

Fighting for Attention

Digital Tactics Add Powerful Tools to Your Communications Arsenal

Does your communications strategy increase **owner satisfaction** and utilization, lower default rates, and **save money**? That's the promise of the digital world. And **done right**, it seems to deliver big-time.

While only a handful of companies in the vacation ownership industry have tapped into the vast potential of digital communications, even those just dipping their toes in the water are reaping benefits in terms of increased owner satisfaction.

About 25 percent of members at some ResortCom International-managed resorts use the Web for all their transactions, reports Chairman John Small.

"Owners can book exchanges and rentals online in real time, including their airline tickets and a six-pack of Corona for their unit. They also can pay their loans and maintenance fees, read minutes from HOA meetings, and get answers to questions 24/7 through our CRM Smart technology."

Common traits of successful resort Web sites

Here are some must-haves for any Web site today.

For prospective owners/ (renters/ exchange guests):

- Overview of resort, company
- FAQs
- Attractive photos throughout
- Amenities listings, area attractions
- Tutorials on the timeshare product (connect to www.VacationBetter.org)
- Floor-plans and video tours (with easy-to-use viewing software)
- Blogs about resort
- Internet-only deals and access to discount vacation packages
- Access to e-news & e-zine archives

For current owners:

- Owner log-in section
- FAQs
- On-line account manager (for mortgage, tax, maintenance, association fees) and if possible, on-line payment and reservations functionality
- Access to e-news & e-zines, board meeting minutes, budgets
- Personalized contacts to call or e-mail
- Advanced tutorials on use of the products and services

by Geri Bain

While most resorts haven't gone quite so far down the technology road, most have at least a static Web site with basic property information and owner/member benefits, as well as an owners' area with FAQs, budgets, home-owner association minutes, and newsletter archives. Increasingly, sites are enabling owners to transact resort business and book reservations online, share opinions on blogs, and enjoy virtual tours, video tutorials, live chat, and click-to-call features.

The demand to transact online is definitely there, as Bluegreen learned a few years ago when their first maintenance fee e-mail blast went out.

"The rush of owners who came online to pay their bills temporarily took our Web site down. It's a good problem though, when everyone wants to pay you at once," says Lani Liber, senior vice president of owner relations. Bluegreen maintenance fee e-mails now go out in lower-volume flights to control the traffic, and Web functionality includes on-line bookings and tutorials that run on Flash technology.

Breaking Through

Technology however, doesn't solve the industry's biggest challenge: getting owners to pay attention to the core messages so they understand and use the product. Those who do tend to pay their maintenance fees, purchase more, and refer friends. Those who don't are likely to default or sell in desperation.

"I get calls, saying 'I want to sell; I've never used my time,'" notes Jan Samson, senior vice president of business and corporate development for Vacation Resorts International. "It's often because they don't know what they bought. Once I explain the product and they understand how to use it, often we can save them."

It's important to cut through the complexity and make sure owners understand how to best use what they have, agrees Jon Fredricks, CHA, RRP, president of Welk Resorts.

"Vacation ownership is unlike other consumer products, in that the product and related services will change over time, requiring strong ongoing communications with the owner base via their desired channels, be it e-mail, mail, Web, blog, phone, or personal meetings."

E-mail has become the vehicle of choice for most owners, who appreciate the convenience, cost, and ecological benefits of saving paper and postage. However, flooding owner in-boxes or mailboxes is a sure way to be ignored, stress the experts.

"Keep in mind that people don't actually read everything you send. We have to communicate and re-



communicate in small chunks,” notes Blake Morris, Group RCI, COO, North America.

Scottsdale Camelback Resort owners receive only four regularly scheduled newsletters a year. So “when something comes from us, they know to read it,” says Clark Rowley, RRP, director of marketing and guest services.

Bluegreen, with valid e-mail addresses for about 71 percent of its owners, replaced sporadic communications sent from various departments with a monthly “Owner Update” e-mail.

Does your communications strategy increase owner satisfaction and utilization, lower default rates, and save money?

“Open rates now average over 53 percent and click-to-open rates exceed 40 percent,” notes Chad Jernberg, regional manager of customer solutions with Bluegreen. “Most importantly, owner satisfaction has increased measurably.”

The more personalized communications are, the more likely they’ll be responded to and acted upon. Experts also agree that it takes a lot of tracking and testing to get it right.

“Probably half of the things we’ve tried haven’t worked exactly as planned, but a 500 batting average is pretty good,” says Fredricks. One success story is an e-mail reminder with interactive “buttons” that allow owners to confirm their plans to use, deposit, rent, or gift their time. “Owners often thank us for sending the reminder,” he says.

Communications in a Digital World

External

Ultimately, the industry is about getting people on vacation—communicating availability is key. Here, technology is providing solutions to the frustrations involved in finding open inventory.

By tracking owner history, ResortCom International knows when and where owners are likely to vacation.

“We’ll set aside two or three suitable options and reach out by email or a personalized call via a predictive dialer. It’s very proactive, a higher level of service than people are accustomed to, and owners appreciate it,” Small says.

Despite the move to Web and e-mail information, print still plays a valuable role in reaching people and making a real connection. Often electronic and print work well in tandem.

Hilton Grand Vacations sends out an e-mail preview to its quarterly Club Member magazine. “The magazine inspires travel with features on new resorts and destinations and stories about members on vacation, but the teaser e-mail alone has a 35% open rate with a 7-10% click-through,” notes Kim Kreiger, senior vice president and chief club officer.

“Even the millennial generation still likes a touch-and-feel product,” notes Gary Byrd, executive vice president of hospitality services, Wyndham Vacation Ownership, which has moved heavily into electronic communications. “Many owners prefer to transact electronically, but the computer stream doesn’t yet communicate everything to everyone effectively. Postcards and magazines won’t go away in the foreseeable future.”

Internal

Internal communications are certainly also an essential part of owner communications, agree the experts. Most owner communications tap into formal or informal input from member services, marketing, and other business units. Still, it’s also

important to circle back and alert them to what’s actually going out to owners or members.

“You don’t want your own people saying ‘can you tell me where you read this?’ when a member calls in about something they read,” stresses Karen Buttice, vice president, business development, Shell Vacations Club. “You need an internal communications plan in place so that when you’re moving fast toward program launch deadlines, everything is communicated internally before it gets to members.”

Owner-to-Owner

The most credible messages may soon come from other members. Hilton Grand Vacations and RCI are among the brands that offer member reviews of resorts; Welk, Wyndham Vacation Ownership, and others anticipate adding blogs to their sites.

“The key to staying on the cutting edge will be providing a Web area where people can blog about your resorts and their good times,” asserts Joe Russoniello, president, Brand Tango. “That’s where the world is going and where we have to go as an industry. But always, we have to keep our eyes on the biggest objective: getting owners to use the product and go on vacation.” ■

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