

Monthly Myth Buster: Soliciting TripAdvisor votes - does the end justify the means?

Social networking websites that allow an individual to share their views on any number of topics has become overwhelmingly popular. The hospitality industry is not immune to this trend. One of the most well known online review websites for the hospitality industry is TripAdvisor. In this month's Myth Buster we will focus on TripAdvisor campaigning and the falsehood that soliciting votes are justified when the results equate TripAdvisor surveys weighing in your hospitality business's favor.

The logic behind the emphasis on TripAdvisor is that it could play a vital role in the success or failure of a property. Some property owners may go so far as to believe that it is so important that *no* guest will book a reservation at a property if they don't have enough positive reviews. With that, a property is naturally at a greater advantage and more likely to thrive if its direct competition has a high percentage of *negative* reviews. The goal for property owners on TripAdvisor then becomes two-fold: to beat out the direct competition in positive reviews and hopefully have their competitors receive harmful evaluations of their property.

The intention for TripAdvisor, and other similar websites, is to offer travelers unbiased information when searching for a lodging choice. Most viewers understand that the reviews on TripAdvisor are only as good as the person's perspective who writes them. Therefore, attempting to influence these assessments, or mislead potential customers about your property, only hurts you in the end.

A recent 48 Hours news segment illustrated the lengths in which some hospitality owners are going to in order to gain TripAdvisor votes. TripAdvisor itself has reported a significant increase in the number of businesses who are writing fraudulent reviews, negative reviews about competitors, and even offering financial compensation to guests who write positive reviews. The practice has become so widespread that TripAdvisor has even taken the unprecedented step of blacklisting properties that engage in unethical negative bashing of competition or in the fabrication of positive reviews for their own business.

Positive online reviews are supposed to be the result of satisfied customers, not manipulative PR campaigns. I have recently seen a number of so-called Internet marketing gurus write articles encouraging accommodations businesses to "catch the wave of TripAdvisor" and use it to their advantage. However, there is a fine line between encouraging guests to write positive reviews and actually attempting to stage-manage them to do so. While aiming to achieve TripAdvisor votes, some hospitality businesses have lost sight of their true purpose in the hospitality business, which of course is to care for their guests, not the illusion of such accommodations. Encouraging guests to write glowing reviews, or submitting fraudulent assessments, only frustrates new customers when they arrive and accommodations are not as advertised. Furthermore, they might just have additional incentive to log into TripAdvisor and tell the truth about your business.

Due to the fact that social networking is growing in importance it is wise to have a clearly defined "online reputation management program," however, honesty remains the best policy when it comes to acquiring positive online reviews. Positive reviews should be the result of your excellent customer service and attention to detail. You don't have to own a five star resort to take good care of your customers.

For example, I recently stayed at a modest, clean, motel in Gunnison, Colorado, called The Waterwheel Inn. The owner of the business offers skiing travelers special discounts on lift tickets and the extra benefit of a hot breakfast. His business is 50 miles from the nearest ski area but his clean rooms, friendly staff, and attention to detail keep his customers coming back. As I was eating my breakfast I couldn't help but notice the smiles on people's faces. One guest remarked, "This breakfast is great." Upon checking out, another visitor told the owner that they loved coming to his place and would be back again soon. The owner simply said, "If you liked your stay, and you feel comfortable doing so, please write a review on TripAdvisor."

Some hospitality businesses fail to see the importance of taking care of guests *while* they are staying at the property. Good customer service, an attentive and caring staff, clean rooms, quality comforters, plush pillows, and comfortable beds, will garner more positive reviews than all the PR campaigns you can think of. Sending out mass e-mails asking everyone who stayed at your property to write a positive review on TripAdvisor is a slippery slope. Offering future discounts to customers who write positive reviews will most likely get you blacklisted on TripAdvisor. While it is acceptable to leave cards in the rooms reminding people to write online reviews, you really need to ensure you are meeting guest's basic needs before you get too carried away in campaigning for TripAdvisor reviews.

Conclusion

Be aware of your online reputation but don't be shackled to it. There are far more important considerations when running a successful hospitality business. The fundamental values that carry the hospitality industry remain the same: put your guests first. This means courtesy, offering guests superior value for their money, taking care of their needs, etc. In essence, if you run a clean operation, your reviews will speak volumes, and your business will flourish.

This month's myth, that the end justifies the means when getting more TripAdvisor votes is...**BUSTED.**

About the author

Bill Mitchell is co-owner and Chief Operating Officer for RezStream. Bill has over 30 years experience in the hospitality industry with extensive knowledge in management and marketing for hotels, resorts, and bed and breakfasts. Bill is recognized nationally as a featured speaker and consultant for the hospitality industry.