

Generic Search on the Internet Can be Elusive for Hotels - What is Your Hotel Website's Search Ability? - By Neil Salerno 02 /16/09

Today, more than ever before, hotels need the exposure and marketing power that only the Internet can provide from a cost-effectiveness standpoint. Your website may look great, but can Internet searchers find it through generic search?

Obviously, your website needs to be seen before it can begin to do its job. This requires a good search engine plan to expose your site to Internet visitors. More than 70% of hotel guests search the Internet to find a hotel before booking a room. Everyone is familiar with the term, search engine optimization, but SEO is a very broad expression, which represents several important elements necessary for generic search.

SEO includes site design which conforms to search engine guidelines, suitable site navigation, a good link strategy and deployment, proper site code development, and, most importantly, keyword-rich site content (text). Without these things, your site may be attractive and contain all the details of your hotel, but it could also be totally ineffective in generic search.

Some website marketers attempt to bypass poor site design by telling you that search engine optimization is simply keyword and search engine submission. The unfortunate truth is that a hotel website's design, navigation, links, code, and content must all be compatible with search to begin with. Making certain that all these design elements are correct is the first, most important, step in getting acceptable generic search results.

Search Engine Spiders

A search engine spider is a program or automated script that visits web pages and makes a copy of the source code for later processing and indexing by the search engine. Search engines don't always enter your site from the home/index page, in fact, every page should be designed as a possible entry point. This is why every hotel website needs a site map to enable spiders to crawl all available pages.

Please keep in mind that a search engine spider does not "see" your site the same way as an Internet user does. It only sees the source code within the hidden portion of your site and the text content in the visible part of the site, no images, no graphics, only text. To the untrained eye, the source code is gibberish, but it's totally critical to your site. This adds yet another significant factor to the design and development of your website.

Another important factor in search engine algorithms is the order in which they index the text and links on your site, those within the body of a page are given higher priority. Yet, we see many hotel websites, with text written by techies or individuals unfamiliar with the methods for creating searchable and compelling sales text. Content is still king. The text on your website is totally essential to its ability to be found by generic search and to drive visitors to your booking page.

It is always a good idea to make sure that each page on your site is no larger than 100KB. MSN-Live and Ask don't index body text larger than 102KB. No matter how little or how much you spent to develop your site, these elements are extremely important.

The fact is that your hotel's location is equally as important as your facilities and service. People first choose a location before selecting a hotel within that location. Location information includes attractions, major businesses, popular dining and shopping areas and local activities all boost your site's generic search ability.

There are many good hotel website developers anxious to do business with you, but the same way guests will buy your rooms based upon value-received, and not price alone, this is the same way you should seek a site developer. Please don't accept the simplistic view that all you need is an attractive website describing the facilities and services of your hotel. There's a lot more involved to develop a functional website.

People familiar with my articles realize that I usually avoid going into this kind of technical detail, after all, I am a hotel marketer, first and hotel website developer, second. But, I did, in this case, partly out the frustration I feel when I see hotel websites, which look attractive, but are not functional from a search and/or sales viewpoint.

Most Common Generic Search Inhibitors

After viewing literally hundreds of hotel websites, we have found the following most common website design errors.

- Poor planning of the overall design and lack of functionality of the site.
- Failure to include effective Title and Description Tags
- Poorly conceived navigation and lack of sufficient keyword-rich body text (content).
- Lack of code attributes and keyword phrases
- Lack of heading tags in paragraph hierarchy
- Lack of sufficient location and attractions information

Stephen Covey states, in his top-selling book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, "Begin with the end in mind". This should be a factor whether or not you are looking to have your existing website optimized or considering a totally new one. In this case, beginning with the end in mind means employing a site developer who will take ownership and responsibility for the reservations performance of your site.

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