

Technology

Online reputation skills require versatility

05 SEPTEMBER 2013 7:46 AM

With online reviews an integral part of the hotel industry's landscape, here's a look at how some experts see the "dos" and "don'ts" of managing a property's reputation during the Internet age.



By **Jeff Higley**

jhigley@hotelnewsnow.com

@jeffhigley1

MEMPHIS, Tennessee—A proper approach to online reputation management takes the skills of a multi-tasker combined with tact, proactivity and at times a thick skin.

During the "Managing your reputation" session at last month's Southern Lodging Summit at Memphis, panelists agreed it's essential for hotel operators to candidly assess reputation management and consider it as a way to increase revenues.

A primary driver in the reputation-management equation is for a hotelier to know the availability of staff and resources to properly manage the process.

"There's nothing worse that can damage your reputations than when you get into social spaces and you can't manage it," said Travis Flee, director of online marketing for Hilton Garden Inn at Hilton Worldwide. "Don't try to be the cool hotel or brand that tries to get into every single platform."

Read more: [21 hotel reputation management tips >>](#)

Once it's determined a hotel staff has the resources to play in the reputation management/social media sand box, it's a good idea to determine the best platforms to monitor.

"You want to be where your guests are," said Jamie Pagel, senior VP at Circos Brand Karma.

Pagel said general managers can get some of the most valuable feedback by being in the lobby or the breakfast room talking to guests. Social media is no different.

Know the demographics

It's important to understand the demographics of your guests and where they are practicing their social media. For example, the much sought-after millennial age group tends to like Instagram, Tumblr and Vine instead of the traditional platforms, panelists said.

Pagel said many millennials and younger users will float between platforms, while older reviewers tend to find a comfortable platform and stick with it.

"For some hotels, especially hotels that are visually beautiful and have great photography, we will try to skew a little bit more toward visual platforms, so that would be [Pinterest](#) or [Instagram](#)—places that really show off that aspect of it," said Allyson Cataldo, social media coordinator for Hostmark Hospitality Group. "But one thing that we noticed ... our followers across the board, even on sites like Pinterest, tend to be a little older than people would think. People are rushing to get and attract millennials, but it's important to not ignore the audience that's in front of you right now."

Flee cautioned to not skew your social media approach to match the demographics of your employees. Stay focused on the guests, regardless of how engaged employees might be in their own social media circles.

Revenue booster

Being on the right platforms can lead to more reservations, said Wendy Norris, corporate director of revenue & ecommerce for Valencia Group.

"We look at sources of revenue—that's our biggest piece," she said. "Where do you want to get new business from, and what are the current trends?"

Norris said having a solid reputation-management platform can mean revenue opportunities—notably for independent properties. That's why TripAdvisor reviews are posted directly on the website booking engines of Valencia's luxury hotels.

"It has really helped our revenues," Norris said. "What's happened is that people aren't going to TripAdvisor to book now or Expedia to book now. They are seeing the transparency as far as reviews are concerned, and we've seen an increase of about 15% to 20% revenue increase on our website booking engine brought about because of that strategy change."

It takes a calculated approach to improve revenue streams, according to Pagel.

"Find out where your money is coming from right now—what channels people are using to book reservations and make sure your reputation on those channels is good," he said.

Be prepared for complaints

The reputation-management process often requires GMs to have a thick skin because of what is perceived as numerous complaints about the condition and performance of the property. Cataldo said GMs need to relax when their property gets a negative review and make sure to learn from the comments.

"I try to caution our general managers when they're really worried about a review that gets posted and they're panicking a little bit," she said. "People have been using reviews to plan their trips for a while now; this isn't a new thing, so they're used to seeing negative reviews for almost every hotel. In some cases I kind of think it looks a little suspicious that when you go to a hotel, and it's been around for a while, and it's got dozens and dozens of 5-star reviews and not a single negative comment."

The process requires humility and some patience, too.

Cataldo said responding to those negative comments tells the guest that you know there are problems that come up and you are working to fix those problems.

Flee said a key component in responding to a negative review is to encourage them to come back to the property to see the changes.

Engage your guests

Another part of the reputation-management process is to actively engage guests and encourage them to be vocal about your property. Flee said it's important to encourage guests to post reviews because the age, quality and quantity of reviews can affect a hotel's rankings on sites such as TripAdvisor.

"Everybody thinks of review sites as people who go on there to only post bad reviews about the hotel, but that's not true," Flee said. "A lot of people also don't even look at those bad reviews. They kind of look past that and look at the averages of what people have been saying."

Cataldo said reviews on Facebook are also important because of the reach they have within influential circles of friends.

A hotelier's approach to responding to negative reviews is often as important as the onsite experience of guests. That applies to all stages of the process, including the language and tone used in the response.

"You should have a social interaction with folks, and you don't want to have corporate speak," Pagel said. "They can sniff that out everywhere. I wouldn't advise you go to the 'LOL' or 'U R' level and respond to them that way. You should still be professional."

"You don't want to make yourself sound like the trendy hotel or the trendy brand," Flee said. "While you have guests in those spaces, you still need to be professional about how you go about them. Obviously you can have some fun when you're communicating with them, but by and large we try not to get into the 'LOLs' or smiley faces."

Pagel said hoteliers must remember any posted response will remain in perpetuity.

"Remember, your response is never going away," Flee said. "Whereas you might mishandle a service recovery opportunity at your front desk and once it's done it's gone and you never have to bring it up again. This is different. It's going to be there. So be very thoughtful about what you put up there."

Norris said hoteliers shouldn't have a rigid template for responses.

“They should personalize the experience that the guest is coming from,” Norris said.

The other panelists agreed.

“You should stay away from any kind of canned or template response, but you can use a certain framework,” Pagel said. “First thing, apologize. Second thing, write something about what they said so they know it’s genuine and you read what they said, and then get them offline and resolve the situation.”

Prioritizing and categorizing

It’s conceivable that a hotel staff might have too many reviews to respond to, so prioritizing them in an order of importance is essential.

“We encourage our hotels to respond to as many reviews as they possibly can,” Cataldo said. “They should be responding to all the negative reviews and a good chunk of the positive ones.”

When review responses need to be prioritized, the longer or more detailed reviews should be at the top of the list, Cataldo said.

“You can see on TripAdvisor how much influence they have, and if they have a lot of influence then you have to pay close attention to those discussions,” Norris said.

The panelists agreed hoteliers shouldn’t offer free things in a public forum regardless how strong a complaint.

“We never respond to a guest saying, ‘Well, sure, we’ll give you an upgraded room,’” Cataldo said.

“Absolutely, 100%—no compensation provided online,” Pagel said. “But a promise to make it right is important.”

The time it takes to successfully cyber-manage a hotel’s reputation varies by property type and location. But regardless of the property, the workload can present challenges.

“Our properties manage the online reputation themselves—we think it’s very important to keep it on the property,” Norris said, adding typically the GM or the assistant GM spearheads reputation management.

Cataldo said Hostmark handles it for some of its properties, while other hotel operators in the portfolio manage it at the property level. Some of the bigger hotel operators outsource some of the responsibilities.