REVINATE HEROES

Hotel Industry Movers & Shakers

Greg Bodenlos

Brand Marketing Manager • The Charles Hotel, Cambridge, Massachusetts

From city-center independents to large luxury brands, Greg Bodenlos has over six years of highly diversified experience in hotel marketing. He says, "While my title has always been in marketing, I think of myself as the bridge between operations and sales/marketing, particularly when we discuss the guest experience."

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When speaking with Greg, especially about the future of hospitality, one immediately notices his enthusiasm. He believes very strongly that to be successful in this ever-changing industry, hotels need to evolve. "Operations, sales, and marketing need to move away from this antiquated, siloed model we see so often. We have to work holistically across departments to take the guest experience to the next level," he says.

Marketing experience with brands and independents

Greg has amassed a wide range of marketing experience at several distinct hotel properties. He started at the Fairmont Southampton resort in Bermuda, learning property-level marketing for the 600-room branded destination resort. Next, he worked for a five-star luxury independent property in New York City. Greg later played an integral role leading the charge on social media and digital marketing for a branded group-focused hotel in downtown Boston. Currently, he works for The Charles Hotel, the only four diamond, four star property that services the area directly adjacent to Harvard University.

Greg describes The Charles Hotel as an establishment that reflects the feel of the neighborhood in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

"The community here consists of intelligent, sophisticated people that carry themselves in an unpretentious way. That's the overall feeling we aim to portray with our rooms, the lobby, and our overall service: high-end and understated luxury."

Setting the bar high

In many ways, 2015 was a great year for The Charles Hotel. "Last year was a very successful year for the property," says Greg. "Our top-line revenue, ADR and RevPAR performance exceeded our expectations."

But, the hotel had dropped on TripAdvisor. At the start of the year, the hotel was at #4 for its geographical market, and it dropped to #9 by the end of the year. "This was at the end of our product cycle," explains Greg. "During this time, the hotel was preparing itself for renovations, we had some staff turnover, and while we were more profitable than ever, our guest satisfaction scores were waning. We were also receiving far fewer online reviews than our competition, which was part of the problem with regard to our ranking decrease on TripAdvisor."

The hotel was concerned that the planned renovations, in addition to the lower TripAdvisor scores, would have a serious impact on future revenues. For 2016, the hotel's goal was to drive a superior guest experience, and to make sure that their TripAdvisor ranking matched the actual experience of the hotel and the perception of the hotel within the local community.

The case for data-based operations

When it came to guest satisfaction, Greg knew that he had three primary challenges:

One, that the hotel's guest satisfaction data was siloed into online and offline portions. "We could see separate trends in our public online review feedback and in whatever private survey responses we could get, but there was no easy way to look at the data together," he says.

The second challenge was improving completion scores on guest satisfaction survey. "I knew we needed a shorter, mobile-friendly survey with the option for conditional questions," Greg says. "We also needed a survey that afforded us the option to request that guests also write a review on TripAdvisor to fix our review volume problem."

The final challenge was incorporating this data with operations. Greg knew from previous experience that using guest feedback data to inform operational decisions is hugely valuable for a hotel that relies on repeat and group business. But to make that work, he had to convince the op's team at the hotel that adjusting operations based on trends in feedback data would deliver results.

It took some initial convincing to get buy-in on these proposed changes. After all, the Charles Hotel had just delivered one of its best fiscal years ever. Why change?

Greg was taking a risk by advocating investment in new software solutions and operations

procedures. "But," he says, "I've seen this work before. I knew if I could just get the right systems in place, we could get our teams working together to create a superior guest experience."

For these challenges, Greg's recommendation was to sign up with a software solution he was well familiar with - Revinate Reputation™ and Surveys™. With integrated data analysis, Greg knew he could get specific, data-based action items for the operations team.

Getting more direct bookings

Taking a data-based approach to operations wasn't the only change Greg had in mind for the Charles Hotel. Because the hotel benefits from a large number of repeat guests, he wanted to double down on guest experience and work on building a relationship with each customer.

"We had guests who had stayed with us upwards of 10 times who had booked through an OTA every time," says Greg. "With OTA commissions of 18-22%, it was costing us the same to retain customers as it was to acquire new ones."

So, Greg pushed to take the hotel's marketing to the next level by moving away from "batch and blast" email campaigns to a more targeted approach. The goal was to target hotel's database of past guests with special email offers to encourage them to book direct.

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The results

Although Greg knew from previous experience that Revinate can help hotels drive results very quickly, he had no idea how quickly the Charles Hotel would see improvement.

3x improvement in guest satisfaction surveys completion

After implementing Revinate Surveys, the Charles Hotel saw results very quickly. "Within a month, we saw a dramatic improvement in surveys completion rate," says Greg. "We went from 5% completion to 15%, and I suspect that's because the survey is less arduous to complete, and it's mobile-responsive, so guests can complete it on-the-go if they want."

"It's fascinating," he adds, "because some of these guests have been staying with us for 20 years, they always stay here, and they love it. We just needed a way to encourage them to talk about us online."

Fast gains on TripAdvisor

The hotel also opted to leverage Revinate's Platinum Partner status with TripAdvisor to prompt guests to write a review on TripAdvisor. "Before we started with Revinate Surveys, we were only getting about 10 reviews per month on average," says Greg. "But, as soon as we turned on the TripAdvisor option in the last week of January, we saw an explosion in our review volume. Last month we got 48 reviews, and as a result, we jumped from #9 to #4 on the TripAdvisor Popularity Index in less than 12 weeks."

Directly-attributable return on marketing investment

Once the hotel had achieved higher visibility on TripAdvisor, the next problem it had to tackle was reducing its spend on OTA commissions, especially within its population of repeat guests.

With Revinate Marketing, Greg and the Charles Hotel ended up getting more than they bargained for. Their first email marketing campaign was a Pi Day flash sale campaign, targeted to their database of past guests. The results? The email generated $166,631 in directly attributable revenue and 41 direct bookings.

"This sparked a whole new conversation within our organization about different ways we can drive direct bookings and revenue with targeted email marketing," says Greg.

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Concrete validation

On the experience of pushing for a new way of thinking within his organization, Greg reflects, "It has been so rewarding to take that risk and push back against the status quo. I'm so excited for the future of this industry!"

For hotels looking to take their hotels to the next level with technology, Greg has some advice:

1. Be mobile. Guests today use their cell phones for everything. Your surveys and marketing emails should be mobile-friendly, and quick and easy to consume on-the-go.

2. Take a data-based approach to everything. Look at your feedback data to determine where you'll get the most bang for your buck on ops adjustments. You can also use that information to inform your marketing campaigns based on what matters most to your loyal guests.

3. Leverage your guest feedback. Sites like TripAdvisor and Google don't just rank you based on the quality of your reviews, but also the quantity. Use that to your hotel's advantage by submitting your private feedback to be published to boost your review volume.

4. Provide the content your guests are looking for. For example, The Charles Hotel regularly publishes relevant content to its social media accounts. Greg also recently created a Things to Do page, which includes a printable list and map of local attractions.

Revinate Heroes is a series of articles profiling successful hoteliers who are moving the hospitality industry into the future.