

## Where Have the Real Hotel Marketers Gone?



In my role as hotel industry consultant, marketer and blogger, I am often asked to provide advice to hoteliers and suppliers. One such call came in recently. The call's nature provides a keen insight into the current state of hospitality marketing.

The call was from an advertising agency that was tasked with the requirement of building a traditional media plan for this hotel chain. The amount was in the multimillions of dollars, not small change given the meager amounts spent these days. I was asked—pro bono, I might add—to see if I could give any recommendations.

My first questions were simple. Who is the target customer for this advertising? What was the message the ads were going to convey? And what were the goals or metrics for the campaign?

The response to my simple questions nearly floored me, and I quote: "(Chain name deleted) needs to demonstrate that they have some muscle and can support their franchise holders with visibility in the face of continued pressure from travel agencies. They did not give us any metrics, and the advertising message will be the same as last year's, focusing on their value proposition. They already have a terrific pay-per-click program, and that will remain."

At first blush, I applaud the chain's recognition that advertising is a necessary part of the successful business mix. I also understand the need to respect the needs of franchisees for some muscle or gravitas in the airwaves and in print. But is this the correct approach?

## **Clear and provocative ideas are the base for any campaign**

This is not a "chicken or egg" situation. All advertising and promotions start with what you want to tell your customer. And these days, that had better be provocative.

Whether in the case of this chain where millions of dollars are being offered up, or an individual independent property with a much more limited expenditure, advertising is an investment in your brand. For that investment to show a return, there has to be a return, and that return only comes from generating awareness and interest. If this foundation is missing, the advertising will not deliver desire or, ultimately, purchase.

While I applaud the senior chain management in recognizing the need to build brand awareness through advertising, I would be giving two thumbs up to a program that not only had some visibility, but as well, some viable and provocative messages that would ring true to the target audience.

## **Who was he/she sleeping with?**

Remember the Westin advertising of the early 1990s? This provocative selling line, coupled with some great creative development propelled this to multimedia campaign and I suspect, delivered some huge awareness numbers for the corporation.

This was not just a summary of product features and benefits but pushed beyond the everyday verbiage to communicate in a meaningful and memorable fashion. I am sure it took some brave soul in the Westin marketing department to stick his or her neck out in defiant support for this idea.

On a smaller, local level, I have seen numerous examples of hoteliers who have worked at differentiating their property through unique and highly differentiated advertising. Calling Google Adwords advertising is a misnomer. Yes, Adwords works and is important. But do not confuse this expenditure for advertising that builds authentically new awareness. Give me some of that good, old-fashioned, idea-centric advertising and this industry will be back on track to differentiating itself from the online travel agencies.

Even though I use the term "old-fashioned," I am not opposed to the use of new media. Just look at the recent craze over the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. It's a simple-yet-brilliant proposition that's fun for others to watch online and keep all participants accountable. If you have an elegant idea like this, new media can make you an overnight sensation. But know that as with most social network campaigns, it's all too easy to be drowned in mediocrity. At least with paid advertising, you can "bribe" consumers for a piece of their time.

But any way you slice it, you have to be bold if you want consumers to remember you.

## **Planning for 2015?**

Marketing is not just responding to TripAdvisor comments, keeping your website or social media up to date and buying the usual collection of search terms in Google Adwords. To be sure, all of these are valuable tactics, designed to keep your property at the forefront of guest inquiries and bookings. But they are little more than loose trajectories, “diddles” in the face of a continually changing guest-centric, information-rich, OTA-driven environment.

Although I like to allude to warfare for analogies, a campaign consists of many battles and skirmishes, all in the name of pushing toward some grand overall objective. Solid marketing starts with strategies that are designed to deliver this stated grand objective, and from those strategies a tactical, on-the-ground and minute-by-minute plan emerges. Without big ideas and the operational fortitude to fully integrate these programs into the fabric of your property’s persona, chances are this coming year will be more of the same at best.

So, I challenge you (throwing down the gauntlet so to speak) to look at 2015 as the year that marketing makes a difference for your property. If your team members put their minds to it and you lead them through motivation and resource allocations, I am confident of your success.

(Article published by Larry Mogelonsky on Hotel News Now on September 29, 2014)

Larry Mogelonsky is the founder of LMA Communications Inc., the developer of Inn at a Glance hospitality software and a recognized expert in marketing services.