

All Marketers Are Liars - Web 2.0 Strategies For Hotel Sales And Marketing - By Carol Verret

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Seth Godin gets your attention in the first part of the title of his 2005 book, 'All Marketers are Liars - The Power of Telling Authentic Stories in a Low Trust World'. While he goes on to state '... marketers aren't really liars... they're just really good at telling stories that customers want to believe'.

In the hospitality industry, the customer is less likely to blindly believe the 'marketer's' story as there are so many ways to access stories written by people like them about the experience they had or want to have.

The customer is control and in Web 2.0 is "Seeking information and looking for perspective--like-minded experience and judgments--are currently trumping the straightforward hunt for the best price.' (Douglas Quinby, Senior Director of Research PhocusWright, Quoted in Forbes 03/28/08). The good news is that price isn't the only driver the bad news is that our customers don't believe hotel marketers anymore - they don't trust our pictures or our adjectives. They believe each other!

At the annual Travel Com Conference, produced by the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA), it became apparent that the economy is having a significant impact - critical for forecasting this summer's upcoming busy season. At the conference it became clear that 'The poison pill in the online travel environment is the slumping economy. If you're not concerned that \$4-a-gallon gas will affect your customers' travel intentions, then focus on the fact that incomes are barely keeping up with inflation. Uncertainty in the economy puts stress on the travel industry - the cracks are already being felt as boomers expect to spend less on travel this coming year, and 62% of survey participants feel the economy will worsen in the next year.' (GroupTravelBlogComments, April 11, 2008)

The hotel's online presence is it's 'story'. This is the story that presents to the potential online customer and they are all online in every market segment to one degree or another! The hotel's online presence is not 'one size fits all' -- the 'story' must appeal to multiple niches or customers with specific interests in a way that appeals to them. Hold the adjectives, rolls out authentic images and post testimonials from satisfied guests!

In a slowing or recessionary economy, it is imperative that hotel marketers and sales professionals 'get it' - the consumer is under stress to spend their dollars as wisely as possible and this includes travel. I recently gave a keynote on this subject at the Newmarket/Delphi Annual Users conference in Las Vegas. The keynote was followed by a Drill Down session focusing on implementation strategies that flow from this seismic shift (sorry, I can't think of another adjective to describe how profound it is). A few of the strategies that came out of this session are shared below:

Engineer the Hotel's Online Presence. Don't just monitor it - take proactive steps to make it appealing to as many customer types as possible. Change it often and incorporate pictures of people enjoying various amenities of the hotel - this speaks to the 'experience'. Ask the web master to insert a piece of code on the site so that the hotel can make changes to parts of the web site and not have to wait for them. If there is any part of the hotel that is not worthy to be seen in a picture or video on Trip Advisor or YouTube - fix it now!

Create your own review site and/or blog. Draw the customer to you with a blog about the hotel -- not a blatant advertisement or a rant about your dog! Write blog posts that give customers information about events in the area or things going on at the hotel. For example, a client has discovered that fishermen are attracted to the property in the off season. They are fishing for a certain kind of fish, in this case steelheads (?). On the blog, are posts about other fisherman's success, conditions on the river, etc.. This stimulates that market with information that 'attracts' them to the hotel. Create a review site where customers can speak directly about their experiences at the property -- good, bad or indifferent. Respond to those reviews as you would to those on Trip Advisor.

Converting Online RFPs into Revenue. This is Web 2.0 in action - exposing the hotel to new customers and markets. Don't just wait for RFPs to arrive in the Inbox, be present on those platforms that deliver those RFPs. Make sure that the hotel profile is constantly updated and consider ads on the RFP platform's web site so that you are at the top of a planners mind when they select hotels to include in their RFP requests. Respond within hours - even if you are declining the RFP.

The 'shift' in Social Groups to Online Sourcing. Social groups represent a huge opportunity - and despite the economy, 'affinity' groups will still travel although they will become more and more value conscious. Make it easy for them to find and book the hotel - if the franchise doesn't provide an interface for these groups to locate and book a hotel, provide an easy way for them to locate the hotel and initiate a booking inquiry especially for them on the hotel web site. Provide a community page that the group can use to communicate to other members of the group with a link so that reservations can be made directly with the hotel.

The Changing Nature of Relationships. Recall the Lending Tree commercial where the customer goes into the bank and the bank manager, obviously glad to see the long term customer, asks if he is there about his mortgage. The customer replies that he is using Lending Tree so that a number of banks can compete for his business. The manager is dismayed and states '... but we have been your bank for years!' The customer responds that this bank is in the running to compete for his business and that he is 'pulling' for them. Web 2.0 in action! Do not count on a relationship with a planner to assume that you will get their next meeting - they are under increasing pressure to assure their stakeholders that they have bid the business and are getting the best value. Just think how much money you will save on site inspections and taking them to lunch!

Think for moment about how your buying process has changed - the research that you do and the product reviews that you look at before ever making contact with the retailer. How do individual retailers reach out to you online - what are the factors that 'tip' your decisions? Apply those same principals to the hotel's sales and marketing strategies.

Don't cringe - have fun! Web 2.0 opens up numerous possibilities for creativity in the hotel sales and marketing process! Sign up for I Hate Cold Calls hotel sales seminar in LA May 16. [Click here for details](#). Watch for the book Hotel Sales and Revenue Management 2.0 coming this summer!

Carol Verret and Associates is offering a series of public hotel sales seminars nationwide this year in response to growing demand from the hotel community. For more information on where they are to be held or how your hotel or management company can sponsor one, email Carol at carol@carolverret.com or call (303) 618-4065.

Carol Verret And Associates Consulting and Training offers training services and consulting in the areas of sales, revenue management and customer service primarily but not exclusively to the hospitality industry. To find out more about the company click on www.carolverret.com. To contact Carol send her an email at carol@carolverret.com or she can be reached by cell phone (303) 618-4065. Visit www.hotelsalesblog.com.

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