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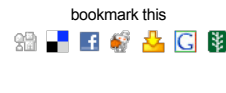
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All Atwitter About Twitter
 Is Twitter really as revolutionary as the media has been promising? Here's the answer
 Wednesday, May 13, 2009
 Caryn Eve Murray

In California, Sacramento's Citizen Hotel has 11,000 square feet of space for conferences and meetings, 198 rooms for guests – and as of early March, more than 350 tweeps.

"Tweeps" are proud, loyal followers – a fan club of sorts – tracking other subscribers to the interactive, microblogging web site known as Twitter. In mid-February, the downtown luxury boutique property – then, barely open two months - staked out its virtual real estate on the free popular social networking site known as much for its high profile as the succinctness of its messages. Since then the Citizen has posted its comments, all contained in 140 characters or fewer, that include:

"Check out our Napkin Wall of Fame in our bar Scandal! Find signatures from famous Sacramento favorites."

"Rev. Jesse Jackson stayed with us last night and met with Mayor Kevin Johnson and entourage this morning in Grange."

And, on another day, a simple, cheery: "Good morning tweeples!"

The Citizen Hotel, a Joie de Vivre property, is hoping for a lot more good mornings like that, too, according to Amy Dempster, director of sales and marketing for the hotel. "We just started a blog and Twittering; it is all brand brand new," she said. "Obviously the hope is that it creates a bit of a following and some interest about what is going on in the hotel and at the restaurant, on a day-to-day basis."

The chatty, personable online environment that has endeared Twitter to teens, working professionals and friends - hastily posting even the most minute comings and goings of their lives, from shopping trips to coffee breaks – is providing a warm welcome now for an increasing number of inns and hotels. They are using it to link visitors to their web sites, their blogs and ultimately, their reservations desk for bookings.

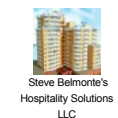
At the Citizen, different staff members share responsibility for posting facts about the hotel, events in the city, or fun trivia, and these short bites are fed automatically to anyone who subscribes to, or follows, the hotel's feed.

"We are pretty excited about this," Dempster said. The hotel's feed not only includes direct links to its web site, which has been online since October, but directs followers to the hotel's separate blog, and it even invites visitors to comment or ask questions which receive a personal online reply.

Twittering doesn't just raise eyebrows, it also raises the hotel's profile. "When you are out there in the world, traveling to Sacramento from Chicago, you may not know what the Citizen is," she said. "This lends credibility. It increases our ability to move higher on search engines."

"As well as being a real-time platform where we can genuinely connect and interact with customers and other constituents, Twitter complements our traditional sales strategies by enabling us to push out experiential packaging and timely rate offers to those who have a high level of interest in the brand," said Mike Taylor, Manager, Public Relations with Fairmont Hotels & Resorts and "Chief Twitterer" for the luxury hotel company. "Essentially, Twitter is the modern day word-of-mouth and it is extremely viral," adds Taylor. "If an offer or promotion is especially attractive or provides a high degree of value, it has the ability to spread quickly and drive incremental bookings, while other users' retweets help generate increased awareness levels by impacting new customers who may have little or no recognition of the brand."

"Twitter is a way for us to start a conversation with a prospective traveler. Its short, to-the-point



messaging helps cut through the clutter. In the current economic situation, we are seeing a dramatic increase in requests for last minute travel, often just a few days or weeks in advance. Twitter provides a forum for the last-minute traveler seeking ideas," said Pamela Lassers, Director of Media Relations with Abercrombie & Kent.

To launch its newly redesigned web site, luxury travel company Abercrombie & Kent created what they billed as a unique "once in a lifetime" savings offer – and booking concept – to drive consumer traffic to the site and boost sales on select A&K itineraries. Short lead media – social media (Twitter/Facebook), online travel sites, blogs, and select newspaper travel sections – was the key to success. Using elements such as Twitter, Abercrombie & Kent reported that 40 out of 46 available trips sold (58 percent were new customers), four out of five of the destinations sold out completely, and website traffic was up 83 percent leading up to the sale date. Site visits the day of the sale were double what they were for the same day the previous week.

For the Hotel Biba in West Palm Beach, Fla., which began posting to Twitter in December, an active account also increases the way the hotel is viewed, and even how some bookings are starting to be made.

"We had our first Twitter-based reservations [in February]," said Jennifer Reichert, general manager. "And we pick up 10 followers a day, consistently."

Travel and tourism professionals and other interested parties receive such pithy updates as: "C'mon Northerners - don't laugh at us just because we wear ski hats and mittens in sixty degree weather! Yoga Groove tonight at 6:30!" Or this posting, directed at one Midwestern follower's inquiry: "Escape is just a plane ride away! Midway to West Palm only takes 3 hours!"

"It is one of those things that snowballs," said Reichert. "And you have to take maybe five minutes a day to manage the account." Hotel Biba's posts might be joyful, inviting celebrations of Florida's balmy weather, or reminders that certain packages are available.

Reichert said the decision to expand Twitter's hotel use was pretty obvious, once staffers realized how well it had worked in their private lives. "Several of us had been using Twitter personally, but trawling around on it, we realized there were so many things on there that had to do with travel and tourism," she said. "We said, 'It's time the hotel has its own Twitter account.' "

The Twitter-generated reservation Hotel Biba book in February was, not surprisingly, made by members of the Twitter Generation, a couple of young Floridians who, upon their arrival at the hotel, explained that they use Twitter for many things – including sending out for pizza.

"It is a lifestyle for younger people, most definitely," said Reichert. "It is much more of a lifestyle than we were aware of. ...We are mostly an office of college students and people just beyond graduate level, and I have students here whose professors Twitter information to them. Our marketing coordinator lives on Twitter." The hotel recently began offering Twitter-based specials, urging prospective guests who use Twitter to mention the code word "TWEEPS" when they book their reservation by whatever method. "That will let the hotel track how many reservations come in from Twitter," she said.

Ed Conway, general manager of the Sedona Rouge Hotel & Spa in Sedona, AZ, said he recently became willing to give Twitter a try, too. Conway is more acquainted with professional online networks, such as LinkedIn, he said, "but we will try anything to see if it works. So we just signed up."

By early March, more than 1,000 Twitter followers were listed to read the hotel's "tweets" (posts) and they were able to see links directing them to the web site for the Sedona International Film Festival, the Sedona Marathon and the hotel's own event with Deepak Chopra.

Mara Sultan, the director of sales at the Lancaster Arts Hotel in Pennsylvania, sees a Twitter presence as a vital part of the 63-room hotel's growing online portfolio, including the larger social networking sites FaceBook and MySpace.

"We use it to get our specials out there, and we try to update at least once a week," she said. "So far, so good."

Sultan also uses the hotel's Twitter presence as a marketing tool beyond the hotel's walls itself, by searching for and then becoming a follower of artists, musicians and others in the immediate market, hoping to generate some synergy to draw them into the hotel to display their works or stage a performance.

The reach, however, goes even beyond that.

"An arts gallery in England that I befriended on Twitter even sent me a direct message saying 'tell me more about what this hotel is,' and then sharing from their own experience ways to get more press and greater exposure," she said. Sultan said, however, Twitter is not a substitute for a strong advertising



budget, "but an extra, just a bonus. I am still doing everything else I had set up to do in 2009. This is just the icing on the cake."

Strategy

Credit

[Caryn Eve Murray](#)

Associate Editor
Hotel Interactive, Inc.

Bio: Caryn Eve Murray is a freelance writer and an assistant editor on the news desk at Newsday on Long Island. During her tenure as a business writer for New York Newsday, she covered the city's small business community for which she won the Distinguished Business Reporting Award of Excellence from the New York Newspaper Publishers Association. She has also been a feature columnist and writer and has ... [more](#)

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