

# PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR YOUR HOTEL PROPERTY



Hotel executives sometimes think very traditionally when it comes to marketing their property. Often this means considering marketing and public relations as an expense rather than as a return on investment.

Thinking of marketing and public relations as an expense usually means spending the budget on only ad placement. Marketing tactics that include as well as public relations, direct mail, Web site(s), social media and media placement, have a budget that's allocated in a targeted and effective manner.

Hotel public relations involves a lot more than just creating and distributing press releases. Activities can include special events planning, targeted outreach for focused editorial coverage, organization of press familiarization trips, newsletters, community relations as well as philanthropy.

Even though public relations is less expensive than other marketing tactics and it produces more beneficial results, public relations budgets have taken a big hit over the last few years. Unfortunately it's considered an afterthought, when it should be a key marketing tactic.

So what's the point of public relations for a hotel property? Public relations is the most cost-effective method for promoting a travel product, such as a hotel, by establishing third-party credibility. It gets the property's name in front of publications, industry trades and the public. Properties that utilize public relations in the form of stories with press releases, articles, and columns gain access to numerous newsrooms, editors, and reporters locally, nationally, perhaps even internationally. This access provides increased credibility.

**So how does a property utilize public relations?**

Consider what images, perceptions and messages your property's audiences have. Are these accurate? Are these the perceptions you want the public to have? Is this something that needs to be modified?

Decide which marketing, sales and public relations strategies will work together to support each other's messages. An opportunity might be to pair a direct mail piece to a targeted audience that will support editorial coverage in a publication read by this group. Public relations efforts can also be supported by web and e-mail marketing.

Once the public relations objective has been determined, you need to allocate a budget to make public relations work for you. Don't expect a lot when only a little is given. Too often executives feel the organization will get a ton of great press on a small budget. The company may not need to spend as much on public relations as it would on advertising or direct mail, but there should be a budget set aside for public relations activities such as press release distribution, photography, special events, clipping services and media tours. Just remember, you get what you pay for.

With smaller marketing budgets, but continued expectations of increased revenue, it is more important than ever for hotels to implement consistent public relations campaigns integrated into other marketing and e-commerce programs with measured results.

**So how do you go about doing this?**

First things first. Start by creating a public relations calendar for the year. Pinpoint possible campaign themes. This could be new amenities, holiday events, local festivals and events.

Next gather editorial calendars for the most relevant publications read by your customers. Identify special sections that would be a good fit for your property. You'll want to send targeted media pitches for these issues.

Your internal staff or public relations firm should be keeping an updated database of all editors and reporters that cover your market or industry. Also, keep in contact with your convention and visitors bureau to learn about new opportunities or potential partnerships to promote your property.

Meeting planners and frequent travelers are looking for value as well as a quality experience. Use the public relations tips outlined above to take the lead in your industry and go beyond traditional marketing efforts to communicate more creatively and effectively with your customers and prospects.

Another important aspect to incorporate in any hotel marketing campaign is Search Engine Optimization (SEO). SEO is the process of improving the volume and quality of traffic to a Web site from search engines via unpaid search results. Typically placement at or near the top of the rankings increases the number of searchers who will visit a site. In order to attract quality traffic to a Web site, an organization must constantly monitor the search terms used to reach the organization's Web site, which provides a picture of who the customers are and how better to reach them.

Today, SEO is the most important component of a hotel property's Internet marketing strategy. The power of the web is driving customers to your Web site via interesting articles or posts about your property which also improves its ranking in Internet search engines used by travelers and travel planners.

Statistics show that more and more travel is booked online. With most property's relying on search engines to bring visitors to a hotel's Web site, the business will lag behind its competitors unless its site is optimized for search engine results.

An experienced public relations firm will work with an organization in finding what kind of visitors its Web site needs and then utilize search terms that will bring in those visits, causing the business to gain a higher ranking in key searches.

Another important marketing tool for hotels is social media. With the popularity of social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook, public relations and marketing communications have taken on an entirely new level of importance in recent years. The effects of YouTube, LinkedIn and blogs, and the application of mobile messaging, electronic message distribution and many other 2.0 methods, have public relations and marketing firms now integrating successful online communications strategies into traditional public relations and marketing campaigns with the potential for driving even more revenue-producing results.

Taking all of this into account, it is important for hotel operators to understand the importance of public relations. A hotel property's messages need to be consistent and clearly created and tailored to specific audiences. Communication methods must be geared to the audiences' preferred way of consuming information. In today's struggling economy, hotel properties need to focus on public relations. A well-crafted public relations plan will influence business results more effectively and cost efficient than traditional advertising. Public relations also allows hotel properties to speak directly to its customer on a personal level and that motivates them to take action.

To increase the effectiveness your public relations efforts, here are several tips to keep in mind:

Know how reporters like to receive press releases and story ideas. Including a link to photos on your Web site will increase the chances your release gets picked-up.

Invest in good photography to increase the chances your property gets covered. Editors appreciate excellent photos that complement

your press releases and pitches. This is especially important in this down economy, as publications' art budgets are being slashed.

Make sure your Web site has an updated news section. This section should include press releases, background information and articles about your property. It should also include available photography that can be downloaded by the media for use in stories.

When you issue a press release about a special package or amenity, be sure to feature the release prominently on your Web site. This will help with your property's search engine ranking.

Contact relevant editors and reporter and offer to be a news source for industry stories. They

all need reliable sources and will appreciate you help.

Expert advice columns on topics you're familiar with such as successful meeting planning and travel management tips can be offered to targeted publications. This will help you develop relationships with key editors and establish you as a leader in your industry.

Extend your positioning statement through every message or communication from your organization.

Integrate Web 2.0 into your traditional public relations planning.

Regularly distribute press releases. In today's 24/7 news cycle, press releases are everywhere

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on the Internet with your property's name and information and are often used a primary research tools by journalists to write stories.

To save time and increase your awareness of the reach of your message, invest in and use technology. Subscription-based services give organizations access to database and news retrieval systems that allow members to view the penetration of their message. This knowledge can help an organization refine its marketing goals and strategies.

Always measure the results of your public relations efforts. Organizations must make

sure that its public relations department or agency is sending updated analysis of results. This can be in form of a listing of articles with copies and the circulation of audience impressions and approximate advertising value.

Keep in mind that your public relations efforts demands a professional with the experience, writing skills, public speaking skills and media relationships that you can capitalize on. This should not be left to a sales assistant or the general manager's assistant to simply handle. An organization needs the expertise of a polished, refined and intelligent pro-

fessional who's dedicated to the practice. It takes experience and know-how for the time, organization, creativity, skill, and media contacts required for successful public relations efforts.

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