Hotels Must Be Proactive About Improving Online Reviews

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Whitney Gibson and Jordan Cohen, attorneys in the Vorys Cincinnati office and members of the internet defamation group, authored an article for *Hospitality Law360* titled "Hotels Must Be Proactive About Improving Online Reviews." In the article the authors highlight the impact that disparaging reviews can have on a hotel's reputation and the steps that hotels can take to build a positive reputation online. The full text of the article is included below.

Hotels Must Be Proactive About Improving Online Reviews

Like other businesses, hotels can suffer from a sampling bias when it comes to online reviews: review pages may not be representative of actual customer bases and a disparaging review can carry significant weight.

A recent study published in the August 2013 edition of the Cornell Hospitality Quarterly (CQ), however, revealed that as hotels receive more reviews, the reviews balance out and the initial negative effect will be mitigated.

In various articles we have written and presentations given, we have discussed a three-step approach to improving online reviews. The first step involves launching and maintaining a program to eliminate this sampling bias by obtaining legitimate positive reviews.

Some hotel companies have already begun to think like this, and we recommend that more do so.

Surveys and Research Shows Online Reviews are Influential

When it comes to online reviews and the travel industry, TripAdvisor is the undisputed king. The website, which allows consumers to research, plan and book vacations, is home to more than 150 million reviews and boasts north of 2 billion unique visitors annually, per a February news release.

According to the recently released results of TripAdvisor's annual TripBarometer survey, 89 percent of the 50,637 travelers surveyed indicated reviews are influential in their booking decisions. That number is even higher — 95 percent — among U.S. survey respondents. Meanwhile, 96 percent of the global and 97 percent of U.S. hoteliers surveyed felt the same way about "generating bookings."

Recently, hotel companies began to see the significance of online reviews. For instance, Starwood Hotels & Resorts integrates guest reviews on its website, a program it debuted in late 2011, according to Travel and Leisure. Each review is written by verified guests, and members of management at the respective hotels appear to personally read and respond to each review, good and bad. Other companies have since implemented similar guest review programs.

According to a recent study from SAS and the Pennsylvania State University, positive reviews are the most important factor for consumer hotel decisions. According to their research, travelers do look at ratings and TripAdvisor rankings, but actual reviews contribute most to their hotel selections. Thus, if reviews are overwhelmingly negative, the typical consumer will not consider the hotel, even if it offers a favorable price.

Higher Quantity of Reviews Can Lead to a Higher "Quality" Online Reputation

The authors of the study in *CQ* — published by the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration — analyzed nearly 17,000 hotels in 249 tourist areas. Their research showed initial reviews "tend to be disproportionately negative," but an increase in reviews leads to a better balance of positive and negative comments.

We regularly advise business owners and corporate counsel to have a strategic plan in place to encourage consumers to review their positive experiences online to overcome the sampling bias. With the unique relationship between a hotel and its guests, this should not be difficult to implement. For instance, it is easy to email guests after their stay or provide them a survey (or survey link) when they check out at the front desk or online.

In a unscientific look at several hotels in different cities, we noticed most hotels had higher ratings on TripAdvisor — which typically has significantly more reviews — than other review forums such as Google or Yelp. For example, one Cincinnati hotel had a 3.0 rating (out of five stars) based on 22 Google reviews, 3.5 based on 35 Yelp reviews, 3.7 based on 433 reviews through Starwood, 4.0 based on 618 reviews on TripAdvisor and 4.3 based on 616 reviews on Expedia.

Increasing Online Review Numbers is Just a Start

Beyond increasing the number of legitimate reviews, it is essential to implement a program to monitor what is being said about your hotel(s). There is inexpensive software that makes monitoring social media channels and review sites easy to do, and which will detect online reputation attacks early.

Finally, having the right team of experts to help respond to attacks is crucial. In the event of an Internet crisis — such as a false and defamatory review — hotels cannot use the same tool to try to fix every problem, as each situation is fact-dependent. The best strategies will be a product of the combined knowledge of various experts, such as attorneys, cyber investigators and online reputation management/ PR practitioners.

It is always important to be proactive. Companies such as Starwood are doing it right, having already implemented a program to increase reviews and presumably monitor their online presence. Any hotel that is not taking steps to improve its online reviews and protect its online reputation should do so immediately.

Even hotels with hundreds of reviews and an above-average rating are still susceptible to false online reviews. But the damage can be lessened with the right program in place. Plus, with the clear importance to most travelers of reading reviews prior to booking hotels, arguably greater than in most industries, improving and monitoring online reviews is absolutely necessary for hotels.