



Whats the secret to achieving top ranking on TripAdvisor? - By Daniel Edward Craig 2010-02-15

Many hotels aspire to achieve top ranking in TripAdvisors popularity index, but HKHotels in New York dominates the charts, with all four of its properties in the top five rankings. Did they pay someone off at TripAdvisor? Write bogus reviews or complex algorithms?

I thought hoteliers could learn a thing or two from the company, which owns and operates Hotel Giraffe, Casablanca Hotel, Hotel Elysée and the Library Hotel. So I contacted Adele Gutman, VP of Sales & Marketing. Turns out the secret is good old-fashioned hospitality. Heres a condensed version of my interview.

Tell us how HKHotels achieved top five placement for all four of your hotels.

Several years ago, one of our hotels was in the top ten on TripAdvisor and another at #56, and it made us wonder, why the disparity? We started to pay a lot of attention to reviews comments. It became clear that reviews were our greatest opportunity for word of mouth advertising. We set a goal to have all of our hotels in the top 10%.

It was clear that satisfying our guests expectations wasnt enough. To inspire the enthusiasm to post a review, we needed everyone to be thrilled. We had hired the nicest, happiest people we could find, so it was up to us to lead, train and empower them. Each hotel discusses reviews at morning meetings and posts comments on the board. Every employee, from housekeeper to doorman to general manager, takes pride in positive comments, so it created a self-perpetuating culture of going above the norm. We reached our initial goal of top 10% in 2004 and then made top ten in 2006.

How are your hotels different from other New York offerings?

If you ask our guests, they will probably point first to the friendly staff who will do anything to please them. Then to our clubroom concept, with complimentary refreshments, a European-style breakfast buffet and an evening wine and cheese reception. They might also mention free Wi-Fi, bottled water, cappuccino machine, and the comfortable, pleasing environment.

Behind this is the owners commitment to spending resources on enhancing the guest experience instead of on high administrative and marketing costs. We trust that if we do all we can to delight our guests, they will support our marketing and sales efforts by spreading the word and returning. With the help of social media, they tell the world exactly what to expect. Thats great, because each of our hotels has its own personality and flavor. And that leads to better and more frequent reviews.

Which social media platforms do you use?

Facebook, Twitter, Linked In, TripAdvisor and any other review sites that allow us to enhance our listing or communicate with potential customers. We tried a blog for a while but it was too time-consuming. I would rather get stronger with Facebook, Twitter and travel review sites. We have small hotels and a lean team. We do not have the resources for a dedicated social media person; we each try to take a few minutes out of our day to see what people are saying and how we can participate in the conversation.

What steps do you follow when you get a negative review?

Its hard to hear bad comments, but we learn from our guests and grow better each day. Every negative comment is reviewed by senior management. We find out as much as we can about what happened and we determine the actions needed to improve, in all four hotels if necessary. Sometimes we contact the traveler privately. We reply publicly if comments are so strong it would look strange and uncaring if we didnt. Or it may be a topic we want to address with the TripAdvisor community to ensure it wont be a problem for them. Some comments are so interesting its best to say nothing at all; we trust savvy travelers will take them with a grain of salt.

What do you do to encourage guests to write reviews?

The secret is to make guests feel they have found something so special they want to share it with the world. There is no shortcut or marketing ploy. Its about hard work and genuine hospitality. After our guests check out, we send an email to thank them and invite them to write about us on TripAdvisor, along with a link. Thats it.

What advice would you pass along to hotels who aspire to similar accomplishments?

Give up the notion that there is a shortcut. Just be the best hotel you can be every single day. Treat every guest as though they were the most important travel writer in the world, because indeed they may very well be.

Note: TripAdvisor rankings can vary from week to week. Visit HKHotels at www.hkhotels.com.



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