

Hotel Marketing and Public Relations Myth Busters

By Jennifer Rodrigues, TravelInk'd

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A confession: I engage in plenty of guilty pleasures. Among the cheaper ones (that is, discounting my yearning for Miu Mius and beachside mojitos) is an irrational affinity for the Discovery Channel's Mythbusters. I suppose the show's a bit more high-concept than The Office, but it certainly doesn't count as sophisticated culture, so whenever I forego BBC or CNN for sixty minutes with Adam and Jamie- which is every Wednesday- I feel a bit guilty... but still wholly entertained.

What I enjoy about Mythbusters is the basic premise: there are accepted truths out there that are really just baloney, and with the right team and the right set of deductive resources you can sort out the valid or plausible assumptions from the false ones.

The show asserts, despite its warnings not to "try this at home", the universality of mythbusting; just about every facet of life needs a little bit of it. This is true for the hotel industry, and particularly apt for marketing and public relations in the biz. There are so many myths about how best to market a lodging property or a hotel brand, many of which arise from outdated, holdover practices and simple misconceptions about the nature of marketing in the information age. In fact, some of the myths I've encountered are so ensconced in conventional wisdom they probably appear in a marketing textbook or two.

This, however, doesn't make them any less busted. So without further ado, here are a few of the most egregious hospitality-related marketing myths I've encountered masquerading as unquestioned truth:

Myth #1: The more that you contact a potential customer, the more likely they will be to remember your brand and purchase your product (or stay at your hotel).

This myth has three distinct sources: a faulty assumption, an incorrect interpretation of a homespun adage, and the strange metrics of hotel marketing. First, the assumption that the quantity of consumer contact correlates to a higher propensity to buy is incorrect; if this were the case, every spammer would be in the Fortune 500. It's the quality of contact that leads (or doesn't) to an eventual sale.

In an industry as competitive and consumer-experience-centric as the hospitality industry, the age-old cliché of 'there's no such thing as bad publicity' -meaning that every consumer impression whether positive, negative or neutral has the ability to advance brand awareness, which ultimately results in sales - doesn't necessarily hold true.

Third, despite advances in this area, hotel marketing metrics still place too much emphasis on the amount of consumer interaction and not the quality of consumer interaction. That is, it is easy to track the number of emails, calls and follow-ups made to a particular guest, and less easy to determine how those touches are interpreted, making the measurable success the process of outreach, and not the results it delivers.

Myth #2: All that matters is a compelling image; no one reads marketing copy anyway.

This myth also has roots in an old saying: a picture is worth a thousand words. And this is true, for the most part: images are impactful, and when executed well, can convey more meaning in less time than a verbal description. But in this digital age, consumers are wary of idealized pictures and perfected photographs; in the Photoshop world, these are too easily manipulated. More to the point, it is too much to assert that the only thing that matters in the effectiveness or quality of marketing materials is the image. The copy itself must be engaging, informative and persuasive- otherwise, the image goes nowhere. Many a 'pretty picture' has been ruined by 'weak words'.

Myth #3: Advertising is always more effective than public relations, particularly for hotels.



Advertising, as a tactic, does some things very well: it is a direct approach, it vitalizes the call to action, and it sells. But advertising is not always the best strategy for building a brand, or improving or increasing brand perception. And it is rarely the most cost effective solution- yet it is often the first impulse for hotel owners and managers in an effort to increase sales.

On the other hand, for many hotels, public relations is either an afterthought or a luxury, and either way not a central aspect of the hotel's operational strategy. This is not to say that there is some sweeping, industry-wide antagonism toward PR; in fact, I believe the opposite is true. If more hoteliers understood the benefits an effective, comprehensive public relations strategy could confer on their properties, PR would shed its stigma as an expendable line item in the sales and marketing budget and emerge as a key aspect of a hotel's operations.

Some of this stigma derives from a misunderstanding of what public relations actually is, and some of it stems from a blurring of the 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 could be further from the truth.

Public relations is, at its core, about generating awareness and visibility for an individual property, hotel chain or brand. It's about telling a story- a compelling story- that will generate 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 this will serve a brand or property far longer than a standalone advertising or marketing effort.

Clearly, at three myths this isn't intended to be an exhaustive list. But these are some of the most pervasive, most entrenched myths I've come across. It is important for hotel owners and managers to periodically reconsider those concepts they 'know' to be true because they too may actually be myths ripe to be busted.

Now, if you'll excuse me, the Discovery Channel beckons.

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