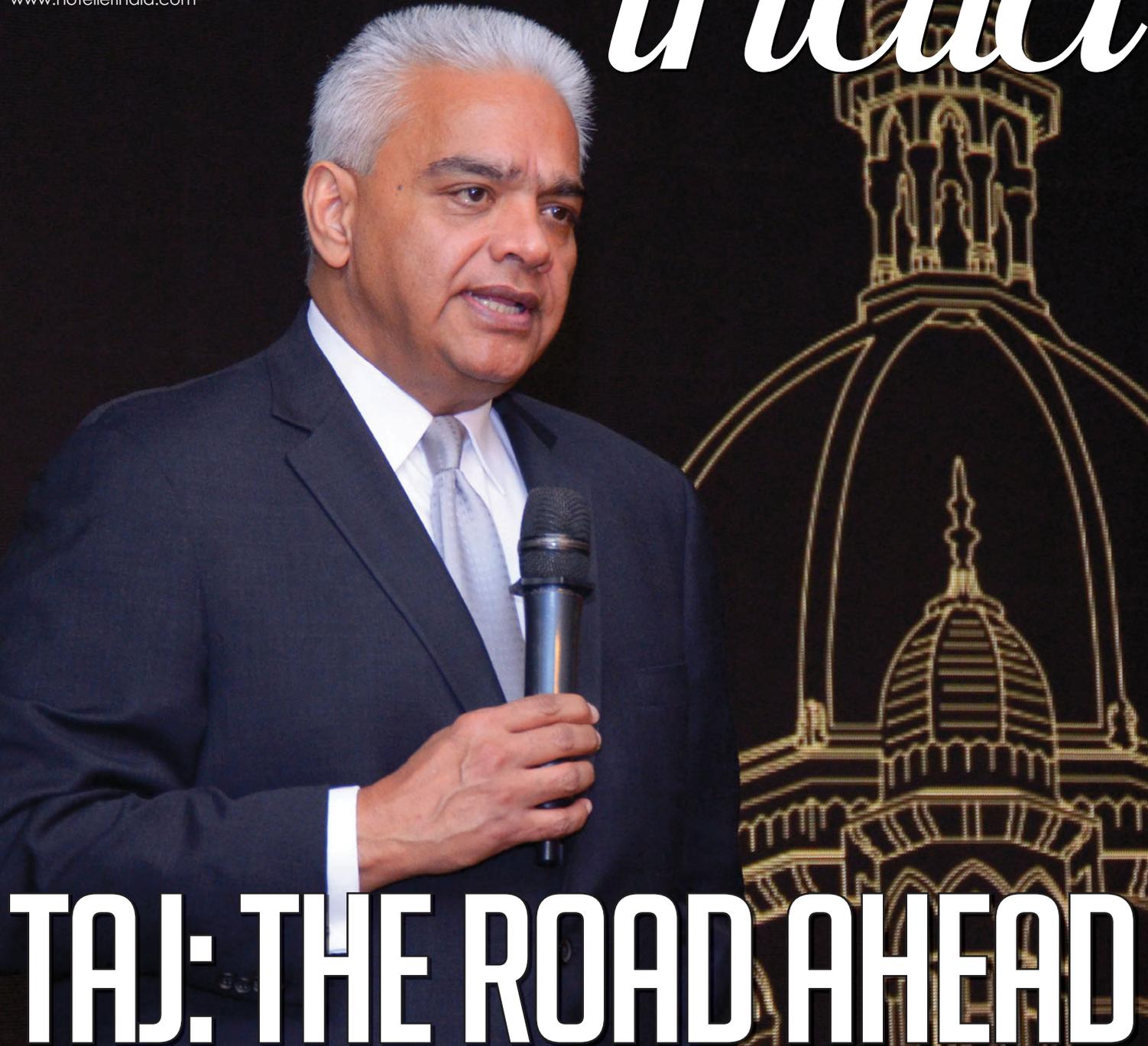


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TAJ: THE ROAD AHEAD

IN A FRANK INTERVIEW, TAJ HOTELS PALACES RESORTS SAFARIS' MD AND CEO, RAKESH SARMA, EXPLAINS HOW THE NEW BRAND ARCHITECTURE REALIGNS TAJ'S VISION OF BUILDING A GLOBALLY REPUTABLE CHAIN OF WORLD-CLASS HOTELS.



SET FOR THE SOCIAL CURRENCY WINDFALL?

The increasing chatter in cyberspace and emergence of new technologies in social media means that hospitality brands have plan their digital strategies well in advance

BY BINDU GOPAL RAO

Here's a quick test for you. Take a look around your hotel. Chances are that at least 50 percent of your guests are using either the property's WiFi connection or their own. But the fact is that they are constantly glued to their smartphones. And in all probability they are checking out some social media network, especially if we are talking about millennial guests.

Hospitality brands of every hue are leveraging it as they face stiff competition and the need to create better recall value amongst their customers. Moreover, the chatter in cyberspace and the emergence of new technologies in social networking means that they have plan their digital strategies well in advance, even if they entered the fray well in advance.

Take the case of Staywell Hospitality Group, which started its social media strategy in 2012 and has an agency that manages its networks like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn. It reviews its social media strategy every six months and tries to improvise on it. "Consumers are the ones that make the decisions and dictate the reputation of an establishment. With the advent of smart phones and mobile devices, consumers have all the tools to criticise a hotel immediately and reach millions of people in seconds," explained Ro-



Sumeet Yadav, CEO, Nando's India.

I. Grand Mercure Mysuru

hit Vig, MD, StayWell Hospitality Group.

Social media is a great to build loyalty and connect with customers in real time as it is both, effective and efficient. "We post regularly and ensure constant interaction with our customers on our social media pages. Our campaigns usually focus on building communities and this in turn makes our fans loyal and highly interactive. All of our campaigns whether they are product-related or about a new restaurant opening have a social media focus. Queries are responded to within hours and this ensures a steady engagement with new customers," said Sumeet Yadav, CEO, Nando's India.

LEVERAGING PLATFORMS

While earlier it was enough for brands to be present in just one or two channels like Facebook or Twitter, now they find it pertinent to be there on various platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, Pinterest and LinkedIn based on the type of messaging they need to send out. For example, contests can be created on Twitter, while story themes can be shared on Instagram or Snapchat. Gargi Guha, director of public relations of The Ritz-Carlton, Bangalore said it all boiled down to engagement at the end of the day.

"Our social media messaging is always woven around vivid imagery and crisp and compelling story-

telling to engage our global audience. Our messaging is conversational and always reflective of the relationship we want to build with our guests. We are in the business of crafting memories, and our social voice will always speak of that," she stated.

She illustrated her point of using different platforms by giving the example of TripAdvisor, where they try to give replies to reviews within 24 hours in a compelling style, as if the guest review is genuinely considered as viable feedback. This drives traffic from the source into conversions as today's travellers are often refer to TripAdvisor for even-handed information before choosing their place of travel or stay.

Every medium helps hotels to connect with different set of people. "For instance, Zomato is more popular amongst the local communities, while international customers rely more on TripAdvisor to search for a restaurant. To make our presence felt, we aim to give a satisfying experience to customers because nothing can match what a happy guest can write and review," said Joy Singh, co-partner Raasta Delhi and Mumbai.

THE RIGHT CONNECTION

Many hospitality chains often have in-house teams that manage their social media networks, to ensure that the right communication is passed to external customers. However, there are hoteliers how prefer to outsource



Pranjal Prashar, CEO and founder of Repup.



Avijit Arya, chief mogul, Internet Moguls.

the social media management and let these digital agencies formulate the digital content calendars, draft the matter emphasising on the promotions for the upcoming weeks months and monitor campaigns. A monthly performance report is usually shared to highlight how the campaigns have performed and detail the page insights.

Internet Moguls is one such company that takes care of the social media needs of companies and share the insights of how their expertise can benefit brands with proper documented reports. "We assist hoteliers in understanding the accessible solutions like which one to use, how to use it and how many times a week, to be able to get more guests for their rooms, more diners for their restaurants, more customers for their spa, more phone calls and more queries for banquets," stated Avijit Arya, chief mogul, Internet Moguls.

On the other hand, there are brands like Raasta that have decided to take charge of their own social media. This is especially the case when their existing customer outreach approaches, like loyalty programs, are increasingly merged with social media strategies in a bid to organically engage with customers.

Tharun Giri, MD, The Windflower resorts & Spa too is seeking talent, particularly home trained professionals, to handle the company's engagement programs. While the company takes help from agencies for de-



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signs, the social media strategy and its implementation is completely indigenous.

ANALYSING THE DATA

Besides helping companies to bridge the communication gap with customers directly, social media additionally gives a boost to Search Engine Optimisation for the brand’s virtual presence, which in key to any marketing strategy. For online campaigns, marketers use and track hashtags and monitor Facebook and Twitter analytics to understand how successful it was.

“When we release ads, we use Google analytics for monitoring it. For overall brand tracker or social listening, we use Meltwater Buzz. We usually stick to reach and impressions and use hashtags efficiently to measure the responses for each leg of the campaign by tracking the hashtag. For other ads we check click through rates and in some cases - conversion ratios (online ordering) For email campaigns, we check opening and click through rates,” explained Yadav.

INVESTMENT DECISIONS

The whole marketing landscape has changed with the introduction of social media and new avenues are available for marketers that did not exist earlier. Neha Bahl, founder of Qube Communication PR & Social Media Marketing Agency said that with ad spend on social media platforms increasing, they are in a better position to capture their target customers by posting various offers, discounts, highlighting the USP of the property and services. Also, these platforms help them to directly understand the requirement/experience of their customers through questions asked on the platforms. Vig added, “We are definitely keen to invest to strengthen our social media and are working to intensify our social media approach. Every month we work closely with our social media agency to formulate a plan and work well in advance on the areas to focus.”



Manveer Malhi, digital head and partner, iGenero.



Gargi Guha, director of public relations, The Ritz-Carlton, Bangalore.



Neha Bahl, founder, Qube Communication PR & Social Media Marketing Agency.

2. Nandos India

Guha said, “Vivid imagery depicting exciting locales and our beautiful hotels are very important to us and we make sure we invest in curating a world-class image bank. We also partner with a social media agency in Boston, Pandemic Labs as they give us strategic guidance build our brand’s assets.”

Sachin Malhotra, general manager, Grand Mercure Mysuru said that as an Accor Hotels Brand, his property has a focused approach towards social media leading to an allocation of 35% of the total marketing budget towards establishing a strong digital presence - a ratio it hopes to keep up in the coming years. “In the first year of our inception, we organised monthly monitoring and quarterly reviews of the strategy and plans as we were focused on establishing our market presence. To quantify the returns, we now have data and statistics available to analyse the market trends and hence we look forward to a weekly monitor and monthly review and for an upkeep of content distribution,” he added.

NEW-AGE SOLUTIONS

The biggest challenge in the digital space is to reach the target audience at the right time and providing immediate response to comments, queries and of course complaints. Another issue is maintaining consistency in content. “A proper monitoring system can help to respond to comments quickly. Additionally, analytical tools and trend analysis can help us better prepare content,” added Malhora.

Pranjal Prashar, CEO and founder of Repup said that his company’s standard solution has various downloadable reports like sentiment analysis, the performance of hotels basis volume, freshness, and quality of user generated content across OTAs, competition benchmarking, staff accountability (closure rate and TAT) for handling customer feedback, guest feedback conversion statistics. “While across industry, the average accuracy of Natural Language processing is around 65 percent, on our platform we endeavour to provide 85 percent accuracy. We have also expanded our reporting repertoire by consulting even asset management firms on brand studies of hotels in which they are looking to invest in,” he added.

Similarly, iGenero’s social media solutions help the hoteliers focus on the metrics across the customer lifecycle. “We break down the customer journey across four distinct stages - Attract, Convert, Close and Delight. Our social media solutions aim to convert potential consumers from Strangers to Promoters,” said Manveer Malhi - Digital Head and Partner, iGenero.

Social media today has become so all pervading that whether you like it or hate it, you just cannot ignore it. And naturally, hoteliers are all geared up to make the right connect with their guests. ■