



Going Places with DoubleTree by Hilton: Digital Engagement in the Travel Market

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PUBLISHED
August 2013

THE RUNDOWN

Travelers love to tell stories and, thanks to the digital world, they're now sharing these stories more and more. With its YouTube channel, DTour — a first-of-its-kind for the hotel industry — DoubleTree by Hilton, one of ten brands from Hilton Worldwide, is tapping into this trend, allowing travelers to post their own videos and tips while also helping them plan and book trips. The brand's global head, John Greenleaf, explains how this new content-sharing platform is engaging travelers in a personal, meaningful way, bolstering DoubleTree's brand awareness as well as its bottom line.

From Homer to Gulliver to Kerouac, people have always loved sharing their travel stories with the world. And in the digital age, this happens faster and more fluidly

than ever before. Whether people are researching or booking a trip, or sharing photos and tips upon return, social media is now fundamental to the way people travel and how they tell their travel stories.

It's a fact that has been recognized by DoubleTree by Hilton, a worldwide brand of more than 350 upscale hotels in gateway cities, metropolitan areas and vacation destinations across six continents. The personal touch has always been a key part of DoubleTree's brand personality: Front desk teams present each new guest with a freshly baked chocolate chip cookie at check-in.

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But with the official company homepage dedicated squarely to the process of booking, DoubleTree knew it needed a way to connect with consumers and communicate its brand hospitality in an online space.

Recognizing YouTube's potential as a place to showcase great content and to create a meaningful engagement with travelers, DoubleTree's marketing team developed DTour, an interactive channel that lets travelers share details about their trips and get inspired by others' stories to plan the trip they've always wanted to take. People can pick a location on the website's map and then add their own videos, photos and travel tips about the destination by uploading content directly from their social networks such as Google+, Facebook or Instagram. Visitors can scroll through the map to see the comments, photos and experiences of others to help influence their traveling decisions.

“What DTour does is give the brand the ability to be characterized by the people who experience locations where we have hotels,” says John Greenleaf, global head of DoubleTree by Hilton. “The more that we can create that personality and talk about the overall experience that you as a traveler have the potential to enjoy, the more I believe we can develop a very solid relationship with travelers and our guests.”

PUTTING DOUBLETREE **ON THE MAP**

But with DoubleTree's goal to increase both brand awareness and revenue, there's a commercial element to DTour as well. The same map travelers use to show where they've been around the world pinpoints every DoubleTree hotel. Along with a booking widget,

there are video tours of several properties and DoubleTree hotel team members serve as “DTour Guides”, leaving their own videos recommending their favorite hotspots in the local area.

Unlike DoubleTree.com, DTour allows DoubleTree to capture both travel researchers and bookers. Google research revealed that 70% of people don't know where they want to go when first looking into booking a trip. “That was just amazing to me,” says Greenleaf. “When you look at our ability to book and our ability to generate traffic to our site through search, our DTour YouTube channel was a way to give that 70% more inspiration and information about destinations they'd consider for travel. It really serves as a bridge between our social network and our growing booking engine on DoubleTree.com.”

Online video is becoming a crucial part of the way people plan their vacations. Google and Ipsos discovered last year that 61% of business travelers used video to help them pick hotels and 41% of leisure travelers used video to plan or book a trip.

Just over half of DoubleTree's travelers do so for business, but by inspiring people to visit any destination where DoubleTree offers hotels, DTour is a new way to engage leisure travelers. “We're learning more about them as the number of views on YouTube grows,” says Greenleaf. “The click-through rate on the YouTube advertising that we've seen has been a record for the brand. We're in better position to see who's coming in and to target people who paid us a visit.”

BEING PART **OF THE ADVENTURE**

The brand used other media to drive people to the channel, pushing it with a year-long, user-generated content campaign. It included video ads on the BBC's website and Lonely Planet, along with promotions on Twitter and Foursquare. “It's very focused on a small number of online sites,” says Greenleaf. “We've done customized traveler interviews, homepage takeovers on multiple days, and we've also engaged a travel blogger who's had Twitter parties, Google Hangouts and 'Ask Me Anything' on Reddit to really generate more awareness.”

As part of the channel's launch, DoubleTree by Hilton unveiled a “DTour of a Lifetime” competition, which allowed entrants to create and share a video — between 30 seconds and three minutes — that showed off a not-to-be-missed travel spot. Six winners were selected to serve as “DTourists”, travel ambassadors that will be sent to six different continents where DoubleTree properties are located. The DTourists will experience DoubleTree hospitality, meet locals and curate their own travel tips, stories and highlights for the DTour website via blog entries, photos, videos and social media posts. DoubleTree collaborated with hotel team members themselves to build a robust itinerary for each DTourist — from surfing in the Gold Coast of Australia to taking a balloon ride in Turkey.

“When it comes to direct response or branding, this is one where I find it difficult to drop it into one bucket,” says Greenleaf. In truth, it’s both.

According to Greenleaf, the response to the DTour YouTube site has exceeded DoubleTree’s expectations “by roughly a quarter”. “There’s a variety of metrics we can look at to measure the success of DTour,” says Greenleaf. “We’re looking at both the views of the videos that have been posted and at bookings that come through the booking window on DTour. The number of views has been remarkable: 4.9 million views and over three million minutes watched. There’s a lot of activity.”

Not only has DoubleTree seen a spiked response from consumers, but it’s taking the interest from the press as another important measure. “When you come out with a program in hotels and get the kind of interest we got from The New York Times, the BBC, USA Today, AdWeek, Travel & Leisure, Fox Leisure, Bloomberg, The Wall Street Journal... It was unlike anything I’ve seen,” says Greenleaf. “Because of that interest, what we’re doing has been recognized by potential guests of ours.” Not to mention by other brands in the travel industry, too.

TRAVELING INTO **THE FUTURE**

Online media is now making up roughly half of DoubleTree’s total marketing spend and, compared to traditional media, Greenleaf is certainly viewing this increased investment in digital as a success so far. “With television, the message is from us to customers. The content on YouTube is generated by travelers, who are effectively communicating the benefits of our different locations to other travelers,” he says. “When you can organize user-generated content the way we have with the framework that YouTube provides, I think it’s an extremely powerful medium. As we measure the success that we’re having with DTour, I think we’re going to be in an even stronger position as we continue to shift our spending more and more into the online space.”

DoubleTree by Hilton plans to open more than 60 properties in 17 countries this year and YouTube channels like DTour could continue to play a part of the brand’s drive to house content and build a relationship with its consumers. “DoubleTree strives to return humanity to the travel experience,” say Greenleaf. “We make sure that everyone in our hotels understands that it truly is the little things that make a difference in a travel experience for everyone, be it leisure or business. So the more we can relate to people’s personal experiences, the better off we are. Our DTour YouTube site and the increased strength that we have in online media is really helping us accomplish that.”