

Turning Media Coverage into Dollars Good PR makes good 'cents' for hotels

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The actual connection between a hotel's media exposure and revenue is not especially well understood. Sure, the industry has metrics for it - ROI chief among them - but for most hoteliers, the process by which media coverage generates hard dollars is mystifying. There's a disconnect between the actions performed by a public relations firm and room sales or restaurant covers; unlike marketing or advertising, which have the explicit goal of driving sales, public relations can sometimes seem like a roundabout way of achieving the end aim of increased business.



And yet it's not alchemy. Those hotels with efficient, robust public relations approaches consistently outperform their competitors that don't.

There are exceptions, of course, and no amount of PR can spin a substandard product. But the correlation remains—and yet so does the uncertain perception about public relations' role in revenue generation. In today's operating environment especially, hotels and hoteliers should be embracing the relationship between media coverage and sales, as it can be a very profitable one.

There's a simple trick to understanding this relationship: substitute the words 'visibility' and 'awareness' for the term 'public relations'. Visibility and awareness are, after all, the fundamental goal of any public relations strategy (with the important qualifier being positive awareness). The correlation between having a hotel be visible to potential consumers and increased sales is much more straightforward, as is the relationship between consumer awareness of a given property and bookings.

In the lodging industry, defined primarily by crowded and competitive geographical marketplaces, visibility can represent a considerable advantage. A hotel that creates more awareness among consumers than its competitors will enjoy more bookings and a higher relative occupancy rate. Though this can be accomplished through marketing and advertising, public relations is the most cost-effective - and often the most effective - way to increase consumer awareness of a property. It logically follows, then, that effective public relations can directly influence room sales.

One of the most important components of a solid public relations strategy is media coverage. Having a hotel featured in the media boosts consumer awareness to a degree unattainable by direct consumer outreach, like marketing and advertising. Moreover, media coverage of a hotel can help define the hotel's image and brand, not just disseminate it. A hotel featured in the media instantly becomes a desirable destination - assuming the coverage is positive, of course. Media coverage, in this respect, is like an invitation: Every feature article in a magazine, every TV news or lifestyle segment, is an unspoken "come and see what everyone's talking about". This can be very effective in terms of increasing sales, including ancillary (non-room) sales.



Hotels can achieve positive media coverage in a variety of ways. As always, everything starts with a great product, though a hotel need not be a W Hotel to enjoy media mentions. The key is finding an aspect of the property or the hotel's operations that is newsworthy, or that appeals to a broad audience. Once a focus is determined, then a story can be told about it.

Hotels are full of good stories, but telling them in a way that will invite media coverage is the real trick. A good story is compelling, conveys a strong message, and builds a property's brand in the telling. And it is more than simply issuing a press release and hoping it sticks somewhere. Most importantly for generating media coverage, a good story is one a wide audience can relate to. The story can be aimed at the society page or the business section, a profile of the general manager or owner or an architectural review of the facilities. A good public relations firm can help a hotel identify the right stories, and tell them in the right way.

Crafting the right story isn't the end of the process for a hotel, though. To get good media coverage, that story must be presented to the appropriate outlets. Is a local newspaper the right target for a given hotel? Or is it a national publication, with the goal of attracting out-of-town guests? Or perhaps a story about the finances and operations of the property, which would be of interest to trade publications? This determination should be made early on in the story development process, to give it direction. When the media targets are set, then the visibility process becomes about getting the story in front of the people who need to see it.

If executed correctly, this PR process (which has been simplified for the purposes of this article - whole textbooks have been written about hotel PR) will deliver increased consumer awareness of a property, which will deliver increased bookings and ultimately, revenues. As the industry continues the process of economic recovery, and as individual hotels continue to try and carve out profitable niches in competitive markets, public relations and media coverage are playing ever-larger roles in sales generation.

Understanding that relationship is the key for hoteliers to unlock the floodgates of revenue. So what are you waiting for?

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