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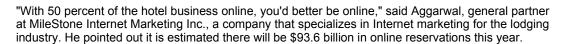
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Internet marketing can revitalize floundering hotels

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CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Judging by the crowd that flocked to him after he finished giving an educational seminar on Internet marketing for hotels, Anil Aggarwal's advice struck pretty close to the heart. And what Aggarwal had to say was pretty simple — Internet marketing is the best way for hotels to reach customers and turn their businesses into cash cows.

"With 50 percent of the hotel business online, you'd better be online," said Aggarwal, general partner at MileStone Internet Marketing Inc., a company that specializes in Internet marketing for the lodging industry. He pointed out it is estimated there will be $93.6 billion in online reservations this year.

Aggarwal

Aggarwal spoke during a seminar titled, "Hotels to HTMLs: Latest Trends in Internet Marketing for Lodging — Web 2.0," at AAHOA's 2007 annual convention and trade show held in Charlotte. Aggarwal spoke on day three of the event, which ran from March 7 to March 10 at the Charlotte Convention Center. Over 3,000 people attended AAHOA's convention.

With 76 percent of visitors finding hotel Web sites through search engines, Aggarwal said the most important factor for successful Internet marketing is to position a site so a search engine will find it consistently and rank it high.

"If you are not there you will not bring that business home," Aggarwal said.

There are two ways to do this: through organic searching when a site is listed due to content fit and link popularity and through paid position on sites such as Google, Yahoo and MSN.

For search success, the content above all else is king.

"The content on your site is absolutely critical," said Aggarwal. "You are just trying to generate genuine content, genuine information that the search engine is looking for."

No matter what, Aggarwal said not to rule out paying for position on search engines. Having a good description of a hotel for pay-per-click options will insure the money is well spent.

"Corporations around the world are paying — you should too," he said. "Make sure pay-per-click is part of your strategy."

Search engine success also ties into the other main way to differentiate a hotel Web site from all the others on the Web — zeroing in on local specifics that can attract guests to a hotel.

Aggarwal said it is absolutely critical to find the key local attractions that people will be looking for and tie them into a hotel Web site. For example, if a hotel is in a region where a lot of people come for weddings the Web site should focus on that and have a whole Web page dedicated to weddings and wedding packages that search engines will pick up and rank high on a results page. The more different options the better, according to Aggarwal.

"Each and every page of your site should be focused on one thing," he said. "Make each page marketable and marketable for a different reason.

"It is a pretty scientific approach to marketing," he added. "If you have 25 pages on your Web site, you have 25 virtual sales people selling on your Web site."

Besides just helping search engine rankings, Aggarwal said finding specific local tie-ins can totally shape the business of a hotel. He gave the example of one struggling hotel that Milestone worked with that was able to turn its business around when it constructed its whole Web site around a focus on hiking, which was a big local attraction. By catering to hikers the hotel created a niche for itself and singled itself out on the Web. According to Aggarwal, 90 percent of the hotel's guests are now hikers, and the town has even changed a hiking bus route to accommodate a stop at the hotel.

He believes this is the perfect example of consumers finding exactly what they are looking for through the Internet and make that the first option — a trend he only sees increasing. "In the next five years, you are going to see on the Internet only what you want to see," he said.

Another critical factor to Internet marketing success is making sure that once visitors come to a hotel's Web site, they do not leave without making a reservation. "When I get a consumer on my site I don't want them to go anywhere but reservations," Aggarwal said.

To ensure this, Web site's must have the booking and reservation engine prominently displayed on every page.

Once a hotel Web site is up and running, then e-mail marketing to guests that have visited the site or hotel is a great strategy to generate repeat customers. Aggarwal explained that you can gather the e-mails needed through the site by asking visitors to input address to receive e-mail offers. Guests can also sign up to receive e-mail offers when the stay at a hotel.

"This e-mail address is like gold and the reason for that is it is a legitimate e-mail address," he said.

"If you are doing a good job people will say yes to e-mail offers," he added. "If they are going to stay at that hotel again why wouldn't they want to hear about specials?"

Hotels must also maximize distribution channels such as Expedia, Orbitz and Travelocity. "It is expensive, but it is necessary. If you don't do it you are going to miss out," Aggarwal said.

Because the Internet is based on constantly changing and improving technology, Internet marketing also continues to evolve, according to Aggarwal, and new advances such as blogs, podcasts and social networking sites must be incorporated into marketing strategies.

Overall, though, Aggarwal pointed out that one of the best things about Internet marketing strategies for the hotel industry is that they are applicable to all.

"Whether it is small hotels or big hotels this works across the board. The strategies are the same," he said.