

## Make social media work for your hotel via storytelling

By Danielle Smith  
Contributing Editor

**NATIONAL REPORT**—Millennials have long been the topic of conversation in the hospitality industry, specifically how hotels can engage, connect with and market to them. Kyle Wong, CEO of content marketing platform Pixlee, believes social media is the untapped resource that is key to drawing Millennials in.

Wong believes that while travel brands try to reach Millennials, often their approach is not the most effective. “How companies advertise to Millennials needs to fundamentally change,” he said. “I think one of the best ways that people get interested in traveling to locations is seeing photos of their friends having a great time. So much of social media is visual now; I think Snapchat, Instagram and Pinterest are incredible for travel brands.”

Instagram seems to be the most effective platform in social media marketing, according to Wong, and he suggests companies begin to take advantage of it. “I think Instagram’s new features are incredibly important to the travel brands. One new feature allows for horizontal, landscape images, which I think is great for any travel brand out there. The second notable feature is the fact that there are more location tags associated with travel than with fashion apparel or food.”

Wendy Murray, director of sales and marketing at Sanderling Resort, noted that the property increased content on Instagram and Pinterest by more than 400% in 2015. “We also started a blog and have done more than 115 blogs this year related to weddings, destinations and Sanderling things to do,” she said. “We have incorporated someone’s role to be related to social media that reports to me. We will continue to evolve that person into a year-round brand ambassador.”

Murray agrees that Instagram seems to be the most effective platform. “Our Millennials love

photos and telling their stories on Instagram. Twitter is actually my least favorite and the least effective. We are very pleased with the number of guests who are using Instagram and feeding into the storytelling of Pixlee. It’s so important that we have that feed on our homepage telling the story from the guest’s point of view.”

Wong agreed, adding that the trick is not simply in accumulating a large number of followers on these platforms, but in recruiting customers to be part of the company’s story. “It’s important to get their customers to post about their brand frequently,” he explained. “One tip is to establish a consistent hashtag that is associated with their experience. It’s one thing if people are taking photos of your experience; it’s another if you’re getting credit for it. Brands need to leverage customers to tell their story more effectively.”

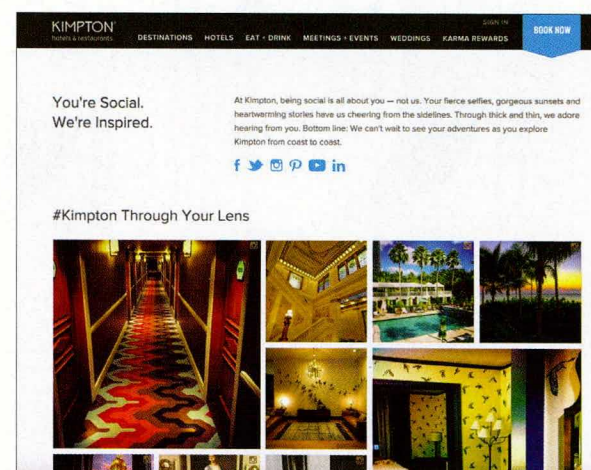
Murray said that clients will respond if you ask. “In fact, they are doing it even if you don’t ask, but figure out a way to see it and use it to your benefit,” she said. Sanderling Resort’s client base is very active in the summer when the crowd is younger and more technologically savvy, she pointed out. The resort has a number of hashtags to incorporate the customer experience into marketing. “We use #sanderlingmoments and have it on our turndown cards in the summer. Of course, #sanderlingresort is another favorite. We have done promotions with local businesses: If they take our version of Flat Stanley called #SanderlingStanley or #SanderlingSally to those locations and hashtag it, they get free samples,” she said.

Customers are not the only social media users who should be engaged. Juliet Carnoy, marketing manager for Pixlee, shared that companies should also make guests aware that they’re paying attention. “Show visitors you’re listening by liking and commenting on the photos of guests who post pictures of their experience with you,” she said. “These small actions will go a long way toward fostering loyalty toward your brand. You can also take it a step further and offer coupons or credit to guests who tag your brand in their posts.”

Wong made it clear that social media marketing goes beyond customer engagement; however, most importantly, it is a storytelling tool. “There’s so many stories behind travel that makes people go places,” Wong said. “If I don’t like to ski, then I won’t care about all those traditional advertisements for Colorado ski resorts. But, if I can see customer photos, I can see how other people employ their time at Breckenridge Ski Resort. I can see people doing yoga, hiking and spending time at a brewery. If you’re only looking at generic travel ads on TV and the radio, you’re only going to see the mountain. Traditional advertising only tells a fraction of the story.”

This, ultimately, does a disservice to the work a property puts in to attract customers. “If you go to any hotel website, you’ll see an empty lobby, bar and hotel room,” Wong said. “But, what if I want to know if the bar is ever full or what the restaurant serves? That changes my perception of the hotel, and I can see if it’s popular or if the restaurant is good for brunch.”

This boils down to a perception problem, according



TOP TO BOTTOM: Photo feeds on the Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants and Sanderling Resort websites

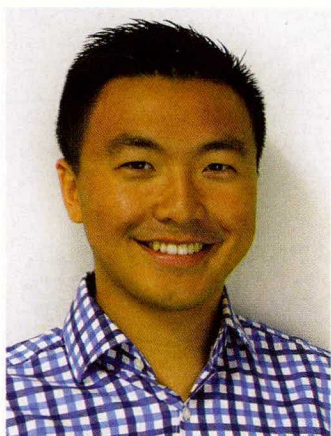
to Wong: “Hotels don’t always know what people are attracted to. Monitoring and using Instagram more effectively allows you to get a sense of what people care about. What do they want to show their friends? Is it the lobby, hotel room or restaurant? Depending on what that is, that can change your strategic decisions about layout and hotel photography.”

Carnoy said that this data should guide the company’s marketing: “The bulk of your brand’s Instagram photos should be of areas that are proven to be of greatest interest to guests, even if they’re not as aesthetically stunning as other potential shots—the back to your cool bathroom, for example, rather than your beautifully up-kept garden.”

“Social media marketing is much cheaper,” Murray agreed. “It’s generated by the user, so it gives more confidence to other users to engage in it and trust it. I continue to scale back print advertising for more online-, digital-, and social media-related marketing.”

This financial benefit correlates to the organic nature of social media marketing. Carnoy said that Millennials are “influenced by visual content, especially if it originated with regular, everyday people. It’s not only less expensive than a TV spot, but it’s also bound to be a lot more authentic, which goes a long way with the kids these days.”

Wong concluded, “Word of mouth is the oldest form of marketing, and I believe that user-generated photos is a combination of that. It’s a no-brainer why you’d use real customer photos in your marketing.” **HB**



Kyle Wong  
Pixlee



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