

HOTELS AND PR: FIVE TIPS TO GET MORE VISIBILITY FOR YOUR HOTEL

By Jennifer Rodrigues, TravelInk'd

For many hotels -- too many in my opinion -- public relations gets relegated to the backburner or is treated as an afterthought. Hotels have a sales department; they have marketing team (which is supposed to support sales); and for more ambitious hotels, a social media program. So why bring in PR?

First, some background. I think that some of the stigma of hotels and PR is derived from a misunderstanding of what public relations actually is, and some of it stems from the blurring line between PR and marketing. Hoteliers often maintain the natural, if inaccurate, assumption that PR and marketing are effectively the same. The ultimate goal, after all, is to increase revenue for the property, and both PR and marketing are tools to achieve that end. But hoteliers tend to view marketing efforts as direct and measurable, and PR initiatives as soft and nebulous. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth.

To be sure, PR is not advertising. And PR does not guarantee exposure, like advertising does.

So again - why use PR? Credibility, for starters.

Unlike advertising, where a hotel can tout its perfect scores on customer service or 95% occupancy rates year over year – messages which consumers these days take with a proverbial grain of salt because they know that in advertising, the hotel's messaging isn't censored – PR generates stories written by trusted, third parties. Consumers are more likely to trust a journalist's integrity because they must remain unbiased. Think about it this way: you could spend \$6,765 for an ad in the New York Times or you could use PR to generate a FREE article in the New York Times that consumers are much more likely to read, believe and act upon. *How's that for ROI??*

Done properly, public relations is, at its core, a highly effective tool for generating awareness and visibility for an individual property, hotel chain or brand. It can deliver a message of credibility that no advertising program comes close to. Public relations is so much more than the distribution of press releases: it's about telling a story- a compelling story- that will generate *genuine* interest and enter into the consciousness of potential guests. It's about gaining recognition and mitigating negative attention. It's about defining who and what a hotel is, and delivering that message to the public.

And when compared with advertising, PR can be a lot less expensive. Whether you choose to do PR in-house or hire a specialist agency, the cost of PR can be much lower than a traditional ad campaign.

So how do you get started? What do you need to know when implementing a PR campaign?

Building a solid public relations strategy isn't as daunting as you might think. Unlike marketing or advertising, PR is not as resource-intensive; there are no media buys or direct mail blitzes associated with it. But effective PR requires the ability to tell great stories - that come from the best aspects of a hotel's operations - as well as creative and strategic thinking from people who understand the hotel market and who also understand media's needs.

So being the helpful PR and visibility specialist that I am, I have put together five important PR rules for hotels. Follow these and an email from an editor at the New York Times might just be the next one coming into your Blackberry (or iPhone). Let's get started...



Be Newsworthy and Think Big (Beyond your Property, that is)

This is a tough one for hoteliers to understand and follow, especially for those that have been relying only on advertising up to this point. Understandably, to you, your property is the center of the hotel universe. And it should be! But to the media and the rest of the world, while it may be important, it is not the only hotel of importance.

As I said earlier, PR is about storytelling and storytelling is only effective when people are listening. Before sending out your next press release or before picking up the phone and calling a journalist, ask yourself this – *is this really newsworthy to everyone? If I was a consumer, would I truly care about this news?* Be objective. If the answer is no, then it's a safe bet that journalists won't care either.

Let's look at the following example. Unless you are Hyatt or Hilton, lowering your rates by 10% (though it may be a big deal to the front office), isn't going to pique the interest of the Wall Street Journal, or from the average consumer. That rate reduction may be of interest to someone contemplating a stay at your property, but that's a marketing function, not PR.

So here's how to turn that bit of news into a news story that the media will pick up on. Think BIG. If you are lowering your rates, and the hotel down the street is lowering their rates and so is the hotel by the airport, then you have a news story. This is a trend and media love to write about trends. Consumers also love to read about trends. When pitching this story, tell the journalist about not only your rate cuts, but also the rate cuts of your competitors to illustrate that it's a trend that's actually worth covering.

That is not to say that only trend stories work. You can pitch a story that is specific only to your property but remember, *it must be newsworthy*. Here are a few examples of the types of stories that media like to hear about;

- Your kitchen staff volunteers one day a month at the local homeless shelter
- Your property's upcoming 25th anniversary.
- Your occupancy rate over the last 6 months compared to other properties in your compset (if you're doing better than your competitors' in today's economy, spread that message far and wide to trade publications!!).

Whatever your story, though, do keep in mind that although you are selling your property, PR should never sound like a sales pitch. Never.

The takeaway? Be aware of the difference between what is newsworthy to the general public and what is important to management. Emphasize the former and you are well on your way.

Emphasize your best assets

A big part of PR is putting your best foot forward – emphasizing the good, and downplaying the bad. Every property has something that distinguishes itself from its competitors- in every story that you tell to the media, highlight this difference and the importance to the consumer. If yours is a historic hotel, make that known. If your hotel is preferred among business travelers, write op-eds and expert commentaries on attracting and retaining business guests. If you run a brand new boutique in an up-and-coming area, talk about being first to market and the revitalization of the neighborhood.



Know your audience

Who do you want (and need) to know about your property? Most likely, your first answer will be consumers and business travelers; the guests you want in your hotel. And while that is definitely a vital target audience and one that you must pursue, there are others too which should not be ignored.

It's very important also to raise awareness of your property among industry experts. This means reaching out to industry publications like YoungHotelier. By being included in industry publications, you position yourself as an expert within your own industry and develop more credibility for your property and brand. Build a buzz within the industry and it could carry over into the general public.

Business media is another audience that shouldn't be ignored. People who read stories about hotels' financial health or day-to-day operations tend to travel (hello, business travel!), and creating awareness among this audience can pay immediate dividends.

Stories that appear in the local nightly news or in the New York Times can be few and far between, but trade and business stories can recur often and in multiple outlets. Widen your net and you'll catch more fish.

No Comment is No Answer at All

We've all seen interviews with "no comment". This is no way to conduct an interview or get a positive message across – even when faced with a difficult or sticky question. While "no comment" may seem like an easy or neutral way to get out of answering a question, to any journalist this is almost an admission of guilt. Try this phrase instead:

"I'm not at liberty to talk about this issue right now. Are there any other questions I can answer for you?"

Or provide a simple answer and always go back to your key message. Let's look at this (very extreme) example to give you a better idea of what I mean.

Question: *"Was an employee at your hotel arrested today?"*

Answer: *"The best source for that information is law enforcement, but what I can confirm is that the operations of this hotel have not been and will not be disrupted in any way."*

In this way, you have reinforced the strength of your property, while deflecting the question and potential risk.

Understand PR and manage your expectations

PR has its value in a marketing plan, but it shouldn't be the only piece. As I mentioned, PR is not advertising. Though its results can be clear and measurable, it is not direct sales outreach to potential clients. Metrics like ROI and incremental cost can be applied to PR, but rarely will there be a moment-to-moment correlation between PR initiatives and sales.

When launching a PR campaign, hoteliers need to be realistic as to what results and expectations they have. No PR campaign can guarantee front-page coverage on the Wall Street Journal every month: that is simply not realistic in most instances. Instead, look for the longer-term impact and value of PR on your hotel, including how your hotel is perceived locally, nationally and internationally, and how levels of awareness of your property change in different markets.



Get Inked!

Great public relations and increased visibility is absolutely achievable for every hotel! But whether you work with an in-house team, or outsource, there must be buy-in from management and the appropriate levels of engagement to make PR successful for your hotel.

To be sure, PR is labor-intensive – it's not an automated process as say, sending out a blast email to a customer database. There is a lot of writing, a lot of strategizing, a lot of communicating and a lot of relationship-building with hundreds of media outlets. But these *outputs* can result in great *outcomes* if you put in the time and effort, which can continue to grow and expand over time. And in time, media will be calling you for comment, instead of you calling to pitch stories.

So what are you waiting for?

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