

## **Think Horizontally : on-line marketing strategies:**

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Hotel Web sites have traditionally been built in a vertical format. The site starts with a Home page, followed by Accommodations, Dining, Meeting Rooms, Golf, Spa and other individual pages with navigation buttons guiding the consumer through the myriad of services offered. This approach is much like the sales brochure design that uses different lengths of paper for each capability so that when you stack all the sheets together you can read each headline. These 'first generation' sites were built and marketed for the early consumers who were looking on-line for hotels.

Today's on-line marketing environment is becoming increasingly more sophisticated, and consequently, savvy hotel marketers are viewing their Web marketing a bit differently.

A bricks and mortar hotel is comprised of various business units, such as Guest rooms, Food & Beverage, Meetings & Banquets, Spa, Golf Course, Casino and other facilities. Most of these business units have their own management, logos, positioning in the local marketplace and departmental P&L statements.

Why don't these business units have their own individual presences on the Internet?

Let's look at hotel Web sites from the market's perspective. A potential bride is looking for 'weddings' in a certain destination. If she looked in the local Yellow Pages under "Weddings" she would probably find a listing for the hotel's function space. Would she find the same listing in a Google search? Probably not.

Second generation on-line hotel marketers are beginning to try to think - and market - the way their customers approach their searches for the services hotels supply. These hoteliers establish Web presences for each functional business unit - a strategy known as "horizontal marketing" - where the hotel presents its various offerings and creates websites and search strategies based on the business unit, not on the hotel.

Say, for example, a famous hotel in South Florida has spent millions on building a new state-of-the-art spa for both its guests and visitors in the area. A simple search on Yahoo for "Spa South Florida" or even "Spa XXX destination" does not reveal this multi-million dollar investment to the on-line consumer.

Horizontal marketing applied to this example would ensure that the search engines were optimized to serve up the new Spa to anyone searching for such a place and location. A customer staying in a hotel in South Florida, searching for a deluxe spa in the area may change her reservation once she realizes there is a facility that accommodates all of her needs. The beauty of such horizontal marketing is not only that it increases exposure for each business, but more importantly, allows the hotel to build e-mail databases specific to the business unit by asking for customer opt-in data within each specific niche. Databases of on-line customers interested in spas, golf or restaurants are far more valuable to the hotel e-marketer than the traditional 'Contact Us' e-mail format of vertically constructed first generation sites.

So, how do we execute the horizontal on-line marketing strategy?

1. Identify the business units within the hotel that can be supported by additional business from the internet:
  - Weddings
  - Meetings
  - Spa
  - Golf
  - Restaurants
  - Casino
  
2. Purchase the domain names to support the marketing effort. For example, the hotel site may be [www.anyhotel.com](http://www.anyhotel.com). So, you'd want to purchase the following domain names:

[www.anyhotelweddings.com](http://www.anyhotelweddings.com)

[www.anyhotelmeetings.com](http://www.anyhotelmeetings.com)

www.anyhotelspa.com  
www.anyhotelgolf.com  
www.anyhotelrestaurants.com  
www.anyhotelcasino.com

(Note that these sites include the hotel name, not the name of the business unit.)

3. Construct "micro-sites" dedicated to the content, pictures and features of each business unit. These micro-sites should be:
  - One to five pages in length
  - Linked to home hotel Web site
  - Include an opt-in e-mail acquisition form on their individual home pages
4. Market the Site: there are many hotels vying for top placement for searches like "Hotel South Florida." But only a handful of hotel marketers has embraced the horizontal marketing strategy for their sites.
5. Perform Search Engine Optimization (SEO) for each micro-site: each micro-site should be optimized with the meta-tags that reflect the business unit. Key word descriptions, home page text, alt-tags and other SEO programming will be different than the main hotel site. Organic searches for "Spa South Florida" are easier to obtain than 'Hotels South Florida.'
6. Purchase key words on search engines to ensure strong placement: you may not realize that the Web sites "Google" and "Yahoo" serve ads in order of both popularity and sponsorship. The ad banners at the top and right side of the "Results" page appear because the advertiser has purchased the keyword(s) the consumer requested in the search. The "pay per click" cost of the business units key words is a fraction of their hotel counterparts.
7. Link the site to business unit related sites: for example, the Spa business unit can be linked to local, special interest or other sites offering spas in South Florida, which strengthens the organic search options of the micro-site. Search engines give a higher ranking to sites that are linked to similar businesses than 'stand-alone' sites.
8. Use traditional media to bring consumers to your site.
  - Make sure your wedding brochure has "www.anyhotelwedding.com" as a call to action.
  - The answering machine at the Spa should have the message, "If you need more information, please see our new website at www.anyhotelspa.com."
  - Any advertisement for the meetings market should bring the consumer to www.anyhotelmeetings.com to give them the information they need quickly.
9. Use the e-mail addresses gathered from these sites.
  - The Spa site has generated 1,000 e-mail addresses in 2 months. What should you do? Convert lookers to bookers! The cost of delivery to this database is negligible. Create a Spa e-newsletter to get these customers to your facility.
  - Have a last minute cancellation of a group? Go to the 1,500 emails gathered from www.anyhotelsmeeting.com and let them know you have a 'hot date' to be filled.

Speed to market, and e-mail campaigning can be executed in 48 hours. The cost of delivery is next to nothing. Every e-mail is trackable; you can measure the results of every campaign.

Horizontal marketing also gives you the option of intensifying activity, or testing a promotional approach in a discrete arena, rather than across your whole Web site. It also allows you to support each business unit with other marketing tools on a targeted basis.

Second generation Web sites must be about more about functionality and intuitive customer functionality than "Flash" technology. Second generation on-line marketing programs must also morph into tools that better match

the intuitive approach consumers bring to their on-line searches.

Clearly, horizontal on-line marketing provides the multiplier effect that allows a hotel to bring customers - and revenues - into the business from a variety of on-line marketing sources, where vertical on-line marketing provides one channel, horizontal on-line marketing gives you many. What better way to expand your hotel's reach into the Internet environment?

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