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Smart Hotelier's 2014 "top10" digital marketing resolutions

by **Max Starkov**  & **Mariana Mechoso Safer** 

Whether you've experienced digital marketing success this year, or have continued to struggle with your direct online channel strategy, now is the perfect time for reflection and planning ahead. We asked Max Starkov and Mariana Mechoso Safer of HeBS Digital to share their thoughts – new year's resolutions, actually – on improving the chances for success in the year to come.

2013, a year of growth in our industry, has also been a year chock full of major industry developments. A few examples include the explosion in meta search travel websites, the continued growth of the mobile and tablet channels, the fall of keyword-centric SEO due to the rise of Penguin 2.0 and Hummingbird, and new technology advancements that have allowed us to achieve unparalleled heights in hotel distribution.

Music to any hotelier's ears is that 2014 is expected to be another great year in hospitality. All three key performance indicators are expected to experience growth over the already robust growth of 2013.

To help you reap the benefits of this continued growth and understand where to focus your strategy next year, here are the 2014 Top Ten New Year's Digital Marketing Strategy Resolutions presented by HeBS Digital for the 14th consecutive year.

1 *I believe that 2014 will be the Year of Dynamic Price Marketing and will work towards the full integration of customer purchasing preferences and behavior with content management and online distribution and marketing.*

Situation

In this fast, interconnected and multi-device world we live in, hotel digital marketing can no longer exist in isolation of the hotel's business needs, real-time availability and pricing. Travel consumers no longer buy into promotions featuring

a lead-in rate ("Our weekend rate starts from \$199") or less than credible rate range ("Our Holiday Rates are \$199-\$399"). Today's always connected traveler demands real-time pricing and resents any type of price promotions that smell of bait and switch. By not integrating marketing campaigns with real-time availability and pricing, hoteliers are losing potential guests to the OTAs as well as their more savvy competitors.

By combining marketing campaigns with real-time hotel inventory and pricing, hoteliers can satisfy travelers' demand for instant, precise and concise information, as well as respond instantaneously to changing market conditions and comp set behavior. At HeBS Digital, this combination already generates substantial returns for our hotel clients, and opens a new tremendous revenue source coming into 2014, which is why we are calling 2014 the "Year of Dynamic Price Marketing."

Dynamic Price Marketing opens up two strategic and powerful marketing possibilities:

a) Online advertising utilizing dynamic price marketing technology such as HeBS Digital's MetaSearch Gateway, enabling real-time availability and pricing across various advertising formats: banners, CPC, email, etc.

The main benefit here is that advertised rates in ad campaigns (banners, meta search, email, etc.) change the second the hotel changes their rates in the PMS or CRS. Some examples of these types of campaigns include:

- Meta search marketing, including TripAdvisor Meta, Google Hotel Finder, Trivago, Kayak.com, etc.
- Dynamic price banner advertising, including several travel ad networks, already utilized across our clients, many major hotel brands and OTAs.
- Dynamic price email marketing
- “Game-changing” initiatives that are already in Beta, including Google Dynamic Text Retargeting Ads, Dynamic Price Google AdWords, etc.

b) Personalized pricing based on known guest booking history, preferences, user and pathing behavior, demographics and affiliation to customer segments or a loyalty program. In other words, this is one-on-one marketing that takes full advantage of “big data.”

- This one-on-one marketing is the industry’s smart response to the restrictions of rate parity provisions.
- By combining guest past booking history and website browsing behavior with real-time, rules-based pricing tied to the property’s concrete business needs, hoteliers can dramatically increase conversion rates, customer retention and maximize direct online channel contribution.

Action Plan

Begin by participating in meta search marketing that utilizes real-time hotel inventory availability and pricing, starting with TripAdvisor Meta Search, Google Hotel Finder, Trivago (if targeting European feeder markets), Kayak.com, etc.

Consider launching business-need campaigns utilizing dynamic price banner advertising, such as on travel ad networks like Adara Media, Sojourn and Criteo.

A natural next step would be to consider dynamic price email marketing to improve email conversions and improve the credibility of your campaigns.

When considering a website redesign, demand that your website design vendor equip the new website with CMS technology that integrates with the property PMS or CRS, and can handle dynamic content personalization and dynamic pricing capabilities for one-on-one marketing.

2 *The Direct Online Channel will remain the cornerstone of my digital marketing strategy. My independent hotel will continue to lessen its reliance on OTAs; my branded hotel will not fully depend on the major hotel brand for online bookings.*

Situation

As online travel demand grows and the industry sees growth overall, hoteliers should have more control over where their bookings originate. Why aren’t we seeing more bookings coming from the most cost-efficient means possible?

Independent hotels: More than 76% of online bookings for independent hotels come from the OTAs and just 24% from the hotels’ own websites (STR, HSMIA Foundation). We should be seeing the opposite! Independent hotels still struggle with not knowing how to allocate their digital marketing dollars wisely, and rely too strongly on the OTAs to generate bookings.

Branded hotels: Major hotel brands cover brand-building and online marketing at global and national levels. They do not cover regional, state and local markets sufficiently, nor can they launch marketing initiatives for every property that addresses important customer segments and feeder markets. We believe this is one of the reasons why almost 36% of online bookings for branded hotels come from the OTAs who have mastered regional, same-state and local travel marketing (Q3 2013, NADR Report).

Action Plan

Both independent and branded hotels need to focus their digital marketing budgets on initiatives that will drive bookings directly on their property websites. This means OTAs should be part of a balanced strategy and nothing more. Read the [Smart Hotelier’s Guide to 2014 Digital Marketing Budget Planning](#) to learn how to structure your budget to drive direct online bookings.

3 *I know that website conversion rates are as low as 2%, and only 5% of initiated bookings are completed; therefore, I will implement technology to recover reservations and convert people that abandon their booking on my property website.*

Situation

Conversion rates on hotel websites are usually between 2-3%, and 95% of visitors that initiate a booking will abandon. Many times they abandon because they are not ready to book or want to continue their research process, quite often on OTA websites. There are now tools available for hoteliers to recover a good portion of these abandoned reservations.

Action Plan

Set aside about 5-7% of your total digital marketing budget for technology that will steer people back to your website to book. Here are some ways to recover a percentage of these abandoned reservations and boost conversions in 2014:

- Reservation Email Retargeting: When a website visitor abandons the reservation process, Email Retargeting invites and incentivizes the potential guest to come back and complete the reservation. The prospective guest receives a well-designed branded email, which includes a customized marketing message, a one-on-one promotion or booking incentive, and deep link back to the abandoned reservation page.

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- **Reservation Abandonment Programs:** This message is served only when someone initiates a booking and clicks on the “Search Availability/Rates” button. Upon exiting the reservation page, prospective bookers are served a well-designed branded marketing promotional banner, which includes a customized marketing message with a booking incentive or a one-on-one promotion.
- **Smart Rate Promos:** This dynamic rate program accesses rates and availability with booking engine connectivity, and then projects that valuable information across your desktop, tablet and mobile websites. With 75% of online travel website consumers indicating price as a primary purchase reason, Smart Rate Promos create a “shortcut” to the booking process by displaying real-time rates as a prominent promo tile on the hotel website.
- **Reservation Reminder:** Visitors in the dream stage of travel planning set a date for a reminder email to be delivered to them. The potential booker is sent a branded reminder email, featuring a booking link back to the hotel website, and can feature a special rate or incentive to encourage them to book via the hotel website.

4 *I know that the search engines contribute at least 50% of bookings on my hotel website, and that organic search and SEO best practices are constantly evolving. I will keep my website SEO up to par by creating high-quality, helpful, engaging and relevant website content, because I understand that this type of editorial-level content is rewarded with high search engine rankings. This includes continuously creating new content around the unique, local experience that represents my property.*

Situation

SEO is not a static science – search engine results are constantly in flux because of Google’s ongoing adjustments to the layout and algorithm. As a matter of fact, Google performs over 500 updates to its search algorithm every year.

Just a few ways Google has shaken up the world of SEO this year include the new [Hummingbird](#) algorithm, [Penguin 2.0](#) and the move to [secure search](#). It has always been important to determine which keyword terms bring the most relevant website visitors and generate bookings, and that has not changed. What has changed is that we now need to focus on what’s actually behind the content – is the content on your site unique, engaging and valuable?

In September of 2013, Google introduced a new, dramatically different search algorithm dubbed “Hummingbird,” intended to gather better, more intuitive results for users via conversational search. In Google’s own statement, the Hummingbird is the company’s largest search algorithm change since 2001 – a staggering period of time in the ever-evolving world of SEO.

Hummingbird’s main intent is to deliver more accurate answers to conversational search queries. In short, the search engine’s results will better answer questions like the following: “What is the best hotel rooftop bar nearby?” These geo-targeted, conversational, query-specific results are meant to help users find the results most relevant to them.

In a more general sense, this algorithm change reinforces Google’s continuing shift toward rewarding quality content instead of keyword-centric content. As noted in a recent HeBS Digital blog post, [“The End of an Era: Google Says Goodbye to Keyword-Centric SEO,”](#) the content-focused age is upon us. Low-quality, keyword-stuffed content is prone to punishment at the hands of Google, while high-quality, helpful, engaging and relevant content is rewarded with high search engine results page placement.

Action Plan

On the hotel website, hoteliers should focus on producing high-quality content that engages users. With each update to its algorithm, Google further emphasizes the importance of deep, relevant, unique and engaging content, so creating a content-centric SEO strategy is a top priority for any hotelier in 2014.

We’ve heard the complaint before that creating quality content is hard for a hotel, that hotels have nothing new to consistently write about – this is not true! Travel is a subject that is fun to write and read about. It’s worth the effort here. Not only does Google value consistent, new and quality content, so do potential customers. New content gives them a reason to keep coming back to your website. There are so many things you can write about, including what’s going on near or at your hotel, such as an upcoming sports game, a restaurant event, a spa promotion or onsite activities. You can even give suggested itineraries for the day. People love this type of content. A blog is one of the easiest ways to keep your site updated.

HeBS Digital recommends starting with a minimum of 35-50 pages of content for a full-service property website. A big full-service hotel or resort’s website should start with 100 pages of content. Utilizing your website’s CMS platform, create landing pages for each hotel special offer, package or promotion, as well as for events and happenings at your property or in your destination. You should also consider using a professional copywriting & SEO team that will know what type of content to write about while also targeting long-tail keywords (e.g. “Chicago hotel with free WiFi”).

The latest Google Hummingbird algorithm update simply underscores the copywriting strategy we have utilized for many years here at HeBS Digital – generating high-quality content that engages and informs users. Make it a priority to overhaul your current website by adopting the latest CMS technology and by creating quality content that accurately represents your property and its destination, and Google will reward you.

5 *I know that search engine marketing has become increasingly complex and demanding, and that I need to increase SEM campaign management, budget and campaign monitoring efforts.*

Situation

Here are just a few of the complexities we are currently dealing with as an industry regarding search engine marketing, which will continue into 2014:

- **Increased Competition by the OTAs:** Since many major brands have disallowed the OTAs from bidding on brand-related keyword terms (e.g. Marriott Atlanta, etc.), OTAs have refocused their paid search campaigns almost exclusively on independent hotels, resorts, casinos, etc. Priceline reported that they had spent over \$537 million on paid search in Q3 2013 alone!
- **Explosion of the Three Screens:** Hoteliers now have to manage campaigns for desktop, mobile and tablet devices, each device requiring a different approach, strategy and tactics.
- **SEM as part of the Property's Multi-Channel Marketing:** In this multi-device consumer world we live in, paid search is now part of the overall multi-channel marketing effort. This requires additional coordination of SEM campaigns with every other digital marketing effort (online media, retargeting, meta search, email, social media, etc.)
- **Improved AdWords Extensions:** Google has recently introduced improvements that allow marketers to consistently show more relevant ad extensions and formats. These extensions, while valuable, double the campaign management time needed to manage SEM campaigns. For example, sitelinks now require extra description lines and can be scheduled around events and promotions, and call extensions now have enhanced tracking, which means more time spent analyzing campaigns. As these extensions often improve campaign performance and Google may lower CPCs if they find extensions and formats to be highly relevant, it pays to spend this extra time needed.
- **Seasonality:** Budgets should be calculated by seasonality and seasonal business needs, which requires extra campaign management and attention to bids and budgets to achieve optimal ROI.
- **Feeder Market Targeting:** Based on your property's feeder markets, which could vary according to seasonality, SEM campaigns target specific geo-locations. This involves complex targeting for the SEM campaigns to pinpoint the best target feeder markets based on seasonality by adjusting bids based on geographic location.
- **Google Algorithm Changes:** Google performs over 500 updates to its search algorithm every year. Most notable recent updates were the Google Panda and Hummingbird updates, which directly affected how Google indexes and values the underlying website landing pages and SEO. All of this necessitates constant tweaking of campaigns to

adhere to Google's new rules and SEM best practices, and to align SEM with website SEO in order to maintain a high Quality Index of the SEM campaigns. The higher the Quality Index, the lower the cost and the more effective SEM campaigns are.

- **The Introduction of New Search-Related Advertising Opportunities** such as Search Companion, Affinity Categories, etc. require additional campaign management attention and efforts. For example, the expansion of Google Display Network's targeting methods with affinity categories allow hoteliers to target more qualified travel markets based on their property's offerings and location.

Action Plan

Understanding these complexities allows hoteliers to justify increased time and resources needed to manage SEM campaigns.

Make sure to dedicate a significant portion of your budget in 2014 to SEM. HeBS Digital recommends 24-30%. If you work with a partner, make sure they are a Google Adwords Qualified Company and that everyone who manages and/or reports on your campaigns is a Google Qualified Professional (has studied for and passed the Google Advertising Fundamentals Exam). Otherwise, there is a good chance that they are not keeping up with the complexities of SEM campaign management and won't reach the ROIs your campaigns are capable of achieving.

6 *I understand that meta search marketing is an advertising format and not a distribution channel and I will not be duped into thinking this is a "set and forget" initiative.*

Situation

Meta search marketing generates [high revenues and is a great way to shift share from the OTAs](#). Yet we are seeing that some major hotel brands and third-party booking engine vendors operate meta search as a distribution channel, utilizing a commission model (cost-per-acquisition). The problem with the commission model is that it deprives member hotels or hotel clients from serious direct online revenues.

We also see that it is a popular misconception that once a property is enabled on a meta search platform like Google or TripAdvisor, the job is done, and bookings will generate on their own. This particular method of meta search campaign management—"set and forget"—can be compared to setting up SEM campaigns and never touching them again.

Action Plan

Meta search marketing requires real-time bid and budget management, campaign monitoring, conversion tracking, and ongoing optimization on the property level.

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The [economics of the commission model does not work in favor of hoteliers](#). With current commission models, both hotel chains and booking engine vendors will lose money with every booking for most of the properties they are promoting with meta search campaigns. This means that, even though the hotelier may be enjoying ROIs of 500%, 600%, 700% for instance, their campaigns may be shut down because the profit margin does not work for the hotel chain/booking engine vendor.

Work with a company that will run meta search campaigns on a CPC model, and has the ability to manage the complexity involved in managing these campaigns on a daily basis.

7 *I know we are living in a multi-device world, and I will provide my website visitors with the best user experience by utilizing Responsive Design on the Server Side (RESS) no matter what device they use to reach the hotel website.*

Situation

In [last year's Top 10 Digital Marketing Resolutions](#), HeBS Digital proclaimed 2013 to be the “Year of the Three Screens” and recommended that you provide a customized, user-friendly experience on the desktop, mobile and tablet.

This recommendation holds true for 2014, with a twist. Hoteliers also need to also understand cross-device user behavior, meaning that in the span of one day or less, people are using multiple devices to accomplish the same task. In fact, a recent study by Google showed that smartphones are the most common starting place for online activities, with 47% of users starting their trip planning process via the smartphone, 45% continuing on a PC and 3% continuing on a tablet. Tablets are most often a starting point for shopping and trip planning.

Action Plan

This multi-device user behavior we are seeing means a few things for hoteliers:

- Hoteliers must boost their presence in all three screens to provide the best user experience on each device (desktop, mobile, tablet).
- Year-over-year web analytics are meaningless.
- Call analytics or “offline reservation tracking” is now more important than ever: the majority of mobile bookings come via the voice channel.
- Special attention must be paid to mobile paid search strategies, as consumers are relying on search to help them move between devices.
- Multi-channel campaigns must be launched to reach consumers at every touch point. These campaigns utilize the right combination of online channels effectively (paid search, email marketing, SEO, online media, social media, etc.) to promote one campaign theme. This strategy is the

most effective way to increase reach and boost revenues for a need period.

Technology available today allows for a hotel to manage all content in one place, yet still provide a customized user experience for each device. This technology, Responsive Design on Server Side (RESS), does the work for the hotelier, meaning they don't have to manage three different websites.

You must also have access to a CMS that functions as the nucleus of your digital marketing, where every website update, social media post and image can be published with the click of a button. The CMS should not only allow you to create and manage content through the three distribution channels, it should also offer the features specified in the next resolution.

8 *Speaking of providing the best user experience on the three screens, I will utilize a next generation Content Management System (CMS) that allows me to achieve this, as well as easily make updates to my site without having to pay any extra fees.*

Situation

In this multi-device world we live in, hoteliers must meet the needs of their guests on each device. This means investing in technology that allows for the best user experience on the three screens: desktop, mobile and tablet, which many hoteliers find hard to do, due to their website's antiquated Content Management System (CMS) technology.

In addition, many hoteliers also find themselves in a situation where their CMS does not let them add new content (extra pages) at no extra cost, or they cannot create landing pages and promotional tiles specifically for special offers, packages and events. Having the power to make these updates on their own is crucial for hotels to have in their arsenal, not only to satisfy the requirements of Google's new Hummingbird algorithm, but to generate incremental revenues.

The difference between an ordinary hotel website and a great website could be measured in hundreds of thousands of dollars of missed revenue a year. Going cheap when redesigning the property website will severely damage the hotel's bottom line. If your website is over 18 months old, there is a good chance it's not utilizing the latest trends in artistry, functionality or technology. Your website needs to find the right balance of excellent design, state-of-the-art digital technology, and engaging textual and visual content (rich media and video), improving the user experience from top to bottom.

Action Plan

Invest in technology built specifically for hoteliers, that allows you to manage all content in one place yet still provide a customized user experience for each device. This Responsive Design on Server Side (RESS) technology means you don't

have to manage three different websites. HeBS Digital's CMS Premium is an RESS-enabled content management system.

Start by treating the three device categories: desktop, mobile and tablet as separate avenues to reach the travel consumer. Desktop users require as much information as possible and place high value on visual galleries. Mobile users need slimmed-down content with an emphasis on maps and directions, easy to use mobile booking engine and click to call property reservation number. Tablet users require a visually enhanced experience as well as a website that is built to accommodate the touch screen and swiping capabilities the tablet offers. [Read more about how to accommodate behavior on the three screens here.](#)

You must also have access to a CMS that functions as the nucleus of your digital marketing, where every website update, social media post and image can be published with the click of a button. The CMS should not only allow you to create and manage content through the three distribution channels, it should also offer:

- Innovative architecture facilitating fast download speeds
- Functionality to push promotions to the hotel's social media profiles
- Full compliance with the Google Panda and Freshness SEO updates
- Ability to change the look-and-feel design of the hotel website with a click of a button
- Dynamic content personalization
- A suite of reservation conversion features

A cloud-based (for lightning speed responsiveness) CMS, developed exclusively for the hospitality space will allow you to manage all content seamlessly across the three screens, saving you thousands of dollars every year. This includes the creation and content management of all pages as well as easy management of photography and videos. The CMS should also allow you to update elements that help generate bookings and position the hotel as the hero of the destination – from the calendar of events, to a map of activities that are nearby, to promotional tiles and landing pages for specials and promotions.

9 *I will take advantage of smarter online media advertising initiatives which are now more affordable and easier than ever for my property to participate in. This will allow me to also increase my reach to target audiences and communicate the unique experience my hotel has to offer.*

Situation

There was a time when online media initiatives were considered out of reach for individual hotels, resorts, casinos, small and mid-size hotel chains and that they could only be afforded by major hotel brands and OTAs. Today, there are a

number of online media initiatives that any hotelier, big and small, can now afford, and these options must become part of your 2014 marketing budget. These options are clearly paying off for our clients as we are seeing between 15:1 to 25:1 ROI.

Online media targeting and retargeting options are smarter and more affordable than ever before. These smarter targeting options, coupled with advertising options that reach a relevant hotel audience, help move users through the conversion funnel. For instance, did you know that you can retarget group planners that visit your website with customized group and meeting related banners after they leave your website? Or that you can serve a banner with your hotel offer to someone who has just booked a flight to the city your hotel is located in? Or, how about that you can reach people that have visited your website in their Facebook Newsfeed? These highly- focused targeting and retargeting opportunities available mean that you can drive a significant amount of bookings through smart online media planning and campaign management, and finally at affordable prices.

Action Plan

Construct an online media plan that reaches your key customer segments and utilizes today's technology to reach the right consumer at the right time. Start by determining relevant media channels for your property, create banner ads to promote a concrete promotion, launch campaigns and then optimize, optimize, optimize.

Utilize retargeting campaigns on Google Display Network (GDN) to reiterate your marketing message and value proposition to users who have already visited your website. Another example of an online media opportunity you can afford is to launch an interest category targeting campaign on the GDN. [Click here](#) to read about a South Beach hotel that increased bookings during the low season through an interest category campaign on the Google Display Network. With a nominal budget the property achieved 106 conversions in a very short period of time and an ROI of 840%.

If you are a new property or newly rebranded property or simply want bigger piece of the pie, having a "Similar Audiences" display advertising via the GDN will allow you to target users who share similar qualities of those that have visited your property website (but have not actually been to your website).

The online media targeting and retargeting revenue-generating opportunities are endless. This strategy should require approximately 6-8% of your digital marketing budget – a number any hotelier should be able to reach considering the revenues that are at stake.

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10 *I know that self-proclaimed digital marketing vendors are a dime a dozen and will choose my digital marketing partner wisely.*

Situation

It seems that every few months a new company crops up that claims to be an expert in hotel website design and digital marketing. Often the founders and employees at these companies have no hospitality experience nor are they evolving their products and services ahead of the marketplace.

Action Plan

Educating and empowering hotel owners and managers to look at the web as the most critical and fastest growing revenue stream for the property requires hospitality experience, the ability to utilize the full digital marketing “toolkit” available (SEM, SEO, Online Media, Email Marketing, Meta Search, Reservation Recovery Applications, Multi-Channel Marketing, Social Media, etc.), and knowledge of how to grow the direct online channel.

Choose a partner that can lead your property in achieving maximum revenue from the property website/direct online channel by:

- Providing solutions to address business needs at the property such as occupancy, seasonality and ad-hoc needs
- Increasing online sales and leads from targeted customer segments (meeting planners, group planners, family, leisure, business travelers, etc.)
- Making proactive recommendations on your competitive set, rate parity and shifting share from the OTAs
- Providing ongoing monitoring and recommendations for improving the property’s digital marketing presence including new revenue generating opportunities and technology applications
- Sharing best practices, the latest research in the digital space and technology trends
- Creating a digital marketing proposal
- Including analysis and recommendations in reporting by using state-of-the-art analytical tools

We hope that you have enjoyed this year’s Top Ten Digital Marketing Resolutions. With 2014 expected to be another great year in our industry, we encourage you to adopt these resolutions and to start the year in good digital health!

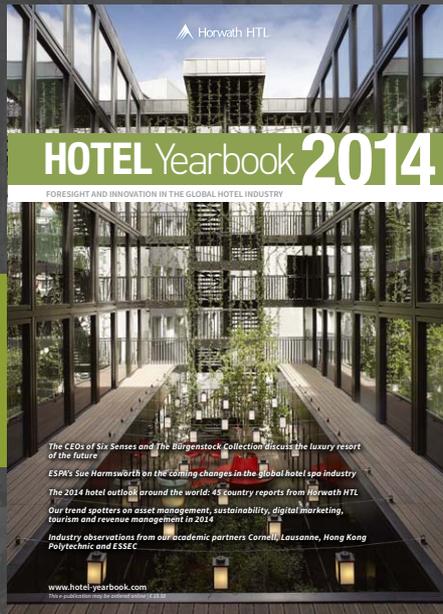
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Max Starkov is President & CEO of HeBS Digital, the hospitality industry’s leading full-service digital technology and marketing firm (www.HeBSDigital.com). Max is a published author and recognized “thought leader” in digital technology and marketing strategies in hospitality and has spent his entire professional career in hospitality and travel, including more than 18 years in the online space. Max received the most prestigious industry award, the HSMIAI “Top 25 Most Extraordinary Minds in Sales and Marketing” and served on the HSMIAI Digital Marketing Council. Max has an MS in Economics of International Tourism & Hospitality and an MBA degree, Beta Gamma Sigma Honors, from Fordham University in New York.



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