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Ms. Frank

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## Hotel Websites: When Standing Still Means Going Backward

By [Tema Frank](#), President, Web Mystery Shoppers International Inc.

The percentage of people who have researched hotels online is continuing to increase. So are the numbers of those who have actually made hotel reservations online, with 77% of approximately 600 US-based Internet users in a recent study saying they had done so. This means that not only are your prospective customers likely to find you and book with you online, they are very likely to have visited competitors' sites and have a "standard" in mind to which they are comparing you.

Overall, hotel and online travel agency sites have improved since 2003. The percentage of shoppers getting error messages on hotel booking sites has dropped from 15% to 13%. The error messages are easier to understand and the errors are easier to fix. More sites have moved to plain English error messages, and have eliminated some of the more common errors. For example, more sites will now accept a phone number entered in varying formats, such as with or without brackets around the area code. After all, why make your users go through hoops to figure out which format they need to use when simple programming can make your system accept it either way?

Yet despite such improvement, the study of 23 hotel and travel agency web sites saw a significant drop in the number of shoppers who were willing to continue beyond the sites' home pages (from 93% in 2003 to 89%). There were also fewer respondents willing to recommend the sites they visited to friends (down from 4.32 out of 5.0 in 2003 to 4.10).

Even more troubling was that some of the sites taking the biggest plunge in consumer satisfaction had not changed much during the two years. One site appears to have been exactly the same except for a different promotion. Yet it went from being the second most highly ranked site in terms of overall experience in 2003 to one of the lowest ranked sites today. What happened?

In that particular case, one obvious difference in the site was the promotion that the company was running at the time of the second study. Perhaps it simply didn't appeal to the site visitors. The promotion in 2003 was a chance to win a portable DVD player. This year's promotion showed a grey-haired couple wearing leis and drinking a cocktail out of a pineapple (promoting a chance to win trip to Hawaii). It seems likely that these promotions would appeal to a different segment of the market, and it is possible that the earlier one appealed more to mainstream Internet users than the more recent one.

Surprisingly, though, the comments made by the people testing this company's site did not focus on the new promotion. While a few did comment on disliking the picture on the home page, most of the comments made had to do with the navigation and other more structural concerns. For example:

"I would not automatically check the boxes for being a [Rewards Club] Member, or receiving [Hotel X] e-mails. I do not appreciate having a business decide that they are going to send me information that I do not need." As a result, this person later went on to comment, "I

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## Hotel Wi-Fi: Balancing Budget & Bandwidth

By [Craig Ziegler](#), President, SuiteLinq, Inc.

Ten to fifteen years ago, the need for Wi-Fi connectivity in a hotel was based on the guests' needs for basic data and voice transfer. Today, multiple technologies are converging thus creating a major stress point on bandwidth allocation. Bandwidth that was once more than sufficient is no longer efficient. With the ever-increasing demand for bandwidth via guests' personal devices and desire for video transmission, hotels must analyze the metrics between costs and ROI. The debate now becomes... does the hotel offer it free of charge, thus "eating the cost for the increased demand", or do hotels create incremental revenue through various streams to help cover the cost increase in bandwidth to deliver this content? And, if the hotel wants to increase its revenue streams, in what unique ways can it be supplemented? [READ MORE](#)



## Wi-Fi's New Revenue Opportunity and Operating Liabilities

By [Colby Goff](#), Senior Vice President of Strategy and Business Development, Boingo Wireless

don't think this organization will respect my privacy by checking the box to automatically enroll me in [Rewards Club]. It is possible that [Rewards Club] will sell my information to someone else."

This is a clear example of how consumer expectations have changed. Two years ago, people were far less aware of and concerned about privacy and security on web sites. What concerns they had were usually focused on fears of making credit card payments online, not on e-mail. And since most people were not bombarded by nearly as much e-mail as they are today, they were less likely to object to being added to a list that might result in e-mail.

What other sorts of changed expectations may be hurting your chances of increasing web-generated bookings?

- **Pictures.** People now expect pictures of hotel rooms and facilities. They are reluctant to book without seeing the room first. But you have to be sure to provide these pictures in a way that does not slow down your page loading speeds. Make sure your techies are using image compression.
- **Professionalism.** Your home page (and all the other pages) must look professional. They must make it clear, right from the start, that this is a hotel site, run by experienced, well-organized people. This applies to both your images and what you say. Cute pictures that do not relate to your hotel detract. As one shopper put it, commenting on a site that did not meet industry appearance standards, "The information is very general which would make me unsure that it is a real company. It looks like something a person would make at home rather than a professional web site."
- **Forget "stickiness".** Today's consumers want speed and efficiency. This means you have to have a clear focus to each page, so they are not getting confused by multiple offers and unclear links to follow. Even though average page loading speeds are perceived to have improved in the past two years, the ability to find what shoppers were looking for quickly and efficiently is worse than two years ago. "Stickiness" is an outdated concept. People don't want to spend more time than they have to at hotel sites. They have a goal to accomplish. Help them do so quickly and easily.
- **Balanced page lengths.** In studies a few years ago, many consumers complained about having to fill out online forms that were too long. Long forms looked intimidating, so people were reluctant to tackle them. As a result, many companies swung too far in the opposite direction, with forms split into many pages with only one or two questions on each. While this looks less daunting at first, waiting for each new page to download gets annoying quickly, especially for the half the population that is still using dial-up connections. Be sure to only ask for information that you really need, and strike a balance on page length. And always let people know how much more they have to do in order to complete the process.
- **Clear pricing.** Most of the non-hotel competitors for online bookings (e.g. agency sites such as Expedia, Travelocity and Orbitz) now give shoppers a good idea of what their total costs will be, including taxes. Consumers expect the same of your hotel site, and resent hidden fees and taxes. Unclear pricing information makes them hesitant to trust your other claims.
- **Fast turn-around.** People now expect instant confirmations of bookings and other correspondence. If they send you an e-mail and do not get a confirmation immediately and a full answer by the next day, they will question your reliability. Make sure your back-end systems are such that all e-mails do get answered thoroughly and quickly. And provide a toll-free number for them to call if they still have any questions.

So how do you know when it is time to update your site? The most obvious indication is if your online conversion rate - the percentage of site visitors actually booking with you -- is dropping. If you are not measuring your conversion rates, you should be.

Rather than waiting until damage is already being done (as seen by a dropping conversion rate) you may wish to run quarterly, or at least semi-annual, assessments of how your site compares to your major competitors' sites. Keep screen shots of what key pages of each site looked like at the time of each test, so you can see major changes at a glance. Then get some people (preferably people who do not know your site or business very well) to actually try to use your site and those of your key competitors. Find out what they like better about the other sites. What they like (and dislike) about your site. This may seem like a lot of work, but given the steadily increasing trend towards online research and booking of hotel stays, you cannot afford to let your web site slip.

Tema Frank is president of Web Mystery Shoppers International Inc. Her company's proprietary website assessment uses an ever-changing panel of some 50,000 people testing web sites from their own computers and providing detailed feedback. Her company has produced research insights that have been valued by companies such as Expedia, Sabre Holdings (Travelocity), Travelweb, OctopusTravel, and many others. She serves on the research committee of the Web Analytics Association and on the Editorial Board of User Experience magazine. Ms. Frank can be contacted at 780-444-5645 or [tema@webmysteryshoppers.com](mailto:tema@webmysteryshoppers.com) [Extended Bio...](#)

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Over the last five years, the wireless data world experienced fundamental changes that shifted the focus of Wi-Fi network operators from a niche market of laptop users to a mainstream base of smartphone users. The proliferation of devices and the explosion of data intensive apps have placed increasing pressure on Wi-Fi networks to support the digital lifestyle of a larger audience. This market growth is accompanied by a rise in security exploits and an increase in requests for information from government agencies. The newest opportunity in this landscape - 3G/4G data offload - presents a revenue opportunity that offsets increased operating costs and capital improvements required. [READ MORE](#)



## Hotel Internet Security Concerns

By Ian Millar, Deputy Director of INTEHL, Ecole Hôtelière de Lausanne

For many months now the internet has not been one of the nicest places to exist. From the actions of anonymous, to the implementation of SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Acts) implemented by U.S representative Lamar S. Smith, the work of the movement Antisec, and even NASA admitted early this month that Hackers gained "full functional control" of key Nasa computers in 2011, which unsurprisingly came from Chinese IP addresses. Mr Martin of NASA outlined how the agency suffered "5,408 computer security incidents" between 2010 and 2011. [READ MORE](#)



## Hotel Wi-Fi: The Biggest Challenges and Recommended Solutions

By Jeremy Rock, Principal & Founder, RockIT Group

Wireless Internet is changing the way business gets done in the hotel industry. There's a tremendous demand for wireless access - for overnight guests and even for conferences and trade shows where video streaming, audio streaming and voice-over-IP are all competing for the same Internet pipe. It's not just for email and web surfing anymore. Wireless has also created new ways for hotels to connect with their guests to generate loyalty. Wi-Fi has become a standard amenity. It's becoming a determining factor on where guests choose to stay. But few guests would say they're happy with the current sign-up and security concerns of hotel Wi-Fi. With mobile media hitting the mainstream, hotels are eager to find affordable and non-disruptive solutions to meet guest demand for reliable, consistent in-building cellular coverage. [READ MORE](#)



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Bill Kotrba of JDA Software explores hotel pricing, and provides an interesting perspective on the psychology behind numbers and how hotels can maximize revenues by sticking to a numerical formula. A very interesting article indeed!

**HotelExecutive.com - Business Review - Do Hotel Prices Really Need to End In 9?, by Bill Kotrba**  
[hotlelexecutive.com](http://hotlelexecutive.com)

Is pricing ending in 9 an outdated 20th century carryover from the pre-e-commerce era? Does anyone care anymore that the last digit of a price is when

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*Coming Up In The June Online Hotel Business Review*



**FEATURE FOCUS**  
**Hotel Sustainable Development: Principles and Best Practices**

Sustainability is now a daily topic that affects every facet of hotel development and operations. As hotelier Hervé Houdré recently noted "The goal of Sustainable Development is clearly to secure economic development, social equity, and environmental protection. As much as they could work in harmony, these goals sometimes work against each other". In the June Hotel Business Review, some of the industry's most recognized sustainable development experts come together to identify emerging trends and discuss how sustainability is currently affecting the hotel industry. Each author presents the most important aspects of sustainable development of much interest to hotel owners, operators,

*"Hotel Business Review offers weekly articles for hotel management and operation and discussion on emerging growth markets."*

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