

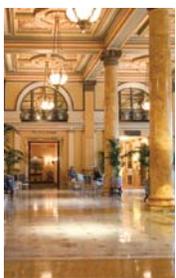


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A 7-STEP STRATEGY TO MANAGE HOTEL ONLINE GUEST REVIEWS

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A 7-STEP STRATEGY TO MANAGE HOTEL ONLINE GUEST REVIEWS: Inspired by the most recent research on responses to TripAdvisor reviews

Online hotel guest reviews significantly influence the booking decisions of future guests. Implementing the 7-step strategy suggested in this article can improve guest satisfaction and may increase future bookings.

Online hotel guest reviews are a transparent form of word-of-mouth. As such, they represent an invaluable opportunity for hotels to know what their customers think of them. Whether those opinions are positive or negative, hotels can use that information to engage with customers, increase guest satisfaction, identify operational problems, and improve employee morale, among other things. On the other hand, if left unchecked, online review sites can foster negative opinions about your hotel in plain sight of your competitors and prospective guests. The best way to ensure that online guest reviews become a positive force at your property is to have a clear plan for how to deal with them. The 7-step strategy suggested in this article provides an excellent starting point.

Opinions abound about how to deal with online reviews, both positive and negative ones. However, few of these opinions are based on an objective review of the data. Two groups of talented researchers recently took on this task. Their research papers are published in the February 2013 issue of the *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*. They focus on how hotels respond to reviews on TripAdvisor, the most widely used online hotel guest review site. Combing through data and interviewing industry participants, they make a serious effort to identify the most effective practices to respond to online reviews. The results of the first study were presented in the article titled “An Analysis of One-Star Online Reviews and Responses in the Washington, D.C., Lodging Market,”¹ by Stuart E. Levy, Wenjing Duan, and Soyoung Boo. The results of the second were included in “Responding to Online Reviews: Problem Solving and Engagement in Hotels,”² by Sun-Young Park and Jonathan P. Allen.

Both articles focus on analyzing how different hotels respond to online reviews, while each study follows a very different approach. The Levy, et. al. report centers on the responses to one-star reviews on TripAdvisor (i.e. the lowest possible rating on a scale of five stars). It analyzes how different hotels handle such poor reviews (apology, explanation, correction, passive follow-up, for instance) and draws correlations between different types of responses and the overall TripAdvisor

¹ Levy, S., Duan, W., and Boo, S. 2013. An Analysis of One-Star Online Reviews and Responses in the Washington, D.C., Lodging Market. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly* 54 (1): 49-63.

² Park, S-Y, and Allen, J. 2013. Responding to Online Reviews: Problem Solving and Engagement in Hotels. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly* 54 (1): 64-73.

ranking of the hotels. For example, it finds that highly rated hotels are more likely to show appreciation for negative feedback than lower rated ones. Lower rated hotels, however, are more likely to share corrective action but less likely to explain what went wrong. The study also includes an interesting analysis of the most frequent sources of guest dissatisfaction. Most prominent among these were front desk service issues, “principally those involving front desk staff responsiveness and empathy.”³ The authors observed “that front desk staff and check-in issues were often major problem areas, underscoring the role first impressions play in service evaluations. In addition, guestroom-related complaints [such as, bathroom, cleanliness, noise, and room size] were pervasive and accounted for over half of all problem areas ...examined.”⁴

In contrast to the Levy, et. al. study, the Park and Allen article uses a comparative case-study design. The authors take an in-depth look at four hotels (two luxury and two upscale) with contrasting practices for responding to online reviews. In the sample selected, one hotel in each category regularly responds to reviews, while the other responds infrequently. From this qualitative review, the authors distinguish between hotels that take a problem-solving approach and those that take a strategic one. The authors find that the problem solving approach is reactive and focused on “manag[ing] the hotel’s reputation,”⁵ while the strategic approach focuses on engaging with guests and the general public, and using online reviews “to improve operational efficiency and effectiveness.”⁶

While the analyses differ, both studies sensibly suggest that hotels should develop a clear strategy to track and respond to online reviews. Park and Allen expressed it like this: “our exploratory study... found that hotels’ approach to online reviews is all over the map. ...Even hotels within the same brand can have completely different response rates and patterns. Nonetheless, given that online reviews have become an important enough information source, hotel managers should be better prepared with an online review response plan that works for them.”⁷ Levy et. al. call for hotels to “establish a Reputation Management Plan”⁸ (that goes beyond the problem solving approach described by Park and Allen), and they provide a number of suggestions of things to include in such a plan.

The articles are insightful and they offer an excellent overview of diverse issues. The Levy, et. al. study centers primarily on the content of responses, while the Park and Allen one focuses more on the frequency, timeliness, and tone of responses. Both articles offer some practical recommendations; yet, they stop short of providing a step-by-step action plan to manage online

³ Levy, et. al. Analysis of One-Star Online Reviews: 56.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Park and Allen. Responding to Online Reviews: 70.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.: 71-72.

⁸ Levy, et. al. Analysis of One-Star Online Reviews: 58.

reviews. A logical progression seemed to be to attempt to combine the recommendations of both articles. With that in mind, the following 7-step strategy to manage online reviews offers suggestions that are consistent with the discussions and data presented in both articles. However, not every detail is drawn directly from the research presented.

- 1) Assign one or two staff members to respond to online comments (both positive and negative ones). Either the hotel's general manager, or "a seasoned, trustworthy employee with strong writing abilities"⁹ should be the point person for writing responses. Dedicated off-site responders, or "social media consultants" are not recommended.¹⁰ The rationale for this type of responders is that they offer the benefit of message consistency. However, that benefit will be more than offset if they do not have an intimate knowledge of the hotel and the staff, and if they do not follow up quickly with related staff members and guests. Their more generic responses may lack the richness of detail needed to convey the feeling of genuine engagement that should pervade all hotel responses
- 2) Require management and/or the executive committee to read online reviews, and use them as a serious tool to improve customer service. Discuss them openly during staff meetings. In addition to specific guest comments online, pay attention to social networking channels. Levy, et. al. point out that "as the vast majority (90%) of consumers trust recommendations from personal acquaintances (Nielsen 2009), lodging executives must pay close attention to consumer-generated buzz beyond online reviews."¹¹
- 3) Respond to comments quickly and regularly. This promotes an image of engagement, akin to developing a relationship with your guests on- and off-line. A quick response to negative comments limits the negative image generated by them. This has the added benefit of pushing them off the front page faster.
- 4) Be appreciative of all guest feedback. For negative comments, apologize for the subpar experience, explain what caused the complaint, and use a positive and personalized manner. The research data also suggests that hotels with higher TripAdvisor rankings tend to offer responders the opportunity to speak with management to follow up. In practice, however, it is easy to visualize how this could quickly become unruly, especially at larger properties.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

- 5) Ask your guests for their support. Levy, et. al. suggest “actively soliciting online reviews from satisfied hotel guests.”¹² While they do not comment on the best way of doing this, post-check-out email requests are one common way of doing this. A more personalized approach is to train front desk agents to tactfully encourage satisfied guests, as they prepare to leave the hotel, to write a review.
- 6) Do not respond to all posted comments. This can generate a sense of non-genuineness. Strive to respond to a majority of negative comments. At the same time, plan to respond to some of the positive comments, especially if they can be used to highlight some aspect of personal attention that would otherwise be hard for other guests to find out about.
- 7) Do not offer compensation in online responses. This is a practice that is avoided by properties with higher TripAdvisor rankings. Furthermore, nobody wants to train guests to complain to receive compensation. However, in general, “compensatory actions [are] highly satisfactory to complainants.”¹³ This suggests that a best practice may be to proactively make a service recovery call after reading a complaint online, but before posting a response. Compensation may be offered to the guest, if warranted, even if it is not made public. More importantly, the call may reveal details that can be used for future training. A call also takes away the anonymous face of the reviewer, which may tone down the dramatic language of the original complaint. A reference to the call on the online response may further help to show the responsiveness of the hotel (e.g. “as we discussed on the phone, I have spoken with our team about our guest service policies...”).

Online hotel reviews are not infallible. As with most voluntary customer comment programs, they tend to attract responses from those who are most satisfied or dissatisfied with a hotel, or simply those who are most vocal or have the most time on their hands. Nevertheless, Levy et. al. quote a 2008 study by P. O’Connor and J. Murphy that showed that fear of rampant fraudulent reviews is unfounded. Furthermore, they quote results from a 2009 study by Nielsen showing that 70% of internet users trust consumer opinions posted online, whether real or not. Thus, it is troubling that they also found a 2009 report by Barsky and Frame showing that 85% of hotels have no guidelines for monitoring and responding to online reviews.¹⁴

¹² Ibid.: 58.

¹³ Ibid.: 57.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Levy, et. al. wisely recommend going beyond online reviews to establish a comprehensive feedback system. They “urge hotels to synthesize solicited and unsolicited feedback for the purpose of quality improvement, competitive intelligence, and employee performance evaluations.”¹⁵

The authors of both studies acknowledge that there are limitations to their findings, as the data they analyzed are not representative of all hotels in general. Park and Allen state plainly: “the most effective approaches to customer engagement online remain elusive.”¹⁶ However, lack of evidence of a perfect plan does not constitute evidence that it is best to have no plan. A hotel that does not have a comprehensive and clear policy to manage online reviews treads on dangerous ground.

¹⁵ Ibid.: 59.

¹⁶ Park and Allen. Responding to Online Reviews: 72.

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