‘Cautious optimism’ has been the economic catchphrase for 2014 and no wonder. Despite the many successes of the hospitality industry, the promise of a quickly receding recession is often contradicted. For example, recent statistics from VisitEngland show a drop in the number of “business trips (-19%) and business expenditure (-24%)” in Great Britain when comparing March 2014 to March 2013, yet overseas visitors to the UK have reached a record high of 13.23 million during the first five months of 2014, according to figures from the Office of National Statistics’ latest International Passenger Survey.

Peaks and troughs in the number of enquiries and bookings have long been a common pattern among hotels across the world. Revenue and marketing managers being able to yield rates and distribute new marketing promotions to people on the move at the touch of a button means competition for conversion has never been fiercer.

What can hospitality businesses, particularly small or medium enterprises (SMEs), do to sell services in an increasingly competitive marketplace? How can operators track down local corporate business? Or develop a meeting room offering for local start-ups? And how can businesses appeal to the unpredictable leisure travel market?

Over the last five years it has been, and still is, a challenging economic environment for the industry and the need to stay close to the customer is greater than ever. In recessional times, businesses need to find new ways to operate and resonate with their audience and with new online and social routes to market, reaching the right customer, any time, needn’t be expensive.

Adopting a digital strategy should be part of every hotel’s marketing plan and this management guide will suggest ways in which hospitality managers can use social media tools to mine digital data and create valuable ‘curated’ - or targeted - content on which to base marketing activities.

**Conducting market research**

Setting out to gain more corporate business can be tough, but tracking down data on potential customers needn’t be. An hour or two spent negotiating the lobbies of office buildings located near your hospitality business with pen and paper (or a smartphone, if digitally inclined) can help build a list of leads. This type of field research, also called primary research, is still a viable method for locating customers. Other good sources for regional data include local chambers of commerce or the business section of public libraries, both of which can help determine who is doing business in the region - or looking to - and might require hospitality services.

The leads located during primary research then guide your online research. Does the potential customer’s corporate website have contact details for the local office? Who are the key staff involved in travel arrangements? Are there links to the business’s social media accounts? As this data is gathered, select a suitable method of storage. SMEs might prefer to create an Excel spreadsheet for easy data sorting and active web links. Larger organisations will already have a marketing database or customer relationship management (CRM) software in place – just make certain it has fields for social media links.

**A variety of tools**

An RSS (Really Simple Syndication) reader can help streamline news from corporate websites and extract keyword searches from global business news websites like the BBC, CNN, the FT and Reuters. Tailor the RSS feed to add searches related to the targeted companies as well as the local area. This helps create an evolving dynamic information source about the potential clients. In-house IT managers can easily set up a feed, but many people do it themselves. Popular
RSS readers include Feedly, NewsBlur, Digg Reader, Feedbin, AOL Reader and The Old Reader. Alternatively, after the demise of Google Reader in 2013, many news seekers have migrated to options other than RSS feeds, such as Twitter or apps like Mr Reader.

The use of social media applications like Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest and Facebook can help source similar sets of information. Maintain lists and links to feeds of official accounts of possible customers as well as their business-related news. Tools like Twitter’s hashtags, search box and mentions make monitoring these businesses even simpler.

Follow a city or regional business news publisher for your area or, failing this, a nationally focused publisher. This will allow you to learn about specialist project work and potential business clients that will be coming to the area and can also provide additional new leads.

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**Discovering customers**

The valuable data from the various social media resources combined with the primary research create a powerful tool for facilitating the start of new relationships or strengthening existing ones. Demonstrating this applied knowledge about a company, its operations, projects and goals is a key component in creating and presenting a solid business case to a company about why they should use your hospitality business's services. It also helps build rapport at early meetings. Knowing their business will help you do yours.

But is there anyone else doing business near you? Not every company is a big multinational sending business travellers around the globe. What about start-up companies or small bespoke businesses? Local SMEs may not need overnight stays, but meeting rooms and event space are often at a premium.

Many start-up companies use social media to market, advertise and distribute information about themselves because it’s a cost effective channel. The first step to capturing start-ups’ business is to find them. And this means having your own profile on the various platforms, like Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram for example. If your business doesn’t already have a presence on social media, it needs to do so in order to engage with both customers and potential business clients. These platforms disclose so much about the customer (and their preferences), allowing hospitality businesses to better market and tailor their product. Social media also creates an opportunity for customers to engage with your business in both a positive and a negative way, so monitoring and constant management of these channels is vital to ensure customers are both engaged and interactive with your business. Undertaking social media can be time consuming, but it - like email in the 1990s – has become embedded in how society and businesses communicate. Ignore social media at your peril!

According to a 2013 Barclays report, social media uptake “among travel businesses is over 80%, while it falls to just under 69% among hotel businesses” and in 2013, travel and leisure companies dedicated “43% of their marketing budgets and resources to social media”. Depending on business size, companies need only undertake a couple of social media platforms – not all – for a decent social media presence, then commit to managing a properly applied social media strategy incorporating the crucial customer service.

Localised social media accounts – ones that are local or regional – are prevalent throughout the social media world and function as a curation service by providing an ongoing stream of content and information around a specific area. Examples of localised Twitter accounts include @LondonMarriott or @VisitBath which promotes followers’ use of ‘#Bath’ to catch mentions. Finding the accounts in the different social media channels, discovering who they follow and then assimilating that information will help identify new customers.

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**Media supports the message**

Psychology and sociology play an important part in traditional marketing and the same is true for social media marketing. Hotels often struggle with a tone for their social channels – particularly those aimed at leisure travellers – and are caught between what is needed to support the business’s brand image versus the tone that is needed to engage with customers. The key to determining a balance is twofold and involves mirroring and content.

Mirroring is a behavioural trait that occurs in almost all social environments. When people are relaxed in a friendly environment they start to mirror one another’s speech patterns and movements as well as building a joint vocabulary. Mirroring can be used to craft the tone of a company’s account. What type of customers does your business have, or seek? Are they Millennials, families, environmentally-sensitive types, the booming Chinese market or perhaps business travellers? Are your customers seeking luxury, boutique or budget options? Understanding these facets of your prospective customers will help set the tone.

Once the tone is determined the curation of content can begin. Every second over 22,000 GB of internet
traffic comprising Tweets, Tumblr posts, Instagram photos and YouTube videos is posted or viewed. This enormous quantity of data has the potential to be shared and forms a basis for curating content. By seeking content that matches the aforementioned tone of the business’s account, a usable pool of social media posts can be gathered that shows trending information and updates. This content can then be accentuated by generating further content for your own business. For example, try ‘favouriting’ or ‘retweeting’ interesting content on Twitter or pinning your guests’ good quality photos on Pinterest.

Tying it together

Consider the mixture of tone and content for the following examples: a spa resort and a family hotel and resort.

Visitors to a spa resort will want to relax and refresh themselves. This should be reflected in the tone and content used on the social networking site. Consider posting serene nature photos, relaxation techniques, dietary tips and articles about well-being. These can be interspersed with photos and videos from the property and its facilities, perhaps with short quotes from spa staff – your experts – about what services are provided to help guests wind down and rejuvenate.

Alternatively, a family resort’s tone should mirror that of the typical family on holiday at the resort. That may mean bright images, exciting videos featuring activities for the children and some relaxation for the parents. As with the previous example, this can be offset with hotel generated content, perhaps something from the General Manager about how parents find the hotel provides a blend of family time with personal time, a talk from the head chef about menus including the popularity of the children’s menu, or a greeting from the top bartender discussing the guests’ favourite cocktail whilst mixing one. Use the information held by staff to help build an image – or tone – of the resort.

When curating content it should be of the best quality possible. While HD and 4K video may be out of reach for some, hi-res photos are eminently possible meaning there is no excuse for poor quality photos. If the budget allows photos taken by a professional, consider the following: create a brief by planning the key shots you want from the session; decide whether people should be included; is there a certain style to be used and how will it correlate with the business’s brand image? Then determine whether the images will be used in print, online or as part of any campaign. If a professional photographer is not within budget, consider contacting regional art colleges or photography clubs that may have interested novices who want to create a portfolio and would be willing to work for free in exchange for using your business as a reference. You may want to allow the photographer to retain good technical photos for a professional portfolio while your business retains the ones it prefers for marketing purposes. To ensure there are no problems with the ownership or copyright of your business’s commissioned photos, refer to the Intellectual Property Office’s information on ‘Commissioned Works’ – or to the relevant government body in your country, or obtain guidance from a qualified advisor.

Keeping content current and in the right tone will help keep people interested in your business even when they aren’t looking to use your services, but it will be there when they are ready to make a purchase.

Conclusion

Hospitality managers’ expectations about the mining of potential business on social media need to be realistic. In a recent Forbes article, Ted Rubin, Chief Social Marketing Officer of Collective Bias, urged small businesses to consider the return on investment (ROI) - in staff time and marketing budget - when using social media as well as focusing on ‘return on relationship’. Although some leads can be generated through social media sites and it is a place to ‘extend the business’s personality’ through the right tone and content, social media really shines when it is used for building loyalty, responding to customer service matters and building a community of long-term trusting customers.

Supranational Hotels

Supranational Hotels is one of the world’s largest GDS representation companies providing advanced distribution and reservation technologies to almost 800 hotels across the globe. Established in 1974, Supranational Hotels is a trusted provider of sales, marketing and distribution expertise to an international network of hoteliers and contributes to ongoing developments in the global distribution and internet booking technology industry. For further information, contact: Cho Wong, Managing Director, Supranational Hotels. Tel: +44 (0)20 7357 0770. Website: www.supranationalhotels.com. Follow Supranational on Twitter @Supranational.
Further resources

Barclays, 2013

British Chambers of Commerce
www.britishchambers.org.uk

Casserly, M. 2013

Fewell, K. 2013

.GOV.UK. 2014

Institute of Hospitality ebooks – eResources Collection
www.instituteofhospitality.org/info_services/eresources

- Small Business Marketing Kit for Dummies

- Hospitality Marketing : Principles and Practice

- Small Business Marketing Kit for Dummies

- Marketing Research Kit for Dummies

International Chamber of Commerce
www.iccwbo.org

Intellectual Property Office (UK)
www.ipo.gov.uk/types/copy/c-ownership/c-commissioned.htm

Popick, J. 2013

Tucker, S. 2011

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What kind of social media user are you? Hospitality: the magazine for hospitality management professionals, 32, 32-29.