

10 DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES DURING & AFTER COVID-19

WITH THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY AT A VIRTUAL STANDSTILL, what's a hotel marketer to do? If you promote your hotel, you risk coming across as insensitive. If you do nothing, you risk being left behind when travel resumes.

Marketing in the time of coronavirus is a constantly moving target. It requires keeping close tabs on market conditions and adjusting your approach as the situation evolves.

Depending on where you are in the lifecycle of the pandemic, you may need to fine-tune your messaging, re-evaluate your target markets and channel mix, or adjust offers and pricing to meet the changing priorities of travelers.

Here are 10 digital marketing strategies to consider along the way.

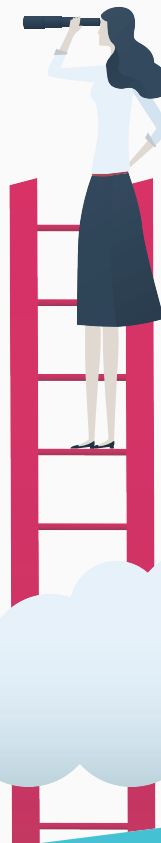


1. UNDERSTAND THE CONCERNS OF TRAVELERS

FIRST OF ALL, IT'S IMPORTANT TO RECOGNIZE THAT THE priorities of travelers have changed dramatically. Mundane concerns like checking in early and getting a room with a view have been replaced by concerns about travel restrictions and safety.

The questions at top of mind for many would-be travelers can be generally summarized as follows:

- Is it safe to travel?
- Am I permitted to travel?
- Would I need to self-isolate upon arrival (or return)?
- Is your hotel open?
- What services are available onsite and in the area?
- Will I be able to cancel or change my reservation?
- Will I be safe in your hotel?



2. USE APPROPRIATE MESSAGING

BY NOW WE'VE ALL SEEN EXAMPLES OF TONE-DEAF ADS. Now is not the time for the hard sell. Right now, everyone's priority must be to stop the spread of the virus. Only then will travel resume. In an ironic twist, some destinations are encouraging people not to travel.

In the short-term, hotels need to focus on keeping travelers informed and assisting with reservations and changes. A dedicated page on your website is a good way to answer travelers' questions all in one place. Direct inquiries there, and include a link to the page in reservation confirmations. Be sure to update the information regularly.

Pay attention to visual messaging too. Photos of groups mingling in the bar and attending events might not be the best message to send out now. Consider replacing them with photos of individuals, couples, families or even staff at work cleaning and sanitizing. When travel restrictions are lifted, shift your messaging to encouraging people to travel. Later, as travel gains momentum, you can be more aggressive with promotions.



3. DON'T SCRIMP ON MARKETING

YOU PROBABLY HAVE LITTLE CHOICE BUT TO CURB marketing costs, but think twice before drastically reducing spend. Continued investment in marketing will help generate demand in the short term and will better position you for recovery in the longer term.

A Cornell study found that hotels that spent significantly more on marketing during the 2008-09 recession enjoyed substantially better performance in ADR, revenue and profitability.

With major travel brands like Booking.com and Marriott cutting paid media spends, there are unprecedented opportunities to increase visibility and reach travelers at much lower costs than normal.



4. RE-EVALUATE YOUR TARGET MARKETS

IN THE EARLY DAYS OF RECOVERY, YOUR MARKET MIX may look very different from before. The first to venture out will come from local and drive-in markets where travel restrictions are lifted (vs. long-haul and fly-in). Where possible, use data from your CRM to determine where your travelers (if you have any) are coming from.

You can expect more individual travelers travelling out of necessity right now, followed by couples and families (vs. large groups) and younger, seasoned travelers (vs. older, occasional travelers). Business travel will come from small companies and essential services (vs. large companies and discretionary travel).

5. ADJUST YOUR MARKETING MIX

THERE'S NO POINT IN WASTING SCARCE RESOURCES ON targeting people who cannot or will not travel. Data from [Google Trends](#), [Keyword Planner](#), [Adara](#) and [Sojern](#) can help you find people who intend to travel over specific dates from your key feeder markets.

Rather than spend on brand and upper-funnel marketing in the early days, focus on lower-funnel performance marketing – generating clicks and bookings through search marketing, SEO, retargeting, OTAs, metasearch and TripAdvisor.

Michael Bennett, Chief Marketing Officer at Cendyn, recommends exploring opportunities on channels where people are spending time while self-isolating such as streaming video, podcasts, gaming, television and social media. Leverage these channels to highlight what you're doing at your hotel to either stay open for travelers, support your community or keep the lights on for employees still working. Being open and honest about your situation and what you're doing has never been so important.

“If you're spending money on search marketing, it's as important as ever to own your brand terms,” says Michael Bennett, Chief Marketing Officer, Cendyn. “To avoid coming across as trying to monetize the coronavirus term, update your negative keyword and block lists. Adjust ad messaging and remove countries under travel bans. You can reinstate them after restrictions are lifted.”



6. CREATE OFFERS THAT REFLECT TRAVELER PRIORITIES

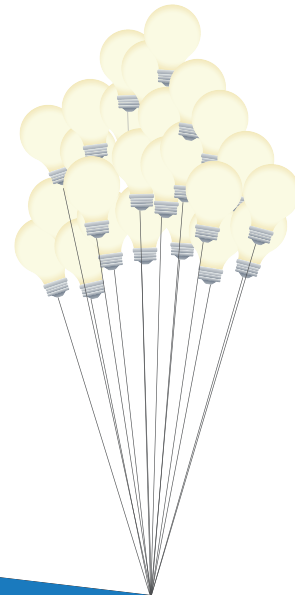
ADJUST YOUR OFFERINGS, PACKAGES AND CONDITIONS to accommodate travelers who are concerned about protecting their health, want the flexibility to make date changes, and are interested in saving costs or getting a deal.

When the economy recovers, hotels that demonstrated fairness and empathy during the pandemic will be rewarded with loyalty and bookings. Those perceived as inflexible or opportunistic will need to rebuild trust with travelers.

Rather than slash rates, offer value adds to protect your rates and brand positioning in the long term. Give travelers the confidence to book by allowing cancellations and date changes without penalty within a certain timeframe. If their plans change or travel restrictions are extended, encourage them to postpone rather than cancel.

7. GET CREATIVE

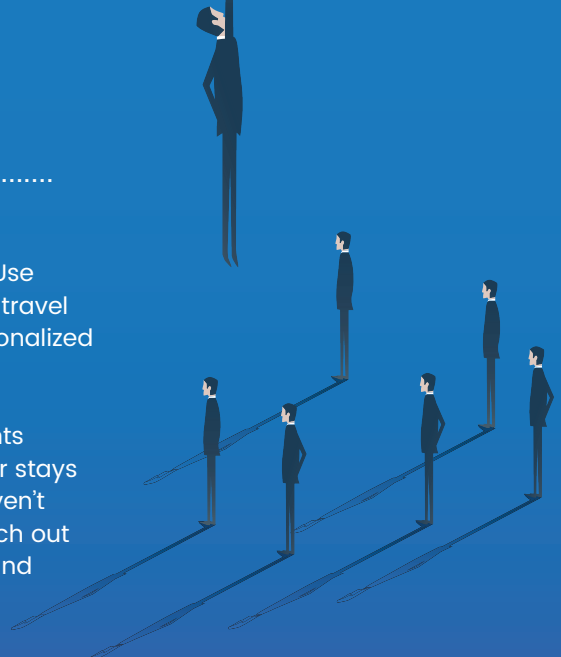
SOME HOTELS ARE OFFERING ISOLATION PACKAGES, city escapes or staycation packages. Others are keeping people dreaming about travel by sharing travel stories and inspirational imagery on their blog, website and social media. Some hotels are offering virtual tours, web cam views, or yoga, meditation and cooking classes – allowing people to embrace these brands in the comfort of their own home as they self-isolate.



8. ENGAGE YOUR LOYAL MEMBERS

IT'S A SAFE BET THAT SOME OF THE FIRST PEOPLE AT your door when travel picks up will be your loyal guests. Use your CRM to identify frequent guests, those most likely to travel and anyone who canceled recently, and send them personalized offers to return.

If you have a loyalty program, reduce the number of points needed to redeem a free stay and offer point bonuses for stays in the coming months. Send emails to members who haven't stayed in a while with an enticing offer to return. And reach out to members whose points or rewards are expiring soon and extend the deadline to build goodwill.



9. BENCHMARK PERFORMANCE

AFTER YEARS OF GROWTH IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY, IT'S disheartening to compare this year's numbers to previous years. But tracking KPIs and benchmarking performance is as important as ever. And just think about how good your numbers will look next year!

Set short-term and long-term marketing objectives and develop a timeline and roadmap for achieving them. Benchmark performance against competitors as well as similar hotels in your region and other regions – measure market share, customer engagement, guest satisfaction and online reputation. Identify hotels and regions that show early signs of recovery and use them as a model to guide your own path to recovery.



10. MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR FREE TIME

STILL HAVE FREE TIME? SEIZE THE OPPORTUNITY TO accomplish all those tasks you've been putting off. Whip your guest database into shape. Build new email subscriber lists, create new email templates and update or retire old ones.

Audit your website. Check in with partners, suppliers and your local destination marketing organization. Take advantage of opportunities to learn and upgrade your marketing skills offered by Cendyn, STR and others industry leaders.

By paying close attention to market trends and adapting your strategies accordingly, you'll be well positioned to be at the forefront when the inevitable recovery comes.

