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“Hotel review” sites add value to the hospitality industry

HOTREC* position paper

The hotel industry in Europe welcomes the Internet trend towards more interaction and more direct involvement of customers in relation to its offer of services (keyword “web 2.0” or “travel 2.0”). In particular, hotel review sites provide hotel guests with the possibility, not previously available, of reading about the experiences of a large number of other travellers before making their own reservations. These sites add new dimensions to the transparency of the offer and allow for a more comprehensive hotel search, according to individual needs.

For the hotel industry also, the advantages of such sites outweigh the risks involved. Such sites allow hotels:

- to present their offer in a consumer-friendly environment;
- to better occupy market niches;
- to carry out, on the basis of these “online guest comment books”, analysis of their weak spots; and
- to use these evaluations for benchmarking guests’ satisfaction.

Hotel associations in Europe are fully convinced that the well-established “stars” will succeed in remaining the driving systems even in this new competitive environment and will not vanish over the internet. On the contrary, within the ocean of subjective opinions, the official hotel classification schemes – because of their structures, their transparency and the regular adaptation of their criteria to the guests’ expectations – will remain the systems of reference.

In order to ensure that hotel review sites are also beneficial to the business of offering rooms, site providers and the hotel industry should collaborate as equal partners. In the

* HOTREC represents the hotel, restaurant and café industry at European level. It counts 1.6 million businesses, with 92% of them being micro enterprises employing less than 10 people. The micro and small enterprises (having less than 50 employees) in the hospitality industry representing 99% of businesses make up some 62% of value added. The industry provides some 9 million jobs in the EU alone. HOTREC brings together 40 National Associations representing the interest of the industry in 25 different European countries.

end, such collaboration is the only solution to ensure a win-win situation for all parties involved. HOTREC is therefore proposing 10 principles to facilitate the protection of sites against manipulation and unfair evaluations. These principles should also favour the further qualitative development of existing sites.

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10 principles proposed by the hotel industry relating to “hotel review” sites

1. Editorial control

Guest reviews should only be published after verification by qualified editorial staff of the authenticity and reliability of the entry.

2. Prevention of manipulation

2.1 Site providers should ensure that reviews of a hotel are provided only by guests who have actually stayed at the hotel.

2.2 Ratings should be based on an arithmetic average or statistical median, excluding under both systems the best and worst 10 % of evaluations from the calculation.

2.3 The number of ratings should be a factor in the calculation of ranking.

3. Quality assurance

3.1 Site providers should ensure that hotel contact coordinates, basic content data, availability or rates figures shown on their sites are displayed accurately.

3.2 Reviews should only refer to the hotel facilities that are actually offered by the hotel. For example, an evaluation of the “gastronomic” performance of a hotel offering breakfast only should not influence the rating of this hotel.

3.3 The hotel guest should be led to comment exclusively upon the services and offers he/she actually took advantage of during his/her stay at the hotel. For example a guest not using the spa facilities or the restaurant of a hotel should refrain from posting a review of these hotel facilities.

3.4 Review sites should provide the user with evaluation criteria, which are

- relevant;
- with appropriate levels of detail; and
- commensurate with the characteristics of the hotel.

3.5 The user should be given the opportunity to express the evaluation not only via ratings but also via “open” texts.

4. No anonymous reviews

Reviews should not be anonymous to the site provider, through whose intermediate the hotelier should have the possibility to react. The site provider should reconfirm E-mail addresses used by guests and exclude temporary E-mail addresses.

5. Guaranteed minimum number of reviews

- 5.1 Sites should only display reviews when the number of reviews for a specific hotel is meaningful in relation to the number of rooms.
- 5.2 In order to avoid a “chicken-and-egg problem” during the construction phase of a review site, its provider should pay particular care in supervising the individual reviews until a critical number is reached.

6. Harmonisation of rating scales

In order to improve their reliability and comparability, hotel review sites should aim to harmonise their rating scales, e.g. ascending from 1 (worst) to 10 (best) and give orientations on the meaning of the ratings. Under no circumstances should star symbols be used, so as to avoid any confusion with official hotel classifications.

7. Right of reply

In case of a review (positive or negative), sites should automatically offer the hotel the chance to react (e.g. by an email “alert” system). Such a procedure will allow the hotel to assess and manage guest complaints actively and on-time. When available, use should also be made of the official ombudspersons for the hotel industry and their mediation services.

8. Legal certainty

Reviews should be truthful and based on the personal experiences of their authors. Hoteliers have a legal right to protection against defamatory criticisms. False factual statements should be removed from sites in a quick and non-bureaucratic manner.

9. Up-to-date data

Sites should only display current reviews. After a maximum of two years, reviews should no longer influence the rating and should be deleted automatically.

10. Indication of the official star classification

In order to increase transparency for guests, hotel review sites should always specify when they use their own classification system and provide information about the official star classification of hotels in accordance with the system in place in the country(ies) concerned, including a link to the applicable classification criteria. Review sites should check star levels of establishments at least yearly together with the competent classification authorities. Review sites are invited also to include reference to quality schemes.

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