

THE DISTANCE BETWEEN A HOTEL'S KEYWORDS AND BOOKINGS:

How to close the deal after Search Engine Optimization

By Paolo Boni

There's no question that sophisticated SEO strategies are paying off for hotels, delivering healthy increases in prospective customers. Yet, once the keywords have done their job, the battle for bookings is facing a serious challenge. According to online travel consumers, many hotel marketers simply aren't giving them the tools they need to make an informed booking decision once they've made it to a travel website – be it the hotel's own branded site or an online travel agency or other third-party site.

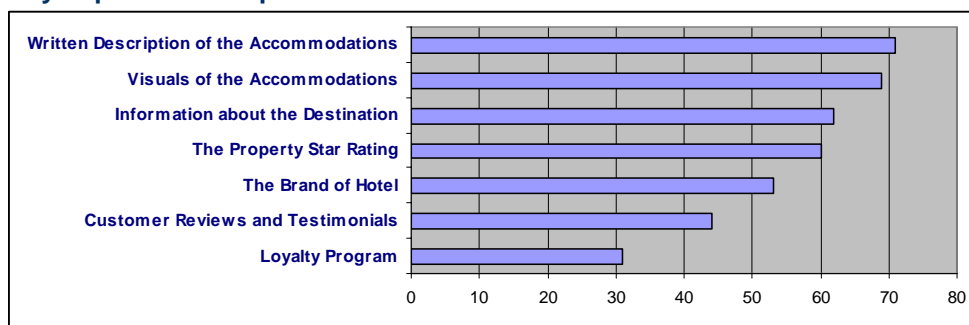
A recent survey conducted by Harris Interactive on behalf of VFM Interactive of nearly 3,000 online U.S. adults suggests a missing piece is visuals, including still images, videos and 360° virtual tours. The survey reveals there's a significant gap between consumer expectations and actual visual content found online – a finding that should raise a red flag to hotel marketers responsible for converting visitors on their sites as well as across all electronic channels.

The Crucial Period Between Search Engine & Booking

A key to understanding this is the crucial shopping period that begins after the keyword results are returned and the consumer begins comparing options, or what we've begun to refer to as the BSEB (Between Search Engine and Booking) period. We know that the typical travel consumer visits multiple websites, shopping and comparing the available options. This is where it becomes vital to understand the factors that impact consumer decision-making BSEB. For hoteliers, it can mean the difference between a cursory once-over and a booking.

The Harris/VFM survey suggests a cautionary tale in this regard. When travelers who research and/or book hotels online were asked to rate the factors that influence their choice of hotel apart from price and location, respondents rated

Factors affecting hotel selection online: Percentage of respondents rating factors, other than price and location, as very important or important



Source: Harris Interactive survey commissioned by VFM Interactive

visuals as one of the most important¹ in selecting one hotel over another, second only to a written description of the hotel.

In fact, visuals were rated notably higher than a host of other factors, including the brand of the hotel, the star rating, and customer reviews. Interestingly enough, loyalty programs were rated lowest – particularly significant given the very expensive nature of these programs. Also of interest, frequent online travel shoppers are more likely than the general population to give visuals the highest rating.

Low Satisfaction with Visuals

With visuals rated so highly by consumers, how then is the industry doing in satisfying customer needs and expectations in this area? According to the survey, it appears there's lots of room for improvement. The majority of online hotel researchers and bookers (59%) report low satisfaction² with the quantity of visuals found online today. This covers a range of visuals, including photos, virtual tours and videos.

And while satisfaction among quality of photos was higher than quantity, almost half of online travel consumers (45%) are not satisfied with quality of hotel visuals. It appears we're simply not giving consumers adequate visual information to say "choose me."

Opportunity to Improve Visuals Across Distribution Channels

Third-party sites in particular came up short, with more than two-thirds of those who shop only third-party sites reporting low satisfaction with the quantity of visuals found there. Certainly online travel agency sites should stand up and take notice. Yet there's an equally strong message here for hoteliers.

This is because many consumers are using third-party sites BSEB to compare properties and make their shortlist -- before booking directly with the supplier. Data gathered by the research firm PhoCusWright earlier this year estimated that four out of 10 online consumers are doing exactly that: shopping at third parties, then buying direct. As a result, online travel agencies and other third parties have become significant influencers of direct channel bookings.

Many hotel marketers are now starting to see this shop-here/buy-there pattern as the silver lining in their relationships with online distributors, meriting serious attention as an acquisition vehicle. Clearly, a hotel's BSEB marketing strategy should assess how effectively a brand or property is represented through its distribution channels, with particular attention paid to the factors that consumers rate most highly: visuals and written descriptions.

¹ "Important" refers to a net of the top two responses on a 4-point scale (Very Important, Important, Somewhat Important, Not at all Important).

² "Low satisfaction refers to a net of the bottom two responses on a 4-point scale (Very Satisfied, Satisfied, Somewhat Satisfied, Not at all Satisfied).

Consumers Ready for More Rich Media

As to the kind of visuals found online today, photographs naturally dominate. However significant broadband penetration is rapidly changing consumers' visual expectations. Rich media advertising is growing 20 percent annually, according to eMarketer, illustrating not only growing consumer acceptance of rich media, but also the increased value advertisers across many industries are experiencing. And this trend is carrying into travel as three in five online travelers (59%) say 360° tours would be useful to select a hotel, while nearly half (48%) believe a short video would do the same.

Two things seem certain as the industry heads into the new year: First, consumers will continue to utilize search engines and are unlikely to give up the convenience of comparing a large number of properties side by side in third-party settings BSEB. Second, visuals will only grow in importance with an increasing emphasis on rich media. Perhaps the third should be that hotel marketers include a thorough distribution channel evaluation and BSEB strategy - with a close look on improving their visual content scorecard across all channels. It might mean the difference between an SEO strategy that simply delivers prospects and one that delivers bookings.

Paolo Boni is President and CEO of Toronto-based VFM Interactive, www.vfmii.com, which provides content production, management, and distribution services to more than 10,000 hotel properties. A complimentary copy of the Harris Interactive survey summary can be obtained through http://www.vfmii.com/vfm_harris_study.html

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