

Hotels: Does Twitter Marketing Work?

It has been five years since the birth of Twitter and although other industries have been early adopters of the social networking site, the hotel industry (apart from a few early hotelier adopters) still largely debates the usefulness of such a site and whether return on investment can actually be measured. And this focus on ROI is a major shift in the tweeting business world.



That is, the fact that participating in a social experiment of a trendy community is no longer the case. Twitter has an audience of over 200 million users and, as a tool, it has long matured and it is about time that tweeting for business and the associated costs are measured appropriately like any other marketing or PR activity.

I will own up and say that, as a hotelier, I was as much a skeptic as the next person with a limited marketing and PR budget. Although I could easily see the uses of Facebook or YouTube, Twitter eluded my business imagination. So a while back I decided to join the twitter community for research purposes - so my views represented in this article are based on both my own participant observation as well as evidence from successfully tweeting hotels.

Do I really need to use Twitter for my hotel PR?

This is a tough question to answer without knowing a hotel's specific profile, but I shall try to illustrate how Twitter is currently used by its users to spread news. Consider the very topical news about the Royal wedding.

If you recall the morning the media announced that Kate Middleton was to be staying at the Goring

Hotel the night before her wedding. That very morning I kept track of all the tweeting relating to the Goring Hotel. My findings suggest that:

In the first five hours tweets about the Goring Hotel were generated by 58 twitter users. Each user had a number of followers from as little as 18 to one media guru that had about 300,000 followers. From 11am to midday, the message was tweeted to a combined audience of 516,177 followers! Four hours later another 88 tweeters joined in bringing the potential audience to over 1 million in just nine hours.

Not a single one of the tweets that I monitored came from the Goring.

The conclusion is that the tweetosphere has a mind of its own and will react with or without you. This was great advertising for the Goring, but it was good news. What happens when bad news about your hotel is spread out in hours to a large audience? Again you can either proactively attempt to limit the damage or you could choos to let things fizzle down hoping for the best.

Who are some of the successful hotel tweeters and how do they do it?

In 2009 Ron Callari wrote an article taking screenshots of the top 10 brands that tweet above the rest and today we can take a chronological view to see what those brands have achieved almost three years later in terms of followers and quantity of content.

Hotel Brand	Followers 2009	Followers 2011	Following 2009	Following 2011	Updates 2009	Tweets 2011
Marriott	11915	103786	9495	13213	2162	4463
RitzCarlton	1052	9147	212	353	179	5478
Hyatt	3414	15471	3513	7590	189	4952
Jole de Vivre	3256	11589	3419	9188	182	1218
Omni Hotels	684	9968	684	2659	785	4316
Starwood Hotels	3776	25253	2985	15374	121	5587
Morgans Hotels	2615	9502	39	302	272	1368
Fairmont	4178	13755	1886	3743	1323	4608
Millennium	1188	4272	838	2018	103	895
Tiara	2146	5582	1637	2615	1030	37520

Looking at the data and comparing 2009 to 2011 there are some interesting qualitative and quantitative facts worth pointing out:

Ritz Carlton and Millenium hotels both started their Twitter accounts adding PR at the end of their user name, clearly showing the PR focus of their intentions. However RitzCarlton dropped the PR from their Twitter label, perhaps suggesting a more holistic approach to their tweets. RitzCarlton appear to tweet approximately 5 times a day whilst the Millenium tweets once every one to two days.

A very different approach and although RitzCarlton may have slightly more than double the followers to Millennium, when we compare the followers of Joie de Vivre who seems to tweet once a day to that of RitzCarlton we see a larger follower base for JDVhotels by 2,500 users. Similarly the Marriott brand with less tweets than the RitzCarlton manages to have an impressive 104,000 followers.

I think that the figures tell a story of their own but I will let the reader decide what that story may be. Note that in 2009 Twitter referred to posts as updates but today we talk about tweets a sign of how far Twitter penetrates social norms ... even language.

Why do followers follow?

Why do followers follow? ... in one word, "automation". From the 104,000 of followers that Marriot have I would argue that an estimated 10-15% would be users who have enabled software to automatically follow anyone that follows them.

So in theory, if you wanted to create a really large and meaningless following very fast you could hire someone to click like crazy for 24 hours and follow 10,000 users. Chances are you would find that you instantly have a 1000 to 2000 following just by doing that.

But what good would that do? Would these followers be interested in any of your messages? Probably not.

There have also been cases of Twitter vulnerability where hackers can force Twitter users to follow other accounts without the followers' consent - so I would be very careful if I was promised a huge following to my account really fast by some twitter guru.

Fine, I was half-kidding with the "automation" point in order to illustrate one of the weaknesses of twitter as a tool. The real reason true followers follow business related Tweets is "value" ... And this is where hotels can shine.

Your hotel can offer intangible value by engaging with its audience by offering extra value. You could search twitter for any tweets from customers that may say they are coming to stay in your hotel and offer a free upgrade as a thank you! Such acts cascade through other mediums and a happily surprised customer becomes momentarily a virtual ambassador.

Hotels may also offer time sensitive special offers as a means to offer tangible value to their followers, and test the strength of their follower base in conversion rates.

Will there ever be Twitter based reservation systems?

Yes, there have been efforts to develop such applications and I think this is where hospitality will really jump on the tweetwagon.

Restaurants seem to be slightly ahead of the game with efforts such as "Tweetservation". The site, although still at beta phase, allows for a sneak preview of what could happen and I am certain that the big online reservation providers are designing something as I type this article.



What do the experts say?

As I did not wish for this article to be totally biased by my views and approach, I contacted three experts and got their views about the use of Twitter in hotel marketing campaigns.

Petra Clayton of Custard Communications says that her company often gets enquiries from hoteliers who may want a Facebook page or a Twitter account but have no real strategy behind the request. She urges hoteliers to think about the key strategy first and then consider which tools to use and how. DK of MediaSnackers suggests that Twitter has democratized the opportunity to engage with your client base. Through simple conversational style tweeting can attract new customers, reach out to existing ones and also humanize the brand of larger firms. DK adds that twitter is not a broadcast medium for press releases but it's about connecting with your audience and engaging them in a dialogue (not a monologue). Paul West of Ignite Hospitality says that hoteliers are fast-realizing the added value social networking sites such as twitter can bring to their brand. However, he stresses that tweeting alone is not the answer. Hoteliers must have a strategy that runs across all platforms including email, Facebook and Twitter, to name a few.

Judging from the past and current client base of the three experts in hospitality, I would argue that either restaurants and contract caterers are slightly more interested in leveraging social media as part of their communications strategy or hotels feel they can justify a web 2.0 communications strategy within their own marketing teams, without utilizing the services of a specialist.

Do we have any examples of smaller hotels that may miss such opportunity?

I think we have a prime example of when Twitter could be used for a small medium hotel and the opportunity seems to be eluding it. Take for example, Damson Dene, the hotel that is featured at the Channel 4 docu-series "The Hotel". Apparently millions have tuned to watch the show and there has been plenty of interaction between Wayne, the general manager, and viewers on the Channel 4 forum. Yet their Twitter account only had 118 followers (as of 26th April 2011) and a mere 29 tweets.

Considering the millions of viewers reported for the first two episodes and the fact that the series

runs out after a mere 8 episodes, one would expect that Damson Dene would use this exposure to create a loyal following that would see the hotel full long after the series ended and viewers moved to the next interesting viewing.

Should I use Twitter for my hotel?

The key question that drove my curiosity for this article was to assert if hotels of all sizes and serving all kinds of markets should spend effort and money on using twitter.

Although I do not even dream I can answer that question based on the limited research I have so far conducted, I am convinced that at this stage hoteliers should not panic. Twitter is not for everyone. It is likely to pay of dividends for large hotel chains that wish to maintain a strong online brand, but not so much for the small family hotel business which has a limited marketing budget.

The truth is that if you decide you will be using Twitter as part of your communications strategy you need to consider doing a proper job or not doing one at all. Having said that, there are always exceptions to a rule and if you wish to maintain a loyal fan base for your hotel, Twitter could be one of the tools that will help you do so.

Exploring the uses of twitter by investing 10-15 minutes a day of your time would not harm your marketing budget and would give you enough experience and understanding of the medium so that when you decided you needed the help of a marketing expert you did so with a clear strategy in mind.

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