



Points of view

Monitoring and managing one's online reviews and reputation has become one of the most important but time-consuming elements of day-to-day operations. How can hoteliers ensure this still-evolving discipline is performed to the best of their abilities? Abi Millar talks to **Mike Gathright**, SVP of reservations and customer care at Hilton, and **Renu Hanegreefs-Snehi**, VP of corporate communications, PR & reputation management at Radisson Hotel Group, to find out.

It's a nightmare scenario for any hotel – a whole party of guests have been online and left a slew of negative reviews. Not only were those guests unhappy and unlikely to book again, but would-be guests may see the reviews and refrain from staying with you.

The situation is particularly difficult because, given the rise of third-party review sites such as TripAdvisor, hotels don't have much control over what is posted. Gone are the days when a dissatisfied customer would simply write you a letter to complain, maybe discouraging others through word of mouth. These days, they have multiple platforms to vent their frustrations, and word of that frustration can travel far.

"We live in a world where product reviews are often the first place we go when making purchasing decisions, so online reviews are incredibly important for a hotel's reputation," says Mike Gathright, SVP of reservations and customer care at Hilton. "In fact, research shows 88% of consumers trust online reviews written by other consumers as much as they trust suggestions from their personal network, and 80% of Americans seek out opinions from review sites before making a purchase."

Knowledge is power

This means that for hotels concerned about their reputation the dawn of social media may have come as a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it makes them vulnerable to public criticism. On the other hand, it gives them a clearer insight into what guests are really thinking, creating opportunities for those who could work out how to harness that information.

"We encourage our hotels to not think about their reviews as stand-alone feedback, but to monitor how sentiment is trending over time," says Gathright. "A key benefit to the age of online reviews is that it provides a means for hotels to actively leverage feedback to make continuous improvements to their products and processes."

In other words, that nightmare 'bad review' scenario might actually be an important spur to change, provided you adopt the right strategy. As Renu Hanegreefs-Snehi, vice-resident of corporate communications, PR & reputation management at Radisson Hotel Group (RHG), explains, the job has many facets.

"Reputation isn't only about a hotel – it's about the brand, the corporation as a whole and the people or management behind it," she says. "Social media is a powerful tool for helping us build and protect that reputation, by responding instantly and consistently."

She adds that it's crucial to monitor what's being said online and step in when necessary.

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– Mike Gathright

"We use a combination of tools to ensure that we capture what is being said about our brands and hotels, and what is trending in the world so we can become part of these conversations," she says. "If anything negative is posted by a guest on any channel, we try to reach out to the guest as quickly as possible, understand the situation and take appropriate action."

This means that while the occasional dissatisfied guest is a fact of life it doesn't automatically need to hurt your reputation. Pinpointing the source of their dissatisfaction and addressing it quickly is key to managing the situation.

"We want to ensure we never miss a beat, or an opportunity to make every moment matter for our guests," says Hanegreefs-Snehi.

With regard to whose job this is, there is no single answer. On one hand, it falls to each individual hotel to deal with issues promptly. On the other hand, one of the key roles of any hotel group is to boost its reputation and branding.

"Our hotels are responsible for managing their own online reviews, though we provide holistic support from a corporate level," says Gathright. "We also act as a backstop, so if for some reason a hotel hasn't stepped in to respond to negative feedback within a set period of time, we are able to step in and help the guest."

Many hotel groups also appoint in-house social media specialists to ensure they're effectively engaging with their audience.

They might use various social media management solutions, which can be used to search for keywords in real time. RHG, for instance, uses Brandwatch, Engagor, Trackr and media monitoring tools.

For managing online reviews, it recently entered into a global agreement with ReviewPro to deploy the company's Guest Experience Improvement Suite across all its hotels. Given today's fractured digital landscape, with reviews posted across many disparate sites and platforms, software of this nature is becoming essential.

"Artificial intelligence is also something that we are looking at, to help automate some of our processes in communications and monitoring," says Hanegreefs-Snehi. "As Steven van Belleghem, founder of Nexxworks and Snackbytes says, computers deliver and humans overdeliver – we want to offer the best of both to our guests."

As this 'best of both' philosophy makes clear, it would be wrong to suggest that reputation management is an impersonal enterprise, or that social media experts are in any way displacing the role of hotel managers.

"No monitoring tool or guest management intelligence system can ever



Negative or positive comments on social media can make or break a business, and hotels are employing teams of people to monitor and maintain their online reputation.

replace the power of a human relationship, especially in a people business like hospitality,” says Hanegreefs-Snehi. “Good customer service is the bedrock of creating and sustaining a good reputation. Without that, all the social media tools in the world can’t protect a brand.”

On top of this, the physical and digital realms may increasingly be viewed as two aspects of the same experience. For instance, Hilton is piloting a platform based on what it calls ‘social listening at a property level’ – meaning they aim to take advantage of social media insights on a hotel-by-hotel basis.

“This increases our ability to respond operationally rather than just online. This might mean finding a ‘surprise’ or ‘delight’ – an opportunity to celebrate for those who are on-site for a birthday or anniversary in real time,” says Gathright.

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He adds that online reputation management should be tackled through a hospitality lens first and foremost.

“We strive to meet guests where they are – whether it’s on a traditional review site, social media channel or, of course, in person at a front desk,” he says.

“One way that hotels may passively encourage guests to leave a review is by having comment cards at the front desk, which include the hotel’s social media handles. If a guest goes out of their way to mention a positive experience, then the hotel may suggest that they also leave the feedback online.”

Hanegreefs-Snehi adds that reputation predominantly comes down to honest and timely communication.

“Say what you mean and mean what you say – it’s really that simple,” she says. “From our brand promise, to brand standards to delivery at our hotels. We promise and we deliver. As long as our teams understand the promise, and can deliver it infallibly, our guests will continue to give us positive reviews and return to us.”

This means reputation management is about far more than damage limitation. Rather than being a solely reactive discipline, it gives hotels the chance to proactively improve the guest experience. And through a well-thought-out social media strategy,

hotels can forge new connections with their guests.

“Social media is fast paced, conversations shift quickly and news dies out fast,” says Hanegreefs-Snehi. “It’s our job to set the conversation and be part of those that matter to our industry and consumers.”

Getting the message out there

As a result, RHG strongly believes strongly in the ‘power of co-creation’. It uses a network of social media influencers, who bring its hotels’ stories to life in their own voice and style. It also sees video as a huge opportunity, and would like to expand its influencer network to include YouTubers. Since social media is a noisy space, reputation management needs to focus on finding ways to cut through all the online chatter.

“Words are powerful, and with a surge in social media platforms in the last 15 years, everyone has an arena in which to voice their opinions,” says Hanegreefs-Snehi. “As communicators, we need to build trust by telling the truth and being transparent and sincere. Companies that embrace the principles of their customers will be those that survive and thrive.”

Gathright agrees that customer expectations are growing, placing the onus on hotels to listen hard and be responsive. “We know that our guests expect service across the entire customer journey – from booking and pre-arrival until they check-out. Feedback on any part of this process can have a major impact on a hotel’s reputation, so it’s essential for hotels to recognise and facilitate this interaction and learn from it,” he says.

Clearly, reputation management is about more than just the occasional PR campaign. And the odd bad review need not be cause for concern. More important are the thousands of everyday experiences and interactions, which cumulatively shape a hotel group’s image for better or worse.

“Reputation takes years to build,” points out Hanegreefs-Snehi. “We invest a lot of effort in ensuring that we do everything we can to guard our reputation – day and night, across all our markets, all our hotels. And when things do go wrong – despite our best efforts – we do everything possible to make it right.” ■