

## What the Heck is Hotel Web Site Optimization, Anyway? A Hotel Marketer's Guide to WSO - By Neil Salerno

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With all the talk about search engine optimization, web site optimization often gets left off the radar for many hoteliers. Yet, WSO is the necessary first-step to building and marketing a functional hotel web site.

Web site optimization is the process of specifically designing your site's web pages to rank high within search engines, optimizing your web pages for search is an absolute must.

There are a number of hoteliers, who are satisfied with the 'look' of their web sites, but not satisfied with the site's PageRank and reservation production, they often think that all they need is SEO to improve production. But, in the majority of cases, the actual designs of their sites are hindering production and popularity because they are not compatible with search engine optimization requirements, this makes any efforts to market the site totally ineffective.

Unless your site ranks in the top 10 or 20 results in a keyword search, face the fact that your target audience won't be able to find your site. Listing near the top and grabbing the attention of your target audience should be your top priority when having your site developed or improved.

The fact is that the Internet is a search-driven medium with more than 80% of hotels found only through search on the Internet. This makes search compatibility the most important element in hotel site design. Search elements include Meta tags, keywords, title tags, image alt text, properly written sales text, and overall design, they all play an important role in determining how high your web site will rank or if it gets ranked at all.

As you can see, there are several components of a web page which affect its performance in search. The first step towards improving your site is selecting keywords which reflect your site's pages.

### **Keywords and Keyword Phrases**

For hotels, search elements are the most important components in web design. About 80% of hotel searches are organic or general in nature, only 20% or so, are performed by brand. This makes the use of keywords and keyword phrases an absolute must for successful hotel sites. If your site can't be found, it's useless.

The key to the effective use of keywords/phrases is to incorporate them into the body text on each page of your site. Selecting the BEST keyword phrases is the most important step towards optimizing your site pages for search engines.

Yahoo provides a great tool that enables you to type in a keyword, click a button and receive a list of popular keywords you can use. Make sure that you only use keywords which are relevant, not simply those which are popular.

### **Meta Tags**

Meta tags are HTML code which instructs the browser. Although several search engines are no longer using Meta keyword tags to assist them in ranking a web page, some still do, so it's worth the effort to include them. Meta keyword tags also serve as a handy storage place to review and stockpile these important keywords.

The Meta Description tag should contain a description which will be visible in most search results. Your description should focus on your hotel type and its location, never simply repeat your domain name. Make sure to include your most important keyword phrases. In addition, be certain that your description describes the content of the page in detail. Your description should be less than 200 characters, including spaces.

Keywords and phrases should never be capitalized, the vast majorities of searchers use lower-case letters, also understand the important difference between singular and plural forms of the keywords.

### **Image Alt Tags**

An image Alt tag follows graphic addresses in your HTML code. These words will be displayed in place of your images through an older browser or when your visitors have their images turned off. To fully optimize images, insert a readable keyword phrase within the Alt tags of your images.

### **Title Tag**

Your page title should contain your most important keyword phrase. Place your most important keyword phrase first. Not just your most important phrase, but the keyword phrase that you think most people will use when they do a search.

Remember, for hotels, the Internet is primarily a destination-focused medium, location is most important. Most guests choose their destination first...then where they want to stay.

Effective title tags include only relevant keyword or keyword phrases, avoid using non-indexing filter words such as a, an, the, welcome, official site, and home page.

### **Properly Written Site Text Content**

Writing body text for a web site is a critical process. Through the years, it has always amazed me to see hotel web sites with too little and/or poorly written body text. The false notion that a picture is worth a thousand words doesn't apply to web sites because body text 'content' is a search element. Search engines ignore images, therefore, images play no part in the search process.

Now, I'm not saying that images aren't important at all, images can be very effective sales content, but they supplement well-written sales text, not replace it.

When writing hotel body text, it is important to incorporate the most important search keywords and phrases, at least three times, but no more than seven times (That's spamming). This is how searchbots find and list your hotel in search results. The more relevant and accurate the keywords, the higher your placement will be.

### **Overall Design of Your Site**

An important element in the overall design of your site is its navigation scheme. How easily can visitors travel through the pages of your site? Navigation is important in a couple of respects. First, searchbots should be able to easily navigate every page in a logical order and direction, secondly, visitors should be able to easily find the information they need to make a buying decision.

Drop-down menus may look clever, but its best to avoid them. It also helps to provide some sort of indicator to identify upon which page someone has landed. If one knows where they are on a site, they can more easily decide where they want to go next.

Poorly designed navigation leads to frustration for visitors, no one should have to 'learn' how to find the information they are seeking. Knowing that few visitors will read every word on your site, sales information should be written in hierarchy format, most important first and so on.

### **And, Finally**

Bottom-line, there are no short-cuts to Internet marketing. Frankly, I don't understand why more hoteliers, especially those operating independent hotels, are not more committed to the Internet. Web marketing can produce enormous amounts of business with a return-on-investment that is unmatched by other types of marketing.

If you were hiring a sales person, who could be responsible for 30% or more of your total business, you would look for the most experienced person you could afford, check the person out thoroughly, and then, make the decision to invest in that effort. Why would you do anything less for the Internet?

Having your web site developed properly could be the best investment you ever made. Forget online templates, hiring the local computer techie, and other financial short-cuts. Choose a web site developer with hotel marketing experience, not just a company with an ex-hotelier on their sales staff.

For hotels, the Internet is primarily a location-driven medium, your web site must be designed to accommodate search, and, the sales content (text and images) on your site really matters. Then, and only then, is your site ready for SEO and marketing.

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