

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

Introduction

TripAdvisor® is a website that started in 2000 (TripAdvisor, 2014). It has steadily grown to become one of the top rated travel websites on the Internet. The website is used by potential travelers to examine reviews written by previous travelers about their experiences at a hotel, restaurant or tourist destination. The usage of this case study will open the discussion for students to become familiar with this website, so they are better prepared to engage in the utilization of TripAdvisor® and sites like it upon graduation and entrance into the workforce. In addition the exercises provided will give students an opportunity to look at the development of a positive management response to an online review. This case will open the door for students to begin strategically thinking of how their on-line communication decisions and actions that could be used to implement change in a lodging operation.

Teaching Objectives

- To become familiar with the website, TripAdvisor®.
 - This particular website is one of the top rated travel website currently online. Students must become familiar with the online two-way method of communication so they are prepared to work with user-generated content websites when they are employed in the industry.
- To analyze guest and manager response comments.
 - Students should be able to examine the various reviews written by management at a variety of locations. Students will become familiar with ways in which a response should be written for maximum effectiveness.
- To develop positive methods for management to utilize in response to guest comments.
 - Based on the previous objective, students will be able to identify and create a list of the best methods that management can respond to reviews.

Suitability for Use/Intended Target Audience

This case study is intended for undergraduate students at the junior and senior level; as students at this level have had numerous foundation courses, possible internships or job experiences, and exposure to customer service experiences, which will provide them with a solid foundation of knowledge to the industry. Additionally, it could be used with first year graduate students, where they could take the development of management responses further by strategically implementing a plan to change a lodging operation based on the feedback. The various hospitality related courses that this case could be used in include: Lodging, Service Management, Human Resources,

Organizational Behavior, Technology, and Social Media.

Prior to Class

- Prior to class, students will be asked to read the case study.
- Students should examine and become familiar with the structure of review-based websites like, TripAdvisor®. Other websites can be reviewed, like Yelp!, Expedia, and Orbitz.
- Put the class into small groups and assign them a different hotel in a different city and state (or other location). Have them review the comments from that specific hotel prior to classroom discussion.

Class Implementation Outline

- Spend approximately 10 to 15 minutes reviewing the definition of terms such as eWOM, UGC, online reviews, and TripAdvisor®, if they have not already been covered in the class.
- Provide examples of reviews for the class to read; these can be taken directly from any hotel on the TripAdvisor® website. In order to give students more of a personal connection to the review, it is suggested to look at a local nearby hotel, such as a hotel in which the class or students have traveled to for a field trip or tour experience, if applicable. Then, have the students spend five to ten minutes independently reading these examples.
- Gather the class into groups and allow 10 to 15 minutes worth of discussion about the reviews and management responses written.

Class Instruction

- Review examples of User-Generated Content (UGC) by guests and managers to identify commonalities or best practice strategies that could be used by management.
- Have students use TripAdvisor® to select a hotel and examine the reviews and responses. Either the students can self-select a hotel or the instructor can identify properties in different cities, states, or countries. It is suggested to select properties that have managerial challenges or lower ratings. The higher rated award winning properties typically do not have as many negatives issues, thus they may have less discussion opportunities.

Sources and Methods of Collecting Information for the Case

TripAdvisor® is the recommended website for examining material. Go to www.tripadvisor.com. In the additional reading section of this teaching note are links to other documents that might be helpful in understanding the subject.

Review-based Website Information

In addition to the TripAdvisor® background presented in this case, below are details about other websites which offer review options.

Expedia

Expedia is an online travel agency assisting people in planning their business or leisure travel (“Expedia,” 2013). Specifically, Expedia specializes in vacation packages, and helps with planning everything involved in travel (“Expedia,” 2013). In October of 1996, Expedia, Inc. launched Expedia.com as Microsoft Expedia Travel Services (“Expedia,” 2013). Aside from Expedia.com, Expedia, Inc. also owns Hotels.com, Hotwire, Egencia, CarRentals.com, and Expedia Cruise Ship Centers (“Expedia,” 2013).

At the conclusion of a vacation, booked through Expedia travelers will receive an e-mail invitation, in order to submit a review (“Expedia,” 2013). Expedia does not allow posts to include profanity or personal insults, reports of criminal or violent activity, commercial phone numbers, website addresses, intimidation, harassment, or discrimination. Expedia asks that the posts focus on a description of the experience that is honest and detailed, uses common sense and good grammar, does not express frustration with Expedia’s site, does not release personal information, and does not plagiarize (“Expedia,” 2013). Images are allowed; however they must be a certain format, five megabytes maximum, at least 60 pixels tall and wide, and the photos may not be vulgar or plagiarized. The reviews are posted in an effort to help other Expedia members find the perfect place to stay (“Expedia,” 2013).

Yelp!

Yelp! is a free website where consumers can look for local businesses based on customer’s reviews. It was created in 2004; it now has over 117 million reviews (“Yelp!,” 2013). Business owners are able to set up their own accounts and post information and pictures of their establishments. Yelp! has business profiles including everything from hotels to dog parks. Reviews are submitted by anyone through the website and are examined by the Yelp! staff (“Yelp!,” 2013).

Orbitz

Orbitz was started in 1999, by a group of airlines in the United States (“Orbitz,” 2013). The investors included, American Airlines, Continental Airlines, Delta Airlines, Northwest Airlines and United Airlines. Orbitz covers all global online travel business, including airlines, cruises, hotels, vacation packages, and car rentals (“Orbitz,” 2013). This company targets computer savvy business and leisure travelers to make travel arrangements by providing them with a one-stop shop for travel bookings (“Orbitz,” 2013). This third-party website allows users to compare a variety of services (hotels, car rentals, and airline tickets) and prices compiled from multiple sources, of which they have direct buying access from the hospitality service companies (Toh, Raven, & DeKay, 2011).

When previous guests post reviews, Orbitz organizes them by type of traveler, such as business travelers, couples, or singles. A guest is able to write a message and rate the hotel overall on a scale of one to five. Additionally, they can rate categories of interest, including cleanliness, staff, and location. Finally, they can post tips, such as a “nightlife tip” or “time-saving tip” for future guests (“Orbitz,” 2013).

Questions Related to the Case Study

- How do you let others know when you have had a good or bad service experience?
- Why do you think consumers think websites, like TripAdvisor®, are important?
- What impact could responses from management have on potential guests’ choices to book?

Assessment

1. Management Response Examples:

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 of Minneapolis 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 the hotel. I am so sorry to hear of this incident. We have a great working 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 a very unusual circumstance and again offer our apologies.”*
- Potential items for student discussion:
 - This is a Negative response.
 - The response has numerous spelling errors. Management can explain part of the parking situation, but not to the level of detail in this response.

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”*
- Potential items for student discussion:
 - This is a Negative response. The response uses text abbreviations and attacks the guest and not the situation.

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"*
- Potential items for student discussion:
 - This is a Positive response. The response is a nice composition.

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."*
- Potential items for student discussion:
 - This is a Positive response. This response is nearly perfect; however, it could have included a greeting and salutation.

2. User-Generated Content Examples:

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."
- Suggested Management Response:
Dear Not worth the money,

Thank you for taking the time to share your review. I would like to apologize for failing to meet your expectations. During the time in which you stayed our hotel experienced several challenges, which resulted in the disappointing stay. Our staffing levels have been readjusted, as has an upgrade to our computer system. I apologize for the unfriendly staff in which you encountered, we have had a recent service training program, to assist them in handling challenging situations when our technology fails to work properly. They should have explained that our sauna was under renovation.

Once again, I would like to apologize for your experience. I would like to invite you to return to our hotel, so you can experience the improvements to our staffing and the state of the art sauna; please contact me directly.

*Joe Smith
General Manager*

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!

- Suggested Management Response:

Dear Mr. Disappointed, not worth the price,

Thank you for sharing your feedback about our hotel, I would like to apologize for the dissatisfaction you had with your recent experience. Our hotel was built in 1968 and certainly has been visited by many guests over the years. We are scheduled for a complete \$100 million renovation this December. As a hotel management team, we ourselves are really excited about the renovation, as it will address all of the concerns you addressed in your review. We are extremely proud of our spa and the services we provide our guests there. The views of the mountain are indeed stunning.

Once again, my sincere apologies for the discomfort you experienced with your recent stay. We expect that our renovations will be completed by May, and we would be honored to have you return to the hotel on your next trip to the city,

to experience it first hand; please contact me directly when booking your reservation.

Sincerely,

Sally Smith

General Manager

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.

- Suggested Management Response:

Dear Loved the location,

Thank you for sharing your experience with us about your recent stay. My sincere apologies, in failing to meet your expectations, during your recent experience at our exclusive hotel. We indeed do have a pet policy, however, after examining the policy further we have made some revisions to it. We have identified available rooms on the first floor of the hotel that will be available for pet friendly rooms, instead of throughout the hotel; this will help maintain a pet friendly environment while reducing the disturbance and allergen potential for future guests. In our new pet friendly contract, we have advised guests that pets are not to be left unattended in the guestroom; we hope this will help maintain barking control. In addition, we have added a sign at the front desk that informs all guests that we are pet friendly and a pet policy is in effect. In this manner we hope that should there be a disturbance by a furry friend, that other guests will feel comfortable reporting the disturbance so that the staff can address the situation immediately. We are certainly pleased that you enjoyed our spacious rooms with fine décor. This hotel is in the perfect location to enjoy all of the sights of the city.

I would once again like to apologize for the dog disturbances you encountered. I'm confident our changes will have a positive impact on your future stay.

Sincerely,

Mary Jane Smith

General Manager

3. Practical Recommendations

Students should list between five to ten items to be used in creating positive recommendations for management to follow when using a social media review websites for engaging with customers. If time permits, students may also be encouraged to list between five to ten recommendations that managers should avoid when using social review websites.

Items to consider for inclusion of positive recommendations (students' answers may vary):

- Check your reviews at least once every week, depending on the volume of reviews as well as the level of resources available at the hotel. Twice per week is preferable for hotels with frequent reviews; however, daily would be the best method to follow. TripAdvisor®, along with other websites, offer daily email updates with new reviews, if the user subscribes to the email alerts; this helps to stay on top of the situation.
- Log onto the website regularly to check the dashboard for new alerts to posts on the property page.
- Read the user comment; try and identify the guest if possible based on the description.
- Complete any necessary research about the guest stay, if necessary.
- Write a well-crafted response to the review. A hotel manager can resubmit a new response, to replace an existing response, whenever they choose. This is a good opportunity to update the public that the property on the information after a renovation.
- Write the response with all readers as your target audience because the reviewer is not notified of the response and may not read it. However, there is an opportunity to respond directly to a guest through the private message feature, where you can be more personal in your response if necessary.
- Include the following in your responses: A greeting, thank the guest for their review and the time it took to post/share, apologize for a legitimate complaint (provide a simple short explanation for what might have happened), explain how you have handled any issues, explain any amenities of the property, reinforce the strengths of the property by thanking the reviewer for any specific positive comments, relate in a personal way (be sincere), if possible acknowledge the reason for the visit (birthday, anniversary, honeymoon, etc.), invite the guest to return for a future visit, provide a way to contact the management (name, email, & phone number), thank them again, a salutation with name and title.
- Verify proper spelling and grammar prior to posting. Use a word editing program to write your comments and then paste them into the response field.
- Consider letting readers know that they can report any issues

directly to management during the time of their stay so that there is an opportunity to correct and resolve the problem immediately, thus improving their overall experience.

- Develop responses to be family-friendly, unique and independent, original, professional, relevant to all website users, respectful of personal privacy, and be written in the same language as the posted review.
- Respond to both positive and negative reviews. Show appreciation in a response by demonstrating to future guests that you value both positive and negative feedback.
- Mention services of the hotel or fill in additional details. For example, if the guest mentions the breakfast, in the management response let the future guests know what time the breakfast is served and what is typically on the menu.
- Create a spreadsheet of reviews and the guest badge status and note helpful vote totals. Consider monitoring the increase in vote totals over time.
- Develop a solicitation plan for obtaining additional reviews from loyal guests. (Make sure that this plan does not include any quid pro quo features or replace any service quality surveys used by the brand). In addition, make sure that the plan does not include the use of a specific computer in the hotel to write reviews, as the IP address for a post is tracked. TripAdvisor® offers Review Express, an automated email platform to ask recent guests to submit reviews.
- Create a program or method of documentation to use negative feedback to solve the problems that exist at the property; this will hopefully prevent future negative reviews.

Items to consider for inclusion of recommendations to avoid (students' answers may vary):

- Do not come across in an angry, defensive or 'nit-picky' fashion, blame or attack the guest, or publically question the reviewer's legitimacy.
- Do not promise a form of compensation if they return.
- Do not share personal guest information.
- Do not say you no longer want their business.
- Do not use a standard or template response. Be as personal as professionally possible.
- Do not encourage or ask management, associates, friends, or family to write reviews, as this has the potential to be flagged by TripAdvisor®.

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