

It's Payback Time— Across the Board

BY SHARON SCOTT, RRP



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While financial statements and balance sheets tend to place technology on the expense and liability side of the ledger, in today's world, technology provides a timeshare resort with opportunities to find new owners, reduce expenses, avoid liability, and earn revenue. Resort managers who thread a course between customer service and maintaining the annual budget are especially attuned to balancing the expense of technology—whether that means installing WiFi, purchasing software, or enabling owner Web sites with greater interactivity to meet clients' expectations.

Given this delicate balance, a resort manager should review the big picture to select the bare minimum required to obtain adequate returns on the investment. Sometimes, it becomes not a question of "if" but rather "how quickly" a service can be implemented.

"The promise of technology is to help improve, to solve problems, and to make things work better," says SPI Software Vice President of Sales Matt Brosious. "In the resort world, there are many opportunities for improvement where technology can make an important difference."

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Start at the Beginning

"We spent nearly \$450,000 building a rental platform for our resorts and owners, and it paid for itself in 14 months," says Patton Hospitality Management President Will Horton. "Factoring in the reduction in manpower to handle a call center—along with an exponential increase in rentals—operating without it is just unimaginable."

"Maximizing rentals is the key to financial performance in today's vacation ownership industry," says Brosious. He describes how SPI recently acquired a new resort client in the Caribbean, who felt they were missing opportunities without on-line booking capabilities on their resort Web site. "Integrated Web booking for owners, guests, and exchangers is a 'must have' as more and more people look to the Web to make their reservations."

While many resorts have only one site that promotes sales and rentals (while offering owners access to a separate, owners-only section), Synergy Management Solutions President and CEO Lori Entwistle, who manages The Scottsdale Camelback Resort in Scottsdale, Arizona, says they have two sites.

"We have an owners' site, as well as a totally separate marketing site, ScottsdaleCamelback.com, which is designed for the public and those looking for accommodations in Scottsdale," she explains.

Scottsdale Camelback's public site has a booking engine so that travelers can review accommodations, make a reservation, and pay for activities or spa services. Entwistle notes that the owners-only site not only allows owners to review audits, newsletters, the CC&Rs, and other owner-related information but also advertises the weeks available for resale.

"If the HOA site is well-designed, easy to navigate, and offers useful information, it is a valuable and inexpensive tool," Entwistle says.

TECHNOLOGY

Another valuable on-line tool—timeshareAdvisor.com—was recently introduced to provide a timeshare-only resort review site. Resort managers are encouraged to claim their resorts on the site in order to enhance their listing and embellish their Managers Tips section—all free of charge. “Manager Tips” are one of timeshareAdvisor’s key differentiators, offering a platform to highlight the features and amenities of a resort in great detail. The topics covered are just about every question a guest would want to know before arriving at a resort and many questions they would not think to ask. The topics covered are those that are most relevant to a timeshare stay, such as housekeeping, appliances and cookware available in kitchens, WiFi connectivity, and more.

Collecting Information

When an owner or guest goes online to make a reservation, the resort is essentially

able to cut out the “middleman.” Unlike booking over the phone, information entered by the customers themselves is much more likely to be error-free.

“Our Web site allows owners and guests with complete access,” says Patton Hospitality Management President Will Horton. “They can change anything in their member profile, including their address and contact information. They can make payments and place or change reservations. They can rent at a discount. They can also exchange their week, which is becoming an increasingly growing interest.”

Capturing all of the on-line data makes tracking rental revenue and managing inventory and occupancy much more efficient. Plus, maintaining more accurate and easily accessible real-time data prevents embarrassing errors when dealing with owners.

“Providing a complete owners rental program that handles owner banking (on

the Web) and provides for reporting with transparency is another area where the right technology can be applied to assure owner satisfaction,” says Brosious.

The Guest Experience

After a family’s arrival at a resort, technology offers quite a few creative possibilities. But these services may be used long before their arrival. Resorts can use e-mail to remind visitors that they have a reservation and offer them the use of their concierge services to upgrade to a better unit, for example.

“Capturing a guest profile and assuring that any special requests are fulfilled is fundamental to guest satisfaction,” says Brosious. “You’ve heard the axiom, ‘Things often end up the way they start’—nowhere is this more relevant than at the front desk. When a tired family arrives at your resort and is greeted first by a long line at the front desk, then to a seemingly endless drum roll of key clicks as they are checked in, it is not a happy start to the vacation. Imagine if instead, they were greeted curbside by a smiling representative with a tablet who expedites the family through the check-in process. The vacation now starts with a smile and a positive outlook.”

With the proliferation of iPads and tablets, the next big idea might well come from the housekeeping or maintenance department.

“Web-based technology free from being chained to the desktop makes a wide range of applications possible that improve the guest experience,” Brosious adds.

Collecting Confetti

Coming back to reality after a remarkable vacation is like the end of a parade: The kids’ truce is still in place; they’re still little angels. Mom is putting together the scrapbook, and no one’s boss has gotten on anyone’s last nerve—yet. If only there was a way to sweep up the confetti and enjoy the memory of that final Sousa fanfare, one last time!

That’s where technology can help with e-mails, social media, and eZines.

“We send out an on-line digital magazine four times per year that is produced in-house with owner-related content,” says Horton.

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He tells how resorts are encouraging owners and guests to participate online in a number of ways. While they are visiting the resort, Patton-managed resort guests can be rewarded in small ways to motivate them to upload vacation photos to social media platforms, such as Pinterest and Facebook, and to share their photos with the resort's marketing department.

Happy owners and guests help boost a resort's on-line presence, so it is important to get positive feedback on a variety of social sites and not just your own. Resort managers may wish to remind owners and guests about Facebook, Pinterest, and certainly timeshareAdvisor.com. A resort's owners may not be aware of the impact that positive reviews make to raise the resort's visibility on search engines such as Google.

Horton explains that they try to collect each visitor's e-mail address while they're staying at the resort. While Patton Hospitality also attempts to get the

information through member services phone calls and through promoting specials that require email validation, these methods are not always successful.

"They are afraid of receiving spam especially from timeshare marketing companies," he observes. "We use e-blasts frequently to alert members to travel information and specials. We have an on-line blog where we interact with members and they interact amongst themselves. And, of course we also use Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest."

Technology: An Investment

Innovative and thoughtful use of technology might mean better service for your owners and guests; it also should mean cost savings for the resort.

"In 2012, providing our customers with online access saved us \$300,000 in labor hours by allowing members to do things themselves that was only previously available via telephone agent," says Horton.

"Little things can make a big difference," says Brosious. "Software technology that facilitates follow-ups with task reminders, automated e-mail correspondence, statements, and confirmations can help improve customer service substantially."

Brosious observes that in today's environment, customers do not expect to wait more than a few seconds for a response. "The user interface of your software application and how quick it is to provide results can reduce the amount of time it takes to fulfill an owner service call," he adds.

"Technology is an expense," says Entwistle. "Free Internet is not free. As we know however, it is now a cost of doing business. In my opinion, the technology you offer—wireless, for instance—must be the best you can afford; technology that is mediocre is a waste of money. The public expects a great strong signal free; if you offer an intermittent signal at a cost, you will hear about it!"

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Protecting Our Flanks

The very medium that helps us promote our resorts in a positive way has also given rise to some practitioners who seek to prey on owners by offering to “relieve them of their timeshare obligations.”

Fortunately, the Internet also provides a platform for a remedy. In March 2013, ARDA-ROC announced its support for the Timeshare Transfer Registry (www.TTRegistry.com), a Web-based timeshare transfer resource center that includes a comprehensive transfer (estoppel) policy archive, a robust information base of suspect entities and individuals, and a sophisticated search and reporting function all provided to address the many issues and concerns relating to the transfer of timeshare intervals.

Developed by Grant Wolf, Inc., the Timeshare Transfer Registry (TTR) database is available on an affordable monthly subscription basis to homeowner

associations (HOAs) within the timeshare industry. According to Grant Wolf, features of the Timeshare Transfer Registry include an extensive Best Estoppel Procedures and Practices section that provides recommended transfer policy language and numerous downloadable model documents and letters. Additionally, this TTR database features innovative search and reporting capabilities that are able to identify and generate reporting on nearly 1,000 existing suspect asset-less entities and individuals. All subscriber searches that do not already appear in the database are researched and the results are classified and added into the database daily.

“We have subscriber HOAs that have been utilizing TTR’s services for over 15 months now”, says Richard Wolf, Executive Vice President of Grant Wolf. “In all cases, the reduction in fraudulent transfer activity and resulting cost savings to the HOAs has been extensive.”

At the end of the day, managers will find that money wisely invested in technology that helps market the property, as well as run the resort, is not only a necessity, but can also bring a substantial payback. ■

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