



Hotel Industry Movers & Shakers

Irene Pallais

Area Internet Marketing Director • New Orleans Hotel Collection

“The problem for hotels today is that the digital space is very fragmented,” says Irene Pallais, Area Internet Marketing Director for the New Orleans Hotel Collection. “You almost have to be omnipresent. You have to be in a lot of different spaces, you have to have a good content marketing strategy and above all, you have to have a compelling story that makes your brand unique.”

The discovery of a passion

Irene landed in hospitality by chance and fell in love with it. She started on a Starwood field marketing corporate team based out of Austin, Texas, supporting properties in the Northeast region and Canada. She did that for almost two years before deciding to move back home to New Orleans. “I looked around a bit, but I just couldn’t find an industry as dynamic as hospitality. I definitely found my passion by accident,” she says.

Upon her arrival in New Orleans, Irene found a position with the New Orleans Hotel Collection, a rapidly growing group of upscale hotels, restaurants, bars and lounges that capture the

essence of New Orleans charm and hospitality. “This role is very different from what I was doing with Starwood,” she says. “When I started in 2009, we had four hotels, and we grew to seven within the year. My challenge was to establish a brand and a digital presence. It was very grassroots and entrepreneurial, and as I didn’t have the staff or the budget of a large international brand, I was challenged to think outside the box to drive results,” she adds.

“Ultimately it was about figuring which channels drove the best returns and then focusing on those”

Since she didn’t have the budget of a larger brand at her disposal, Irene had to constantly test and try new things. “We were constantly

asking ourselves questions like, ‘Should we be on Snapchat? Who’s going to do it? Do we want to have a wedding blog? Who’s going to do that? Ultimately it was about figuring which channels drove the best returns and then focusing on those,” she says.

“For us, organic outreach efforts worked much better than paid ads, so we found success with a combination of email, social, blog, and our website”

The key to marketing success for the hotel collection was a strong content marketing strategy. “Guests want to stay with a hotel that has a tie to the community and has a story. So we had to create compelling content and then figure out how to get that content into guests’ hands across platforms. For us, organic outreach efforts worked much better than paid ads, so we found success with a combination of email, social, blog, and our website,” Irene notes.

Upcoming challenges

With growth and expansion, New Orleans Hotel Collection is now facing some new challenges. The decision was made to acquire a property outside of New Orleans and expand the reach of the brand into a new market. “We have a great niche in New Orleans. Our hotels here all have really fascinating stories, histories, and

architecture, and it’s all very reflective of the destination. Now, since we’re expanding out of New Orleans, we get to rebrand and create a new story, defined by the individual hotels and their independent spirit.” says Irene.

Another challenge is the need for more scaleable technology. “Once we decided to expand, we had to find solutions that really could support our growth in an efficient and sophisticated way, keeping in mind that entrepreneurial grassroots mindset,” she says.

As such, Irene had to re-think her guest marketing strategy. “What we were doing before with email marketing was very slow and antiquated. Because we’re such a small team and we don’t have a huge budget, we needed to be able to simplify our technology stack and automate some of what we do so we can scale our efforts across the group,” she says.

Back to basics

Irene discovered that the key was going back to basics of hospitality and focusing first and foremost on their own guests. “We wanted to make sure we retain customers and strengthen loyalty within the group by cross-marketing and informing guests about our other hotels,” she says.

The first step is knowing enough about your past guests to send them targeted messaging. New Orleans Hotel Collection started with guest feedback. “At the property level, our general managers focused on maintaining a top position on TripAdvisor and collecting as much guest feedback as possible through automated digital surveys,” says Irene. “We then took the data from that feedback and used it to improve our service levels across the board based on what real guests were saying they liked and disliked

about their experiences with our brand. We also took the opportunity to acknowledge our most loyal guests to strengthen that relationship,” she adds.

The next level

From there, Irene took the work the GMs started, and took it to the next level by creating targeted email campaigns. Not all campaigns were revenue-focused. “It wasn’t just about promotion,” she says. “We started by communicating important information specifically to those for whom it was relevant. With our Revinate CRM and email marketing solution, we were able to inform incoming guests of anything that might impact their stays,” she adds. For example, Mardi Gras is a logistical challenge for hotels in the area, but Irene was able to overcome this by emailing important event information to guests.

“Revinate’s marketing platform allows me to tap into the email databases of the individual hotels. I can send emails from the parent umbrella company and from the individual property level. As someone who does all of this for a hotel group, it’s made my life so much easier,” she says. “And,” she adds, “there is huge opportunity here. We can automate upsell messaging, which will really help me stretch my efforts to create more direct revenue opportunities.

Irene is also one of many Revinate Marketing customers leveraging the power of the complete Revinate platform, targeting campaigns based on guest feedback. “We can get really targeted with our campaigns and send specific, more personal messages to our Net Promoters. As our biggest advocates and best organic marketers, it is hugely valuable to have the ability to tap into that,” Irene says.

Advice for hotel marketers

Irene believes that for hotels, the digital travel space enables the kind of storytelling efforts that help hotels build brand loyalty. She says, “Own your space! The challenge for hotels is that they often don’t have the resources - outsourcing an agency is expensive and you get limited support for your money. We’re all stretched thin, so we absolutely have to automate so we can create more revenue opportunities for our efforts,” she says.

Irene has some advice for her colleagues in hospitality marketing:

1. **Educate yourself.** Take it upon yourself to stay on top of the evolution of the digital space. It moves quickly, and consumers are responding to hospitality marketing efforts in a very different way today than even just a few years ago.
2. **Be aware of what your competitors are doing.** Stay current with market benchmarks and make sure you’re beating them. Figure out where your competitors are strong, and how your brand’s unique offerings differentiate you.
3. **Find your niche.** Once you understand your brand’s differentiator, even if it’s just one thing. It might even be your brand story or your social strategy, but whatever that one thing is, own that space. “For example,” Irene says, “we have a really strong online presence in terms of guest reviews and responses to those reviews.”
4. **Invest in digital.** Invest in having an in-house digital marketing specialist, especially if you’re a smaller independent group. It’s an ever growing position and the hospitality

industry is particularly ripe for all the available digital marketing channels. “Travel is perfect for Instagram and compelling blog content,” says Irene, “and the industry is ready for huge advances in email marketing. For a business of this size, it’s important to have an in-house person that’s active in that space.”

5. **Develop a strong content marketing strategy.** This includes video, quality photos, and rich media content. This doesn’t have to be professionally-produced content, as consumers are hungry for more organic insight into a property and it’s brand story.
6. **Evaluate your channels.** “We’re constantly reviewing our content channels and whether we should be doing something different,” says Irene. “Should we be on Snapchat? Should we have a wedding blog to attract more of that side of the business? There’s an increasing need for specialization,” she adds.

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