

# The secret to great TripAdvisor hotel reviews

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**Reputation is everything in business, but never has your most valuable asset been more fragile than in the age of the Internet. Will Rogers was before his time when he said, "It takes a lifetime to build a good reputation, but you can lose it in a minute." He had no idea how literal that single minute would one day become with the advent of online business reviews.**



Today, with the click of a mouse, an angry or dissatisfied review can take on a billboard effect – drowning out all of the wonderful things past guests might have mentioned and inflicting irreparable harm on your brand. Sure, a hotel might handle the complaint quickly and gracefully, but the review remains. The best way for a hotel to protect their reputation is also the best way to deliver excellent customer experiences: by empowering your staff with both training and technology.

The modern traveler is no dummy. Empowered by the wealth of information available to them online and emboldened by opinions openly shared by others, consumers are making deliberate and well thought out purchases without consulting "experts." As a matter of fact, 48% of people said that they would trust ratings on TripAdvisor as much as they do of a newspaper, magazine or professional. Earned media is taking its place on the content pedestal as almost 95% of travelers report regularly using travel reviews to make booking decisions.

According to a TrustYou study, a traveler is four times more likely to choose a higher rated hotel over its equally priced counterpart. Furthermore, a single point increase in reputation score gives a hotel the latitude to raise its room rates up to 11.2%.

While it might seem obvious, negative reviews have a significant and contrary effect on hotel bookings. Over half of travelers say that they would dismiss a hotel or even go as far as to cancel a booking due to a bad review. Negative reviews, at their core, can be attributed to one of two things: unmet expectations or poor service.

On TripAdvisor, half of all bad reviews are a result of poor service. Disappointing to say the least when service outcomes are something that can easily be controlled or improved by the brand. When positive reviews quite clearly reap tangible and measurable rewards, you can't help wondering why so many hotels find themselves losing business because of service pitfalls.

So what exactly are the barriers to success for hotels? Where and why are they falling short when it comes to creating a superior guest experience? The answer is not as complicated as you might think.

In an industry with a reputation of being slow to adopt new technologies and methods, many lodging brands still rely on outdated forms of communication to handle guest requests. This means that often times service calls are passed along by word of mouth or handwritten note to delegate responsibilities and expectations. As we all know, humans are not perfect, and this antiquated form of communication opens the door for misunderstanding or the request getting lost in the shuffle of shift changes.

Siloed departments are another barrier to interdepartmental communication. Housekeeping may have one method of handling guest requests while concierge may use something else entirely. A lack of a centralized request system not only fosters confusion but often results in a lack of accountability.

While it is easy to place all the blame on communication, employee empowerment is another thing holding brands back from delivering excellent customer service. Employees often feel that it isn't their place to step in and save a strained guest relationship or they lack the training to understand how exactly to handle the conflict.

On top of all of that, millennials – with smartphones attached at their hips – are fast becoming one of travel's most important and influential consumer demographics. Millennials expect to use their phones to satisfy their every whim, and this includes making hotel requests. With this up and coming demographic spending most of their time in common spaces, it just isn't plausible to expect them to use their in-room phone. Hotels must meet their customers where they are, and "where" is increasingly becoming mobile.

Moving into 2016, hospitality brands must adapt to a changing market environment or risk losing business to competitors or industry disrupters who built their entire model around technology. To put it bluntly, a comprehensive approach that includes training and technology is no longer optional – this is sink or swim in an already crowded ocean.

Hotels that empower employees to make decisions beyond their job descriptions through adequate training are already taking steps to combat service breakdowns. A large piece of the puzzle lies in the simple task of defining service and brand standards. If an employee is unsure of what is expected of them, how can they be expected to rise to the occasion?

To prepare staff for situations they may have never encountered, hoteliers can look to one of the oldest tricks in the book – role-play. While many of us were forced to use role-play as children to understand how to share our toys, this tool can be utilized as a way to familiarize employees with common service breakdowns. Guests angry because their room is not up to their standards? Allow your staff to react and then follow up with a critique praising what they did well and offering constructive suggestions for what they did not.

By setting expectations and providing context for common service pitfalls, you are entrusting your staff to represent your brand and its values. But, don't allow those standards to become so rigid that they prevent flexibility in roles. An angry guest combined with a staff member who doesn't feel like they can help is a recipe for disaster – or a terrible review. Allow all members of staff some amount of leverage to appease an irritated guest without needing to call a supervisor. Those precious moments can ultimately save the guest relationship and possibly your reputation.

Beyond customer service training, hotel management can cut out the margin for user error by implementing technological solutions that cut down on communication failures. This means automate what can be automated and break down barriers that might arise in a tradition request environment. A process that ensures the proper teams are receiving the correct requests and carrying out these requests in a timely manner can immediately make a world of difference.

We came across ALICE recently, a hotel operations software platform that does just this, allowing for your staff to remain organized, focused and accountable. Staff can field requests on the go from anywhere on property, leaving them time to focus on creating special moments for your guests.

Just how important are these investments in service? When 58% of travelers indicate that they would go as far to cancel a booking due to a bad review, the answer is abundantly clear. Customer service improvements should be viewed on par with property improvements. Hotels should include training and technology into their yearly budget much in the same way as any other line item.

An environment that rewards employees for effective decision-making builds a sturdy base for a solid and successful brand. Mistakes will happen, but the way that staff is empowered (or not) to respond to those mistakes can have terrible or wonderful results. Providing staff with the tools they need to create superior guest experiences means they will find personal satisfaction in guest satisfaction. A staff that takes pride in their work lies at the heart of every successful brand, and ultimately, every five star review.