



Independent Hoteliers: Twelve Inexpensive Ways to Promote your Website

| by Max Starkov

According to Forrester Research, online hotel sales are expected to grow to \$5.7 billion in 2004. Jupiter Communications forecasts that online travel bookings will top \$20 billion in 2001 and are expected to grow ten-fold over the next five years. Nowadays most independent hotels already have websites. And yet, less than 50% of hotels offer online reservations on their websites. But having a website and even offering online reservations is not sufficient. Somehow Internet browsers and potential bookers should discover your website amidst the millions other websites that are out there. In other words, you need people to visit your website and naturally, book rooms. You need to promote your website. You need to turn those lookers into bookers.

Promoting your website does not have to be an expensive undertaking. Here are twelve simple ways to make your website more visible, increase traffic and turn lookers into bookers.

1. **Meta names :** Ask your webmaster to include appropriate meta name keywords and descriptions in the coding of your website's Home page and main pages to enable the search engines index and display prominently your website. For example you can include "Excelsior Hotel, an affordable hotel in Midtown Manhattan in New York City" as the Meta-Name-Description of your site. You can review your website Meta names and description: while on your Home Page, click on View, then Source and locate "Meta Name-Keywords" and Meta Name-Description".
2. **Include all relevant keywords on the pages of your website:** How do you get your site to appear on top of the list in the search engines? There is no easy answer to that question because search engines use different technology to "comb" the Web (search bots, humans, etc). As a general rule, someone searching for "Hotel in New York close to Broadway" is more likely to get a page in your site if the keywords "Hotel", "New York", "Broadway" appear often on that page, especially if they appears in the title ("Romantic Hotel In New York right on Broadway"). But don't have the word "New York" or "Hotel" repeated 100 times. Most search engines filter out sites that try that. The best approach is to use relevant keywords frequently in your site, but not in a way that appears unnatural.
3. **Search Engine Submission Service:** Please subscribe to a domain name/URL submission service that will automatically submit your website's URL to all major search engines. For example, Microsoft's www.bcentral.com offers Traffic Builder, a suite of Home Page and Web page submission services that starts from \$179 per year. We recommend that you subscribe for submission of the URLs of your Home Page plus 4 main pages. One thing not to do, if you want traffic from search engines, is use software that generates your pages dynamically. Search engines don't index dynamically generated pages.
4. **List your website on Yahoo!** (www.yahoo.com). Yahoo! is the largest Search Directory on the Web and your site should be listed there. You can submit your site for free by going to Yahoo! Home Page, and clicking on the link at the bottom "How to Suggest a Site". You can also use the Yahoo! Business Express Program, whose one-time fees start from \$299.
5. **List your website on the other top 7 search engines:** Apart from Yahoo! there are only seven search engines that matter: AltaVista, Excite, MSN, WebCrawler, Infoseek, HotBot, and Lycos and more than 370 ISPs. To submit your URL for listing, you can use www.looksmart.com, a service that powers MSN, AltaVista, Excite, CNN, iWon, Juno and more than 370 ISPs. A basic URL submission is \$149. All other search engines and indices account for less than 10% of the Internet traffic. Don't expect your site to show up in search engines immediately. It will show up in AltaVista in a week or so, but most other search engines are slow to add new listings. Some will take several months.
6. **Sign up for keywords** You can subscribe to a prominent keyword search service like www.realnames.com for relevant keywords to enhance the "searchability" of your website. For example "LexingtonHotel", etc. An annual subscription per keyword is \$100. You can also sign up for specific keywords with www.goto.com, where you have the flexibility to establish a monthly budget you are comfortable spending. You can also register a keyword on www.AOL.com.
7. **Register additional domain names:** Register other domain names that are similar in name and message of your current URL address. For example if your site is www.lexingtonhotel.com, register www.lexington.com, www.hotellexington.com, which your Webmaster should link to the main URL address. For example, Network Solutions

(www.networksolutions.com), BCentral (www.bcentral.com) are services that will register your domain names at approximately \$35 per year plus handling fee.

8. **Create an Affiliate Program:** You can benefit greatly if your website is getting links from related sites. The best way to get other sites to link to you is to give them a certain bounty or percentage for every booking generated by that link, i.e. to establish an *Affiliate Program*. Industry leaders like Amazon.com have used this technique with great results. The bounty could a flat fee (e.g. \$5) or a percentage (e.g. 5%). Partner with a leading Affiliate Marketing Network, such as Commission Junction (www.cj.com) to handle your affiliate program: enrollment process, bounty tracking and payments to affiliates, invoices, etc.
9. **Don't forget to promote your site to your existing customers.** Send them a special promotional flyer; include a paragraph in your monthly newsletter. Tell them that now they can book online. Tell them how easy it is. And how safe online reservations are.
10. **Promote your website on all collateral materials:** Promote your website and the online reservation capabilities on all of your collateral material, print and other forms of advertising and promotion, leaflets, business cards and stationery
11. **You need Bookers, not Lookers:** Promoting your site is different from promoting an ordinary Web site. You're not just looking for traffic and visitors. You're looking for sales. It is always nice to have more visitors to your site, but what you really need is bookers and buyers. How do you turn lookers into bookers? Display clearly the "Online Reservation" or the "Book It" sign on the Home Page and on all main pages. Include it in the navigation bar. Don't bury it deep inside your website. Include it at the end of any description of your rooms or inventory. Tell your clients that you are running a promotion right now and have a special price just for them.
12. **Use tracking tools:** It is good to know how many hits your website gets, hits are not what you should maximize. You don't just need hits, bookings are what you need. So you should find the sources of hits that turn into the most bookings, and focus on them. How do you do that? Tracking tools. Good tracking tools can tell you where all your visitors come from, and how many bookings visitors from each source spend. They can even tell you which search keywords your visitors used in search engines, and how much money people searching for each phrase spent. Talk to your Webmaster and find the best tracking tool for your website. WebTrends is one such powerful suite of tools.

Max Starkov is Chief eBusiness Strategist, Hospitality eBusiness Strategies in New York City and advises companies in the Travel and Hospitality verticals. Mr. Starkov has an extensive eBusiness experience. He co-founded and served as CEO and Director of two eBusiness companies: Whale Media, Inc. (B2B travel technology infrastructure provider to the hospitality, corporate travel and convention and meetings markets) and Travelbreak.com, Inc. (B2C online travel marketplace). Under his leadership Whale Media won the prestigious 2001 Microsoft RAD Award for its ASP technology for the hospitality industry. Max has 17 years experience in pioneering and building successful travel businesses and eBusiness strategies for national and multinational leisure and hospitality companies. He has written numerous reports, industry research, and articles including: "If I were Barry Diller" (commentary on USA Networks' acquisition of Expedia), "Independent Hoteliers: eBusiness Levels the Playing Field"(co-author with Jason Price), "If I were a Partner at Crosspoint Ventures" (investment opportunities in the travel industry), "If I were Henry R. Silverman" (commentary on the Candant-Galileo deal), "Twelve Inexpensive Ways to Promote your Website". "Independent Hoteliers: How to Level the Playing Field Amidst Softened Economy"(co-author with Jason Price). Max has an MBA degree, Beta Gamma Sigma Honors, from Fordham University in New York and an MS in Economics degree. You can contact Max at max@hospitalityebusiness.com