

## case study

# The Development of Responses to Social Media Reviews in the Lodging Industry

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## Introduction

Managers in hospitality operations must be familiar with the various websites that provide a forum for public comments. User-Generated Content (UGC) is a form of social media. There are numerous UGC websites that exist, for example, Yelp, TripAdvisor®, Expedia, Orbitz, Google+, Yahoo!, and Angie's List. TripAdvisor® is a website with great opportunities for management to interact with their customers.

Demographical analysis on the millennial generation, also known as Generation Y, vary in terms of the age ranges for the date of birth of individuals in this category, however, most researchers generally agree on the range to be those born between the early-1980's to 2001 (Dublin, 2005; Shih & Allen, 2007). This group is said to have an intense level of connectivity to mobile devices, the Internet, and cell phones. This generation can be considered a vital component for the continued evolution of social media as well as a source for product information (Mangold & Smith, 2012). While these individuals know how to perform specific technological tasks, they are not actually as technology savvy as once believed (Banwell & Gannon-Leary, 2000). Current students, planning personal travel arrangements, do not necessarily examine websites that include UGC. It is critical for hospitality students to be aware of UGC websites, like TripAdvisor®, their impact, and understand their importance.

## Learning Outcomes

- Be able to critique management responses as posted on TripAdvisor®
- Identify an appropriate management response to user reviews as posted on TripAdvisor®
- Create procedures for responding to User-Generated Content

## Background Information

Social media platforms capitalize on various methods of communication; the most prevalent is the transformation of traditional word-of-mouth to an online (e.g. electronic) platform, known as electronic-word-of-mouth. Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) is a consumer-dominated channel of marketing communication where the

sender is independent of the market (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007).

This online communication is based on the traditional Word-of-Mouth (WOM). eWOM is a way in which individuals share information about a business, company, service, and/or experience. This concept originates from multiple consumers that discuss the attributes of a range of products in order to provide insight to others about the product (Sparks & Browning, 2011). Consumers are willing to have trust in this communication exchange as it will provide them with information needed to base their perceptions of the lodging operation and their purchasing decision (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004).

One way that eWOM has been successful is through the use of content generated by individual users referred to as User-Generated Content which consists of online comments, profiles and photographs produced by consumers (Wilson, Murphy, & Fierro, 2012). It is a mixture of facts and opinions, impressions and sentiments, founded and unfounded tidbits, experiences, and rumors (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2006). Similar in nature to eWOM, a person with an opinion (about a product or service) shares their beliefs, views, and experiences with other people (Ahuja, Michels, Walker, & Weissbuch, 2007).

Due to the need and opportunities to share this type of information, various websites offer mechanisms for guests to share their opinions and comments about a recent or previous travel related experience. There are numerous websites, which feature online reviews by users, such as Expedia, Orbitz, TripAdvisor®, and Yelp!, however for the purposes of this case study, TripAdvisor®, will be the platform that will be examined. An Online Review (OR) is an electronic version of traditional WOM, which consists of comments, published by travelers regarding their experiences with tourism products, services, and brands (Filiari & McLeay, 2013). An online review is a review of any aspect of a vacation, such as accommodations, restaurants and destinations (Burton & Khammash, 2010). There are two roles that an online review will play in social influence; informant and recommender (Jalilvand, Esfahani, & Samiei, 2011; Park, Lee, & Han, 2007). An informant is an online consumer reviewer who delivers additional user-oriented information; while a recommender, provides a positive or negative review of a product (Jalilvand et al., 2011; Park et al., 2007). There are two types of reviews, consumer-generated reviews, which are based on personal experience, and professionally written reviews, which are based on a professional's review such as restaurant critic reviews (Park et al., 2007; Zhang, Ye, Law, & Li, 2010).

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When these various websites first started to offer the opportunity for consumers to share their feedback, they did not address the opportunity for the management of the business operations to respond to each review. Hence, in the unveiling of these websites, many business owners quickly became frustrated with these websites and failed to embrace them. Over time, the website operators learned that in order to be more successful, they needed to partner with the business operators by allowing them to interact and engage with their consumers. Hence, the website operators developed systems that were more user-friendly toward the business operators whereby the operators were able to log-in to the systems in order to comment on user reviews and update basic information about their business as it appeared on the site. In addition, training tools and workshops were available in order to learn and understand how the website would work and how the manager could respond.

A management response is a carefully crafted written response, to an online review, it is written and shared by a member of management at the hotel. Travel websites, such as TripAdvisor®, provide options for the owner or operator of a hotel or other business to respond to a posted review; known as right-of-reply (Cunningham, Smyth, Wu, & Greene, 2010). While a management response to a review has a significant positive impact on online customer bookings, it often has not widely been used by management as some managers fail to even read the published reviews, let alone respond to them. Several reasons could account for managers slow adoption to response-writing; a shift from early adopters to more mainstream users, sensitivity to reputation, increased competition in the market place, and the possibility of fraudulent reviews (Cunningham et al., 2010). Responding to reviews, both positive and negative, can allow guests to see and engage with an individual from the hotel (Chipkin, 2012).

Users of TripAdvisor® find written reviews by others to be more helpful than facts presented on company websites (TripAdvisor, 2014). Barsky and Honeycutt (2011) determined that consumers view TripAdvisor® as a reliable source for obtaining customer satisfaction information for a hotel. The Global Online Consumer Survey by Nielsen (2009) reported that 90% of consumers trust the recommendations from people they know, yet 71% still trust consumer opinions posted in an online format. A review of various travel websites (e.g. TripAdvisor®, Yelp, Yahoo!, Google+, Orbitz, and Expedia) can identify the various customer comments as they relate to the service experience encountered at hotels. In today's environment, hospitality operations need to be aware of the impact of the posted reviews and ratings that have become a part of reputation management. In general, consumers have a propensity to trust well-established review sites (Barsky & Honeycutt, 2011). For this reason, TripAdvisor® will be the website tool used for illustration in this case study in order to examine guest and management feedback.

## Information about TripAdvisor®

Steve Kaufer established TripAdvisor® (TA) in 2000 in Needham, MA (TripAdvisor, 2014). According to TripAdvisor (2014) the site is considered to be one of the top travel websites, for number of active users, having the highest number of reviews, and unique monthly site visits, followed by Booking.com and Expedia.com. TripAdvisor® is the leading forum for travelers, allowing them to share opinions and comments (Jeacle & Carter, 2011). Its purpose is to provide user reviews based on a first-hand experience that a guest encounters within a hotel or restaurant. Users have the ability to share a review of their experiences with specific properties so that other travelers have a chance to read the information and make informed decisions on their travel plans.

TripAdvisor® has over 3.7 million businesses listed; of which more than 1.25 million are lodging accommodations, 1.1 million restaurants, 116,000 destinations, and 259,000 attractions (TripAdvisor, 2014). The website has over 260 million unique monthly visitors, which provide over 90 user contributions every minute (TripAdvisor, 2014). Users are also allowed to post photographs from their trips; which account for over 19 million candid traveler photos on the site (TripAdvisor, 2014). In total there are over 150 million reviews and opinions available on the site.

TripAdvisor® uses a proprietary algorithm to rank each accommodation (Payea, 2013). There are many variables that go into determining the algorithm. However, the three most important factors include quality, as reported by the traveler, the recency of the written post, and the quantity of reviews per property (Payea, 2013). The rank of each hotel is presented on a five-point scale. Each point on the scale is referred to as a bubble; one bubble is the lowest and five bubbles is the highest rank.

Over time, the percentage of consumers consulting TripAdvisor® prior to booking a hotel, and the number of reviews they read for each hotel, has increased steadily (Anderson, 2012). A recent study found that 80% of respondents read between six to twelve reviews prior to making their travel decisions; yet, the most recent reviews are of more importance as they are considered fresh feedback (Hospitality Net, 2014; PhoCusWright, 2013). Interestingly, researchers have found that the first reviews that a hotel receives tend to rate the property on the low end of the scale (Melián-González, Bulchand-Gidumal, & López-Valcárcel, 2013). As such, when a hotel has few online reviews, the ratings tend to be negative. Conversely, when the number of reviews for a property increase, these reviews tend to be more positive (Melián-González et al., 2013). As these rating scores rise, it is possible for hotels to profit from the increase. In fact, Anderson (2012) found that an increase in a rating score of 1-point could result in an increase of 11.2% in the price that a hotel charges, while maintaining occupancy and market share.

Because there is more benefit in ranking placement as compared to having an increase volume of reviews for a hotel the parameters for

review removal is not an easy process. Hence, there are only four ways for a review to be removed from the TripAdvisor® website; first is a change of brand, second is a change in owner, and third a major renovation of the hotel. One additional way is through a review dispute, where a hotel requests that TripAdvisor® investigates the review to determine whether it meets the site's content guidelines (Payea, 2013). If TripAdvisor® determines that the review does not meet the guidelines it would be removed (Payea, 2013). While TripAdvisor® does have a content integrity investigation team where fraudulent reviews can be investigated based on the request of a hotel operator (Payea, 2013), technically, there is no security feature to verify that a review is from an actual guest who recently stayed at a hotel versus an illegitimate review posted by an employee or competitor. However, TripAdvisor® requires that the users of their website create user accounts in order to be reviewers on the site. Once a review is written, it goes through a verification process. There are certain keywords the content integrity team examines to ensure legitimacy of the review; however, that is only one part of the extremely complex system (TripAdvisor, n.d.).

A user of the site acquires a status, based on the number of reviews that he/she posts on the website. The five status categories include: Reviewer, Senior Reviewer, Contributor, Senior Contributor, and Top Contributor. As users post reviews, they are rewarded by having their reviewer category level, referred to as badge status, increased based on the total number of reviews post. Individuals planning a trip are able to see the badge status of a reviewer on TripAdvisor®. As such, there is a tendency for trip planners to have a higher level of confidence in reviews posted by users with higher-level badge statuses.

## Online Review Importance

*Why should management respond?* In a market research study by PhotCusWright (2013), commissioned by TripAdvisor®, 77% of respondents noted that seeing a management response to a user review was important to them. Those same respondents said that 87% of the time, when selecting between two comparable properties, they would 'sway toward' selecting the property that provided a management response. In addition, 78% of respondents thought more highly of a hotel if there was a management response to a positive review (PhotCusWright (2013).

*Who should respond?* It is critical that a representative from the management team respond to reviews written online. In order for management to capitalize on the financial opportunities that exist with an increase in rank on TripAdvisor® a strategic plan must be put into place. Decisions should be made as to which person at the property is responsible for monitoring the reviews posted on the website, responding to the reviews posted, and ensuring the reviews are legitimate. Ideally, the response should be read and written by the General Manager of the lodging operation. However, in many situations this is not practical. Other managers that might respond could include, the

Guest Service Manager, the Front Office Manager, the Director of Sales, or the Sales Manager. Regardless of which person responds, the signature should appear consistent on all of the reviews.

*How can a lodging operation use feedback to implement change in an organization?* Many lodging organizations will obtain feedback from their guests in a traditional face-to-face method; either by asking them questions, hosting a management reception, having an engaging lobby ambassador program (where a manager stands in the lobby in the early morning or other busy times to direct traffic and answer questions from guests), or in-house guest surveys. Some properties will take more of an asynchronous approach to obtaining guest feedback. This can be seen at some chain branded hotels in which their corporate offices drive the collection of electronic guest survey responses. This is done via email in which the email addresses are collected from guests at the time a reservation is made or during the registration process. Upon checkout the guests are automatically sent an email with a link to an online survey asking about their experience at the hotel.

Obtaining feedback is only the first step. The more critical step that a lodging operation must engage in is the use of that feedback to implement strategic change. For example, in its online reviews a property might receive frequent comments about 'dated' or old looking rooms; the frequency of these posted comments might be enough motivation to implement change with a renovation. Upon completion of the renovation the hotel manager can respond back on the original reviews which expressed displeasure about the rooms and inform the guests, as well as others reading that review, that the hotel has taken action and completed a renovation. Some review websites, such as TripAdvisor®, allow for pictures to be posted, so management could also post a selection of pictures showcasing the 'new' appearance of the guestrooms.

## Management Situation

The following section explains a scenario designed to attempt to determine what a General Manager would do in a specific situation. Assume that you have recently been hired as the new General Manager of a mid-sized hotel. It seems that the prior General Manager failed to take guest comments seriously. The prior General Manager's poor management style has led to insufficient staff training, thus resulting in a service experience that left guests unsatisfied and willing to share their dissatisfaction on public review sites, like TripAdvisor®. In many instances guests have repeated the same concerns, yet the management team has failed to handle the situation. In this situation, you must read the reviews written by the guests whom have stayed at this hotel and determine an action plan for success.

## Exercises

- Identify the improvements that could be made in the "Examples of Management Responses of User-Generated Content". Provide specific examples.

- Write a management response for the “Examples of User-Generated Content”. Refer to Appendix 1 to assist in developing the response.
- Examine reviews posted for a hotel, on a social media website, that presents User-Generated Content (UGC). Identify challenges that the hotel might have based on the posted reviews. Based on the positive comments shared, identify the strengths of the hotel. Determine if the management responses are good or bad, based on the information available.
- Create a list of five to ten suggestions, which could be used by hotel management as an example of proper responses when responding to posted reviews.

## Examples of Management Responses to User-generated Content

Read the management response comments below and decide whether you think they are considered good or bad responses. Be able to explain your decision and re-write the bad responses. Refer to Appendix 1, titled “What is an example of a good management response?” This appendix provides an example of both a comment from the guest and the management’s response. It also provides feedback on the written management’s response and what components make it a good response.

### Management Response Example 1:

*“Thank you so much for bringing to our attention the issue with your car. Just to clarify the parking garage is owned and operated by the City and their outside contractor. Yes the hotel is located above the garage and guests are allowed to charge parking to their room. However none of the employees or parking revenues are shared with us. I am so sorry to hear of this incident. We have a great relationship with the City and their parking contractor and we as well will voice our displeasure with how their employee handled your situation. Rest assured this is an unusual circumstance and again we offer our apologies.”*

### Management Response Example 2:

*“U should have addressed this issue directly when it was happening instead of posting it in the reviews. We do not have a record of the incident you are speaking of in our system. So please let us know which days you stayed with us so we can verify what you are saying is true. We cannot help our customers solve the problems if we do not know there are any. Please keep this in mind next time you visit us. Gnrl Mgr”*

### Management Response Example 3:

*“Dear Madam, It is fantastic to know that you were so impressed by my concierge team, led by Head Concierge Lee Wood, who has himself been in the business for over 35 years. We strive to make sure that all of our guests needs are met and it is assuring*

*to hear that we met your expectations in terms of service and hospitality. Thank you for posting your great review and we shall look forward to your return,*

*Warm regards,*

*Douglas McHugh, General Manager”*

### Management Response Example 4:

*“Thank you for taking the time to provide your feedback. Our Great Park and fly package is no longer a secret. It’s quickly becoming a very popular package as our guests (and repeat guests) not only find it a great value, but also find it really takes the stress out of getting to the airport for those early flights. We look forward to seeing you on your next stay! Please do tell your family and friends about your experience with us. Word of mouth is one of our best friends as we have so many people come visit with us based on recommendations of loved ones. Next time please ask about our suite rooms.”*

## Examples of User-generated Content

Read the comments posted by users below. As the new manager of the hotel write a response to the comments. Be able to explain your decision. Refer to Appendix 1, titled “What is an example of a good management response?” This appendix provides an example of both the comment from the guest and the management’s response. It also provides feedback on the written management’s response and what components make it a good response.

### User Review Example #1

*“Not worth the money!” Reviewed November 12*

*“For a well-known hotel, it definitely did not meet expectations. The room itself was spacious. However, everything else was very disappointing. When we got to the front desk to check-in, the line was ridiculously long. During a high peak vacation time, and also at check-in time, they should definitely have more people working. But we waited in line for almost a half hour before we could finally start checking in. When we finally got to the room, we wanted to go to the swimming pool and relax. We called the concierge to see where it was, but twice they did not pick up. When they did the third time, the phone kept breaking and I could not hear what he was saying. So my wife and I decided to just go down and find it ourselves. When we got there, we were told that the saunas were under construction, which would have been nice if they had told us before hand. Overall, not an entirely awful place to stay but I would much rather stay at a cheaper hotel with friendlier staff, even if I had to give up on the swimming pool.”*

### User Review Example #2:

*“Disappointed, not worth the price” Reviewed October 28*

*We were thoroughly disappointed. The hotel feels like it has passed its prime and seems to survive on high prices, misguided guests and large functions. When paying the prices that the hotel charges, you expect a certain level of luxury. However, the decor is chintzy and rough around the edges, as if trying to dazzle the customer so they gloss over the structure of the hotel, like poor paint finishes, slamming doors, elementary bathrooms, ageing bedroom furniture, antiquated TV/internet/entertainment systems and service that pretends to be high class. Admittedly the views are good and their spa is worth a visit, but you can enjoy either without staying a night. Avoid it -- unless you have too much money and no taste!*

### **User Review Example #3**

"Loved the location & Staff BUT Barking dogs are permitted" Reviewed April 14

*I loved the hotel for its location and room decor. The staff was considerate and helpful. However to my shock & amazement this fairly expensive hotel allows dogs. We were located in a room next to a dog that barked incessantly at dinner time and early morning, perhaps when the owners left the room. The Front desk manager confirmed that dogs are permitted and placed in rooms throughout the hotel. There are NO dog-free floors. So if you are allergic or a light sleeper you might be careful. I would have rated this hotel higher if they told me about the pet policy so I could get a room far away from barking dogs. As a result there was little or no value for the money.*

## **Definitions**

*Consumer-Generated Content (CGC):* This is similar to User-Generated Content. CGC is found in the format of blogs, virtual communities, wikis, social networks, collaborative tagging, media sharing found on websites like YouTube and Flickr (Gretzel, 2006).

*Consumer-Generated Media (CGM):* CGM is considered to be one of the fastest-growing channels of interpersonal and informal communications methods (Jeong & Jeon, 2008). It is a form of word-of-mouth that serves informational needs by offering non-commercial, detailed, experiential, and up-to-date information with a reach beyond the traditional circle of friends (Yoo & Gretzel, 2011). Communication formats include discussion boards, blogs, social network sites, customer review sites, a specific company's testimony page, and independent online forums (Chipkin, 2005/2006).

*Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM):* A consumer-dominated channel of marketing communication where the sender is independent of the market (Brown et al., 2007). This concept originates from multiple consumers that discuss the attributes of a range of products in order to provide insight to others (Sparks & Browning, 2011). Consumers are willing to have faith in this platform as it will provide them with the information needed to base their perceptions of the firm and their

purchasing decision (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). The most prevalent form of eWOM is consumer reviews and ratings (Chatterjee, 2001).

*Management Responses:* A carefully crafted written response, to an online review, shared by a member of the management team at the hotel. Responding to reviews, both positive and negative, can allow guests to see and be a part of the engagement with an individual from the hotel (Chipkin, 2012).

*Online Reviews:* The travel industry considers an Online Review (OR) to be an electronic version of traditional word-of-mouth, which consists of comments, published by travelers regarding their experience on tourism products, services, and brands (Fileri & McLeay, 2013). An online review is a review of any aspect of a vacation, such as accommodations, restaurants and destinations (Burton & Khammash, 2010).

*Service Quality:* This is the comparison of performance to expectations. An underlying theme to service quality is that "perceptions result from comparison of consumer expectations with actual service performance" (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). Through the work of Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) in their focus groups; they were able to identify ten key categories, which are considered to be service quality determinants. The determinants are reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding, and tangibles (Parasuraman, et al., 1985).

*Social Networking:* This is a pre-established network of friends and acquaintances. Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile, (2) share a list of users they share information with and a connection, and (3) view and share information from their connections (Swift & Spurgeon, 2012). Examples would include, Facebook, Google+, and MySpace.

*User-Generated Content (UGC):* Similar to Consumer-Generated Content (CGC). Also known as Web 2.0 sites. It contains online comments, profiles and photographs produced by consumers (Wilson et al., 2012). It is "a mixture of fact and opinion, impression and sentiment, founded and unfounded tidbits, experiences, and even rumor" (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2006). Similar in nature to eWOM, as a person with an opinion (about a product or service) shares their beliefs, views, and experiences with others (Ahuja et al., 2007).

*Web 2.0:* The second generation of web-based services that have gained massive popularity by letting people collaborate and share information online in previously unavailable ways (Reactive, 2007).

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## Management Response Format

### WHAT IS AN EXAMPLE OF A GOOD MANAGEMENT RESPONSE?

#### REVIEW

"The most disappointing of 30 hotels/motels/apartments we stayed in over 9 weeks in Australia and New Zealand. It could/should be so much better, but non-existent soundproofing and uninterested staff made our stay a nightmare. Though we had welcome support on our final day from one staff member (Steve) it could not make up for two almost sleepless nights brought about by noise from neighboring rooms with young children. When we invited one staff member to come and listen to the children cavorting next door, his shrug of the shoulders and comment that it is an old building so there is not much soundproofing gives an idea of the level of service. Yet it is a beautiful building with good facilities and a prime location. Maybe a set of earplugs would make for an enjoyable stay."

#### Dear Guest

Thank you for taking the time to provide your feedback regarding our hotel. I am certainly disappointed that your stay was not all that it could have been.

I would like to apologize on behalf of the hotel and its team for your stay. Our standard procedure in this event would be to offer an upgraded room to you on a different floor as we do try to always allocate all our families with children together on the lower floors of the hotel as this is where our interconnecting rooms are located. The interaction with our staff member with regards to your comments about the noise is certainly not typical and I will be sure to raise your experience with our entire service team as a training exercise. I am pleased that your contact with Steve was memorable and I will be sure to thank him personally for this.

You may also be interested to learn that just this week we have started a full refurbishment of our guest rooms, as well as our lobby, bar and restaurant. Included in this refurbishment is brand new guest room carpet and a much thicker underlay which we believe will soften any noise coming into your room via any doorways. I would take pleasure in welcoming you back after our refurbishment is completed in February so that you could experience the hotel as it was meant to be. Please feel free to contact myself directly via the below details if you are travelling to Brisbane again so that I may personally take care of you and your next stay.

Once again please do accept my apologies and I do hope that the remainder of your trip to Australia and New Zealand was most enjoyable.

The reply starts by thanking the reviewer, then apologizes for the less than perfect experience.

It addresses the reviewer's specific points.

Next, the reply addresses the staff complaint, making sure that potential guests know that he is acting on the feedback. He then reinforces the positive note around the good service provided by one staff member.

He takes the opportunity to mention upgrades which will help resolve the room noise issue and enhance the communal areas.

He finishes with an apology and good wishes. The tone throughout is polite, professional and respectful.

\*A commissioned survey conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of TripAdvisor, "2010 Q4 Forrester/TripAdvisor Custom Online Survey"

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