

A New Year for New Ideas

Innovations in hotel marketing will define 2010

By Jennifer Rodrigues, TravelInk'd

Now that the new year is upon us, I find my thoughts turning to all things new: new beginnings, new circumstances and environments, new strategies, new techniques. From a travel and tourism marketing perspective, I've been thinking about new trends and new challenges, and that's led my thoughts toward innovations in the field - both existing and yet to come.

Because truly, in spite (and perhaps due to) the great struggles of 2009, this is an extraordinary time for hotel marketers. The needs of the industry have changed radically in the past 18 months, and so the marketing demands have likewise evolved. The tools at a marketer's disposal have increased in both quantity and efficacy, and have brought about a reconsideration of what marketing can be, and can do. It is a time of unprecedented integration, of interconnectedness not just between lodging enterprises and their customers but between marketing tactics and sales efforts, between operations and visibility.

Yes, it's an exciting time to be a hotel marketer. And as with other dynamic times, the difference between success and stagnation hinges on innovation. If innovation in marketing really is the key to a profitable hotel business in 2010, then there can be little doubt that the next 12 months will see even more unique developments in the field.

But before we can move forward and innovate for success in the new year, we need to examine how the hospitality marketing industry has changed in the year that just ended.

The Landscape

Hotels underwent a significant shift in priorities in 2009, dictated largely by changes in the competitive environment. The operational focus migrated away from maximizing rates by offering luxury amenities and other enticements, and instead centered on keeping occupancy at survival levels through attractive rates. By retreating, essentially, to the basic core of lodging operations, the hotel industry created an environment ripe for marketing innovation. Those properties whose sole marketing strategy seemed to be discounting rates fared about average (or worse), while those that sought out low-cost, highly effective marketing techniques actually gained market share - no small feat in a demand-depressed, supply-heavy environment.

Forward-thinking hotels and resorts favored public relations over advertising in 2009, social media over traditional media and technology-driven direct marketing over costly broadcast advertising.

Expect more innovations to arise from similar operating conditions in 2010. Demand - particularly among business travelers - is unlikely to bounce back in an overwhelming way, so innovations in direct-to-consumer marketing will be the hallmark of successful hotel marketing this year. Hotels will find new and clever ways to reach leisure customer segments defined by activity (like golfers and shoppers), and newer and more clever ways to gather feedback and institute reactive changes in marketing strategy.

Social Media

So much has been written and discussed about social media in 2009 that it can hardly be considered an innovation at this point. Yet consider the fact that this is still very much an emerging area of marketing, and that many marketers (particularly in the travel and tourism sector) are still figuring out how best to leverage this increasingly powerful communications tool, and you'll agree that this area is likely to be a hotbed of marketing innovation in 2010.



This was certainly true in 2009, as travel and tourism companies embraced Twitter to establish a direct, actionable line of dialogue between themselves and their constituent consumers. Other social networking sites also encouraged innovative marketing strategies last year, allowing hotels and resorts to engage with their guests and present the best, most interactive aspects of their marketing and operations to the general public through well-crafted profiles and active updating.

New social media strategies will be plentiful in 2010, as more and more hospitality companies use social media to meet their unique marketing and sales needs. The expansion of participation by marketers in the social media sphere will ensure that more successful ideas get aired, and in such a burgeoning (and limitless) space, the culture of innovation that will be shaped by this participation virtually guarantees a game-changing innovation or two in the next 12 months.

Technology & Integration

With a dynamic technological landscape redefining what it means to market a lodging property to consumers, the integration of this technology with existing sales channels will be of primary concern to innovation-minded hoteliers this year. The potential is there, even if it has gone largely unexplored, for social networking sites to become direct sales channels in their own right, though hotels are certain to focus on ways to link their marketing efforts in the social media space (and hopefully in the mobile space as well) with their other online sales channels. This is so glaring a need on the part of the individual properties that an innovation in this area will resonate throughout the industry.

A New Year, a New World of Potential

There is no doubt that this is a turbulent and challenging time for the lodging industry - just ask anyone in the biz how their year finished up. But there is an increasing amount of hope for 2010, and as economic conditions improve, the potential for groundbreaking innovations in the marketing field also improve. The myriad of tools now available to marketers provides fertile ground for new ideas, and the pressing need for heads in beds (and, as demand creeps back up to pre-2009 levels, for strong RevPAR and high ADRs) ensures that any innovative strategy will get its chance for implementation.

This means that our challenging, turbulent time is also an exciting, dynamic time. A time for new ideas. As a marketer, that's as exciting as it gets.

Happy New Year! May 2010 bring with it much success for you and hopefully many marketing innovations as well!

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