

 regular page**News****Case study: How Interstate drove bookings with local SEO****By Guest Contributor on 10/12/2011**

Every day more travelers use online search engines and directories to plan their trips and find hotels. And because their hotel choices are greatly influenced by a hotel's location, local search optimization strategies have become essential to any hotel marketing program.

Google's ongoing efforts to make local-based search results more relevant for users underscores the importance of this issue. Through its game-changing Place Search, Google has merged local and organic to provide more relevant results and make it faster and easier for consumers to compare listings when they do a search for, say, "Chicago hotels" or "Orlando family vacations."

In the highly competitive hotel industry, where traveler search queries frequently trigger local results, Google's Place Search has prompted many hospitality marketers to realize how critical it is to stay abreast of local search trends and ask what they can do to get their properties near the top of search engine results.

My advice to hoteliers first and foremost is to make sure you have the basics of local SEO covered. Consider the example of Interstate Hotels & Resorts, the largest independent hotel management company in the United States with interests in 331 hotels around the world operating under leading brand names such as Marriott, Hilton, Starwood, InterContinental, Wyndham and more.

Several years ago, Interstate's network of hotel properties was reliant on "brand.com" support for interactive marketing resources. Recognizing the increasing popularity of geo-specific searches on the part of consumers, Interstate's marketing group decided that pursuing a more aggressive local search strategy could help its properties gain a competitive edge online and drive additional bookings.

In particular, the marketing group was seeking a cost-effective and automated way to manage a local search initiative that would involve minimal effort on the part of property or brand managers, who lacked the time or expertise required to stay on top of tricky optimization strategies and constant Google algorithm tweaks.

Interstate's program, launched in early 2009, initially involved a group of 18 properties that volunteered to test a local search software platform designed for the hotel industry. The platform was used to optimize each of the properties' Google Places Accounts and create customized, branded profile pages with hotel descriptions, phone numbers, addresses, maps, logos, photos, videos and links to hotel websites or reservation engines.

Optimization techniques included adding detailed location information about surrounding neighborhoods, arenas, attractions, convention centers and nearby colleges and universities, as well as upcoming convention dates and calendars of local events. Specific descriptions of hotel amenities such as conference and meeting facilities, banquet halls, restaurants, pools and wedding planning services – anything making the properties unique – also were a key factor in optimizing profiles because they frequently appear in travelers' search criteria.

Through a content management system, custom hotel page content was distributed to Google, Yahoo, Bing and hundreds of online directories such as Yellowpages.com, Yelp, Citysearch, Dexknows, Superpages.com and others that help consumers find hotels. Another part of the strategy was giving property managers a very

user-friendly interface for quickly updating all this information as new amenities are added or renovations take place.

Within 30 to 60 days, Interstate's participating hotels became more visible at the top of Google listings, including its search engine results page (SERP). Interstate's program was designed to provide measurable results. Tracking features enabled Interstate and property managers to view the number of online profile views, search engine clicks, calls and other actions generated by the location-focused web page listings. They could listen to consumer phone calls generated by geo-specific searches and quantify revenue generated from the program.

Within a year after launch of the 18-property test program, its success spurred 100 more hotels to join. The program has continued to thrive and grow with 175 properties now participating.

Interstate has found that local search program drove an average of US\$17,000 worth of incremental bookings on a monthly basis, or US\$4.3 million in additional business for Interstate. This was a return of US\$84 in bookings for each marketing dollar invested, representing a return 3 to 5 times greater than the ROI from either pay-per-click ads or traditional yellow page advertising.

If you're not satisfied with your hotel's online visibility, here are six steps you can take to improve your performance in local search results:

1. **Claim your local profiles on search engines and directories and fully optimize them.** This step alone can improve your search rankings.
2. **Be specific in your descriptions.** Do you offer luxury suites? Best rates? Beach access? A business center? A location near an airport or popular tourist attractions?
3. **Be sure your hotel's name address and phone number, or NAP, is displayed consistently across the web.** Search engine algorithms like consistency and will penalize your hotel in their rankings for using special tracking numbers or varying formats in listing your phone number.
4. **Make sure the online information is always kept up-to-date** as your property offerings expand or change. Wrong phone numbers or out-of-date descriptions will result in missed booking opportunities.
5. **Have a plan that encourages happy customers to rate and review your hotel.** Not only will reviews will help search engine rankings, they will also increase click-through rates and conversion rates.
6. **Provide images, videos and coupons.** Many hotel listings also offer these to increase their appeal and boost conversions.

Amid the dynamic search engine landscape, it's worth noting that the Interstate properties remain at or near the top in localized search results displayed on Google and other search engines. The lesson for hotels is this: Local SEO is more relevant than ever for geo-specific search queries. As competition heats up among search engines to attract consumers who are looking for local businesses, the hoteliers with strong organic and local rankings are best positioned to capitalize on this trend.

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