



nasuti + hinkle

creative thinking

The Hospitality Marketing Spider™

Hospitality Marketing has changed. And it keeps changing. Fast. Especially as new electronic marketing tools, techniques and approaches hit the street.

Probably no other market category is quicker to adopt these new tools than the hospitality industry. “E-mail blasts” actually seems to be a dated concept as user-produced content, social networking sites, text messaging and a plethora of other electronic marketing gadgets are employed.

But one thing remains. The purpose of the exercise should be to drive traffic to your web site. Third-party reservations are an important source of business, but certainly the most profitable, containable and track-able business comes through your own web site.

“You have to be media agnostic and not simply devote all of your marketing dollars to one execution or another.”

That means a major focus of your advertising, marketing and public relations should be developed to drive web traffic. It does not mean that simply putting up a site with an online reservations module and counting on paid or organic searches to bring customers your way is enough.

Think of your marketing effort as a Spider. At the very center is the body, your web site. Everything else (the “legs”) are there in support. These are your marketing tools, your e-mail, direct mail, collateral, print advertising, banner ads, SEO, public relations, trade shows plus anything and everything else.

In our Marketing Spider model, the legs are not necessarily of equal length or value from property to property, just as the various marketing tools are not employed with equal vigor. But they can’t function effectively independent of one another, either. It has to be a concert, not a collection of soloists.

We’d suggest that you consider your strengths and your sales goals to determine which of the various marketing tools need to carry the most water and which are subordinate or not even used. But just as a spider can’t get around on just two legs (or a wagon wheel get the job done with just three spokes) multiple tools ought to be employed for the most effective and cost-efficient marketing program.

The Reality of your Competitive Set

For example, if you’re an independent luxury property or a small group of luxury hotels, you’re not just competing with the Ritz-Carlton, Intercontinental or Four Seasons in your market. You’re competing with any or all of those entire



nasuti + hinkle

creative thinking

chains and their national advertising and marketing budgets of several million dollars each. Their target markets know a lot about those brands and what they represent before they turn on a computer and head for a web site.

“You’re competing with advertising and marketing budgets of several million dollars each.”

Add to that, the fact that branded web searches result in far more reservations (as opposed to web hits) than non-branded searches and the need for brand awareness becomes clearer. If your target knows something about your brand and what you have to offer, your chances of getting a visit from someone with cash in his or her hand are better. According to a 2007 study conducted by Travelocity, branded keyword searches resulted in higher conversion rates than non-branded terms. Only in 2% of paid-search conversions did the searcher originally click on a non-branded term and then search a branded term. And only 4% of hotel bookings (not hits) on Travelocity can be credited to non-branded searches. Any sort of primitive math tells you that 96%, therefore, came from branded search terms.

To us, that’s evidence that however strong your web site is, however hard that SEO works and however much you invest in Google keywords, you’ll get a lot more qualified customers to your site – and your business – if they have some familiarity with your brand before they start to monkey around on the web.

It’s All About the Mix

The name of the game – it seems to us – is to use a strong integrated approach to drive prospective customers to search “Brand Name Luxury Hotel” rather than just “Hotels, Maryland”, or to Google “Our Vacation Resort” rather than simply “Golf Resorts, Arizona”. To paraphrase a classic McGraw-Hill ad, sales start before the customer fires up the Google search engine.

So maybe you ought to include some “traditional” advertising in your Spider mix. Traditional advertising is almost a dirty word in some hospitality marketing circles, but people still do read magazines, watch television, listen to the radio and thumb through the newspaper. If they know something about your property and your brand personality before they even start to look on the web, you’re way ahead of the game.

Besides, how many web surfers are shopping primarily for price?

Good question. And if price is what you’re selling, your best bet could well be the Internet, with paid searches, organic searches and online advertising. Hit them with a price message while they are out there thinking about price. And bring them to your web site pre-disposed to think of your property in a favorable price light.

What about repeat guests and site visitors who have signed up to hear from you? With tools such as e-mail, direct mail and newsletters, you can research and tailor offers and packages for them,



nasuti + hinkle

creative thinking

as opposed to finding customers for existing offers and packages. These are your people. They want you to contact them.

And if you have seasonality to your business, let's say you're a South Florida resort in August or a ski lodge in May, you can make a real argument for all sorts of outreach to target potential visitors with special offers and promotions and push for impulse buys during value periods. Print, radio, television, the web, direct mail and e-mail can all play a role.

There are any number of examples that present themselves once you start thinking about customizing those Spider Legs and their relative power to suit a particular situation. It's unlikely that the mix at one property will be precisely like that at another. Even within a chain or group of hotels or resorts. And at the same time, you should be able to tinker with and tweak the mix to respond to changing market conditions during the year.

The point is, to use a popular term in the creative thinking business, you have to be media agnostic and not simply devote all of your marketing dollars to one execution or another. In all probability the most cost-efficient approach is going to be a fluid mix. Just keep in mind that the goal is to drive traffic to your web site.

Which brings up a whole other topic.

It's Not What You Have, It's What You Do With it

Look at your web site. Is it informative and compelling? Memorable? Does it really tell the story of your property and create desire? If it's luxury and an exclusive atmosphere you offer, does that come through? If you sell on price, is it clear that your price meets or beats all comers with great value? Is it visual, like the web, or is it copy-heavy to enhance SEO? Is it easy to navigate with enough bells and whistles to keep your target engaged and not looking at other property sites?

In short, is your web site a good salesman? Because if your marketing outreach is designed to push traffic to your web site, it damn well better be.

So consider the Hospitality Marketing Spider. All the legs work together and some of them are longer or stronger than others. Don't do everything with equal vigor. Don't even do everything. But don't just put all your eggs in one or two baskets either. Match the tools to the challenge, and put together a collection of tools to drive qualified, interested prospects to your web site. And when they get there, make sure it's worth the trip.

And then see just how effective and cost-efficient your marketing program can be.

©2008 Nasuti+Hinkle Creative Thinking
Bethesda, Maryland