

Meta search marketing: the new revenue frontier in hospitality

by **Max Starkov** 

In 2014, hoteliers must add meta search marketing to their core marketing activities and budgets, says Max Starkov, CEO of HeBS Digital. By doing so, they can shift share from the OTAs to the direct online channel – the hotel website - and level the playing field.

Though meta search has been around since the early 2000s, today we are witnessing an explosion of meta search in hospitality, the result of advancements in digital technology and the convergence of hotel online distribution and online advertising. Meta search marketing in hospitality is hotel rate comparison online advertising format that requires real-time room availability and pricing feed plus campaign/bid/budget management technology.

The most popular meta search sites and features in the hospitality space include Google Hotel Finder, Bing hotel pricing ads, TripAdvisor Meta Search, Kayak.com, Trivago.com (Europe), WeGo.com (Asia Pacific), and others. The value proposition provided by these meta sites to travel consumers is undeniable: By adding real-time availability and pricing and enabling rate shopping, online hotel planners are now provided with everything they need to research and book their hotel stay.

The main question is: Why would any online travel consumer want to go to an OTA website when they could get all of the above on Google, TripAdvisor, Bing, Trivago, or a similar meta search site? This is why I consider meta search the ultimate “OTA-killer.”

Contrary to some perceptions in the industry, meta search is not a distribution channel, nor is it a “set and forget” marketing initiative. It is an advertising model that typically utilizes the cost-per-click (CPC) advertising format, in which the

advertiser pays only when someone clicks on their listing and is taken deep into their booking engine. This format requires professional campaign management, including daily spend and bid management, daily reaction to what other advertisers are doing, monitoring of budget spend on a daily basis and monitoring of rate parity (that is often abused by the OTAs).

For instance, since only the top three positions on TripAdvisor and the top four on Google Hotel Finder matter, just being enabled means nothing since OTAs will push the property down or out of the pricing ad menu. This is why many branded hotels rarely see themselves in the Google Hotel Finder meta search pricing menus or among the top three featured advertisers on in the TripAdvisor Check Rates meta search menu.

In my view, meta search marketing must become part of hoteliers’ concerted efforts to shift share from the OTAs to the direct online channel – the hotel website. By being part of meta search marketing on websites like Google, TripAdvisor or Trivago, hoteliers are leveling the playing field with the OTAs and giving their past guests or referrals from past guests the chance to book directly with the hotel.

In addition to other fundamentals such as website re-designs, SEO, SEM, online media and retargeting, email marketing and social media, meta search marketing is an important tool hoteliers can use to drive more direct bookings through the property website. Independent hotels are particularly OTA-



dependent. Approximately three quarters of online bookings for independent hotels come from the OTAs and just a quarter from the hotels' own websites (STR, HSMIA Foundation).

Meta search marketing generates incremental revenues and produces excellent ROAS (return-on-ad-spend). HeBS Digital's hotel client portfolio has been enjoying robust ROAS rates of 800% - 2,000% on both the TripAdvisor Meta Search and Google Hotel Finder meta search program.

Advertising via meta search sites is easy and stress-free if hoteliers partner with an experienced meta search marketing firm that has the technology a) to interface with the meta search algorithms of Google Hotel Finder, TripAdvisor Meta Search, etc. and b) to manage the meta search campaigns, daily bids and budgets, conversion tracking and reporting. One such technology is the MetaSearch Gateway, HeBS Digital's one-stop meta search marketing platform that enables, runs, manages, tracks, and reports on any property's meta search marketing campaigns on Google Hotel Finder, TripAdvisor Meta Search, Kayak.com, Trivago, Bing, and other sites.

How much should hoteliers budget for meta search marketing? This advertising format is gaining strength, and hoteliers must include meta search marketing as a separate line item in their 2014 digital marketing budgets. For example, for less than a \$1,000/month any hotel could become part of Google Hotel Finder, TripAdvisor Meta Search, and Bing Meta

Search. Such cost-effective meta search marketing packages include the advertising spend, property CRS connectivity to the MetaSearch Gateway, campaign management, daily bid and ad spend management, conversion tracking and reporting.

What is next? Meta search marketing is already branching out beyond the typical rate comparison sites. Google Dynamic Text Retargeting Ads offer one such example, available only to properties participating in the Google Hotel Finder meta search program. Based on the meta search marketing concept, here at HeBS Digital we are already working on several game-changing "hybrid" digital marketing initiatives, utilizing real-time hotel inventory availability and pricing fees, such as Dynamic Rate Google AdWords and display advertising with real-time pricing, email marketing with dynamic rates, hotel desktop and mobile site dynamic rate promotions, and more.

In 2014, hoteliers must add meta search marketing to their core marketing budgets. Not only does meta search marketing help hoteliers compete against the OTAs and shift share from the OTAs to the direct online channel, it generates cost-effective incremental bookings at great ROAS levels. I expect meta search marketing to explode over the next few years and encourage hoteliers to participate in this viable marketing channel.

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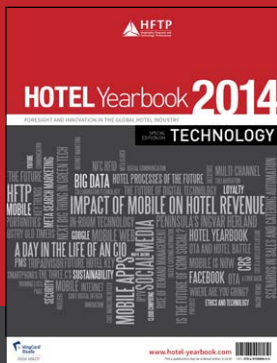
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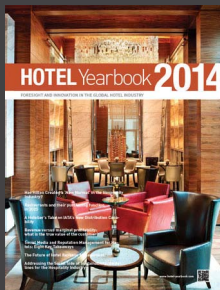
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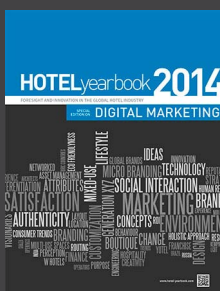
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