facebook becomes a powerful tool for gathering and monitoring sentiment and a brand-rich vehicle for sustaining conversations with consumers.

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