

YOUR WEB SITE VERSUS ONLINE TRAVEL AGENCIES

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You may recall the recent *USA Today* article comparing hotel Web site prices with online travel agency (OTA) prices. In two of the five hotels sampled, you could buy rooms cheaper through Expedia, Orbitz or Travelocity than you could directly from the hotel.

Wake up hotels! Pay attention to your online prices. If you're trying to develop a robust online strategy, you can't post your highest price on your own Web site in today's economy. People are cost conscious and spend more time doing research to find the best value. In today's economic environment, a comprehensive Internet marketing plan is your survival tool, and pricing is one of the key ingredients to securing bookings.

Worried about the downturn, many of your competitors are dramatically slashing budgets. This presents a great opportunity to increase your market share and conversions and decrease your reliance on OTAs. By taking steps to differentiate your property from your competitors and understand your target audiences, you can position yourself to seize this opportunity and maximize your ROI. It's important to start with the basics and have pages and content that appeal to your target. Taking advantage of natural search marketing is key.

When strategizing and building your online marketing plan, goals always come first. Your ultimate goal of driving revenue in today's recessionary times takes creativity and focus. We recommend you start with a strong search engine optimization (SEO) program for your Web site. Although the upfront costs may seem



a little high, SEO provides the highest return on investment and ongoing benefits such as elevated traffic. For those facing budgetary constraints, there are a number of affordable SEO initiatives and techniques that can effectively drive online reservations. For instance, according to recent research, consumers are searching for new words such as "hotel promotion codes," up 120% on Google this year. Focusing on these new words and phrases allows your site to be uniquely optimized for searches.

Sample of rising searches in 2009

- 1) "hotel promotion codes" .. +120%
- 2) "hotels for cheap" +110%
- 3) "cheap orlando hotels" +80%
- 4) "vegas hotel codes" +80%
- 5) "cheap hotels nyc" +70%

Once strong SEO is implemented, make your site stand out with professional design and photos. If guests' first impressions are that your property is a first class operation, you will see improved conversions. You'll also realize improved guest retention and

online revenue from your most profitable sales channel, your direct independent Web site.

Having the right content is also vital. Writing in an easy to read and enticing format is one thing, but writing with certain Google standards so that they can index your site is another thing. It gives you the best opportunity to show up near or on the first page, where you're most likely to convert shoppers into guests.

Many hoteliers ask the question, where do I start and how do I know how much to invest online? These questions are based on your property's business goals and objectives. But let's say you're generating 15-20% of your revenues online. Then you should strongly consider investing 15-20% of your marketing budget online. And if you're trying to capture more than your fair share, maybe some additional budget is necessary. One thing is for sure, if utilized properly, the Internet is your property's most profitable revenue channel. ■

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