

“We Know What You Said!”

...we are listening closely, everywhere!



By Mark B. Hoare

Broadly speaking, a hotel's departed guest falls into one of three sentiment classes; delighted, content, unhappy. The reasons why guests sit at either end of the contentment spectrum are most likely due to one or more noteworthy experiences or discoveries having occurred during their stay.

Historically, a hotelier has had little proximity into their departed guest's sentiment related to their stay experience, unless of course that guest was sufficiently motivated to send a direct message to the GM, fill out a paper survey card before leaving, or respond verbally to the "How was your stay?" question at check-out.

Departed Guest Surveys were (are) a reasonable method to solicit and measure satisfaction feedback, but given the typically low response rates (primarily caused by the

required effort on the part of the respondent) the hotel is predominantly seeing only the highly positive or highly negative respondent's views. If we add to this that these are closed-loop feedback events, the hotel is excluded from the *chatter* about their hotel's performance as exchanged by departed guests with family, friends, business colleagues, etc.

Along come social networks, blogs and industry specific customer review sites. User-Generated-Content has truly come of age.

Most would agree that TripAdvisor forged the way in our industry, exposing open-loop hotel guest reviews and rankings; followed by the leading Online Travel Agencies opening up their own *qualified* guest review features, followed then by the hotel brands themselves. Factor in the epidemic of regional [and long-tail] social media sites and the millions of travel and hospitality related blogs, within no time at all we have *Big Data*. Did I forget to mention Facebook and Twitter? All of these exposure points culminate in a global mass of uncoordinated, unformatted, opinion-rich chatter about our hotels... good chatter, indifferent chatter, and bad chatter. The closed-loop is broken and guest sentiment is now being publically expressed... everywhere.

Hoteliers must be over the moon! Well, perhaps not, because the analogy of trying to drink from a fire hose comes to mind.

There simply aren't the hours in a day for a hotel to read all the free-format comments and blogs, and even if you thought you could, how would you know where they all are anyway? Without an ability to efficiently and economically; locate, gather, cleanse, analyse, quantify and then present all of this feedback in an insightful and actionable way a hotel will ultimately have to cherry-pick where and what they monitor manually.

Although TripAdvisor is still the most significant hotel review hub, gone are the days when a hotel could simply rely on taking a daily peek at the hotel's TripAdvisor comparative ranking number and, maybe, the hotel's TripAdvisor Rating Summaries and say that they're in tune with the hotel's public-facing reputation and operational performance. Or worse still, simply use their TripAdvisor Ranking as the hotel's only guest satisfaction KPI.

So how does a hotel attempt to locate, gather and synthesize the exponentially growing mass of information being publically generated about their property?

To truly understand the spectrum of sentiment and derive a holistic, real-time and qualified measure of what the World thinks of a hotel's product and service delivery -together with an ability to precisely identify the specific topic with which the guest's sentiments are associated- requires technology to do all the heavy lifting.

Specialist technology providers have emerged and have really matured into this space over the last several years to address this need. Think of these companies and their products as the hotelier's equivalent to the consumer's Kayak. Reaching out and trawling the web to consolidate and correlate vast

amounts of data into meaningful and enriched information.

In the main, all of these specialist providers offer a complementary suite of Online Reputation Management tools that facilitate managing a hotel's online and social media presence. Including; social media positioning, monitoring, survey management, engagement/response facilitation, etc. As expected, some regional strengths comes into play, with Revinate, and newBrandAnalytics being perhaps more finely tuned to the Americas, TrustYOU and ReviewPro for Europe, and Brand Karma for Asia, certainly, when it comes to their understanding of which travel review sites and blogs are most influential within their home regions. As you would expect, they all probe the global players such as Facebook, Twitter, TripAdvisor, Expedia, etc.

In terms of the rankings that they retrieve and how they aggregate them into an overall score for the hotels there is uniformity.

| NAME | GRADE | TREND | REVIEWS | INSIGHTS | IMPRESSIONS |
|--------------------------|-------|-------|---------|----------|-------------|
| Overall | B+ | ↔ | 4,922 | 50,955 | 228,781 |
| Service | A- | ↔ | 3,277 | 11,507 | 51,561 |
| Facilities | A- | ↔ | 3,334 | 11,064 | 49,541 |
| Guest Room | B | ↔ | 2,754 | 7,428 | 33,101 |
| Décor and Amenities | C+ | ↔ | 1,590 | 3,737 | 16,985 |
| Food and Beverage | B+ | ↔ | 1,239 | 2,902 | 13,832 |
| Pricing and Value | D+ | ↔ | 1,541 | 2,740 | 12,029 |
| Hotel Services | B- | ↔ | 803 | 1,434 | 6,428 |
| Dining and Entertainment | A- | ↔ | 588 | 878 | 4,062 |
| Overall Sentiment | B+ | ↔ | 288 | 818 | 4,062 |
| Overall Reviews | B+ | ↔ | 288 | 818 | 4,062 |

(Screenshot Courtesy of newBrandAnalytics)

However, all these leading providers also incorporate an ability to derive guest sentiment from freeform guest reviews and posts using their *Natural Language Processing* sentiment analysis tools, and form the output into meaningful Customer Sentiment Metrics. Even local language freeform reviews can be analyzed, although there are differing opinions on how to handle this. newBrandAnalytics sees

merit in first normalizing the freeform reviews to English so that their proprietary sentiment analysis tools will be comparing like-to-like, while others may wish to derive sentiment directly from the original language text.

Never-the-less, subscribing to any of these tools creates huge opportunities for a hotel to fully understand what it is they are doing (or not doing) to cause the satisfaction needle to move left or right. Added to that, it is also possible to benchmark the hotel against the same apple-to-apple satisfaction metrics of their competitive-set.

So now the hotel has access to all this focused information distilled and normalized from all corners of the globe... on what they're doing very well, what they're doing very poorly, and everything in between. Even down to the level of an individual service provider on the hotel staff. Now what?

Interestingly, this is where The Prism Partnership has identified a recurring shortcoming on the hotel side. We are often engaged to uncover the root causes of why a particular hotel or collection of hotels is failing in one or more of their Balanced Scorecard areas. Although just a component part of our initial discovery methodology, we now include a very detailed examination of the hotel's online guest reviews. We seek out recurring mentions of a particular topic, qualify it as a positive or negative sentiment, and then quantify the intensity of the sentiment. We are also on the lookout for interesting outlier mentions that may also point to an otherwise opaque sentiment. This provides us with a targeted and actionable list to follow up on.

The benefit of descending to the more detailed level of review than just the Rating

Summary scores is that down here you can see why you scored poorly.



For example: *Service* may be driving a low aggregate score and sentiment analysis identifies a recurring theme related to the Bar and, in particular, comments related to the “Grumpy barman who serves a great cocktail and gets drinks served quickly but often offends the clientele while doing so.” ...something that needs to be dealt with as a matter of urgency.

Rooms may be getting a lower than expected score tracing back to recurring comments about the “Bedside clocks which cannot be moved to face the bed due to a too short electrical lead... which makes them pretty much useless” quick fix but may need to be done in all 320 of the hotel's rooms.

Being in hyper-proximity to your real-world brand reputation and to qualified customer sentiment of your products and services has never been easier than it is today. The technology to put you there is readily available. However, as with any investment made in technology tools the return on your investment will come not only by using them but, much more importantly, by acting upon the information they are providing you.

Transforming this insight into an actionable and ongoing improvement roadmap that addresses the negative and leverages the positive is essential to driving performance improvements, the measure of which being seen in month-over-month higher rankings

throughout those points-of-exposure that have the greatest impact on stimulating a guest's booking decision. Or in other words; positive sentiment scores increasing, negative decreasing, and a measurable gain against the competitive set. We would also suggest the hotel incorporate these guest sentiment metrics as KPIs in the hotel's Balanced Scorecard so that they have full exposure to the hotel's management, investors and owners.

This is the industry of Hospitality, so every customer's voice deserves to be: listened to, responded to, and acted upon. The benefits of doing so are highly stacked in the favor of the hotelier and the tools to make this a task rather than a chore are now readily available. ■

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