

Social Media & Relationship Marketing

Achieving Virality in Hotel Social Media

By Michael Barbera, CEO, Barbera Solutions



Mr. Barbera

Virality is a social media marketer's dream. Achieving virality is a feat that few could claim. It is statistically more likely to be admitted to an Ivy League university, to win the lottery or to be struck by lightning than to go viral. Social media marketers continuously attempt to develop content that contains all of the essential attributes of historically viral posts. However, changing the default could increase the chances of virality and increase organic reach: set the honeypot.

Social media marketers spend the majority of their time designing content at their computer. Instead, they should work with the organization's interior designers, chefs, and event staff. Setting the honeypot is laying a trap, or bait. The bait is an item, a cuisine, a swan-shaped towel or any service the consumer could consider "going the extra mile." The swan-shaped towel, an art-like meal, and unique lobby art all create the cognitive desire to share the experience, and the most convenient method of sharing this experience is via social media.

Hospitality and food service are two extremely saturated industries with significantly low barriers to entry, and the most persuasive thing an individual could do is show that others are doing it too. If a follower of a guest views a post from their friend on social media, they are more than likely to search for that location when planning a visit to that geographic area. It is the oldest persuasive trick: peer pressure. However, the technical name is social proof.

Spending more time with interior designers or art curators does not require new purchases on the company account, recreating the wheel, or spying on competitors. Identifying unique items throughout the common areas, individual rooms, and restaurants and lounges is likely the best method of finding post-worthy articles. It is likely your organization already possesses these items. If these articles are not receiving much social media attention, a simple nudge might support a change. Move the items to an area, or into a position that may receive more traffic, or next to other items that receive the attention of social media.

To increase social proof, you should double the bait. Act like a guest during peak times, take photos of the items, overtly post them to social media. Verbally spell out the hashtag as you type it on your mobile device and move on to another article. These actions are likely to create curiosity and desire for belonging, which will likely increase the chances of onlookers searching for that same hashtag or posting a photo of that article. If another person posts a photo of these items, here's a breakdown of what we have created.

First, we created free marketing content with increased organic reach. The individual posting the content likely geotagged the location, which now creates another avenue for potential clients to find your business, and the most undervalued attribute: memory. You created an everlasting memory for the photo taker.

During recent research with 197 participants in a well-known hotel chain, we placed several unique art sculptures in a hotel lobby. Additionally, each item has been placed into the check-in area and near the elevators to the hotel rooms. The placement created the nudge of a traffic heuristic, in the path where the consumer is most likely to walk. Furthermore, each participant was between the ages of 23 and 55, and each paid for his or her stay at the hotel with his or her personal income. The art chosen for this study was chosen at random. Additionally, participants were recruited in the parking lot of the hotel before checking into the hotel between the hours of 2 PM and 6 PM local (standard check-in times).

Study number one consisted of 50 participants. Each participant possessed a smartphone and had the smartphone in their possession at check-in. Following check-in, 98 percent of participants walked passed the art, but 50 percent (N = 25) stopped for at least two seconds to look at the art. Of the 25 participants that stopped to look at the art, 10 participants took photos, four posted to social media and three geotagged the photo.

The four participants that posted to social media had a median quantity of 123 followers on the network where the photo was posted. Seventy-two hours following the post, the organic reach of the post was observed to be 1,476.

More than fourteen hundred individuals were exposed to content that was exclusive to this hotel chain, but more specifically, it was unique to that respective location. The organic reach, to date, is unmeasured, but likely to have increased from 1,476.

Study number two consisted of 147 participants. The same art from study number one was moved to a different hotel within the same chain and in the same city. For this study, we moved the art to a unique location. We placed the art next to the ice machine on the 5th floor. This floor consisted of 44 guest rooms. The art was placed into a position that was visible from the hallway, without the need to intentionally seek ice. Each participant was likely to make eye contact with the art when walking to their room. Of the 147 participants, 101 participants walked to the art to view it. None of the participants went for ice, brought an ice bucket or returned with ice. This is a significant observation that tells us the uniqueness and curiosity of the hotel guests. Sixty-nine participants snapped photos of the art. Of the 69 participants that snapped photos, 71 percent of them posted at least one photo to social media, and 91 percent of the posts were geotagged.

During each study we observed behavior consistent with the cognitive desire to share an experience. The art was unique, but it was also placed in a single location that art was not expected and another where traffic is frequent. Each location proved to be fruitful to organic reach and nudged the consumer to provide free marketing for the hotel.

Additionally, in a follow-up survey, 81 percent of participants that posted a photo on social media stated that they were likely to return to that hotel. Furthermore, there was a significant increase in the percentage of satisfied consumers from previous surveys.

Each of these evokes consumer emotion, and this initiates the path to being post-worthy. Imagine your friend told you a joke or a funny story, it is likely that you would share that joke or story with your other friends; then it is likely that they would share with their buddies.

More factors contribute to the success of this tactic. It is imperative to understand the behaviors of your target audience. I recommend having an understanding of what type of content they prefer to post and what kind of content they prefer to view on social media. Furthermore, ask yourself, "who is my customer?", and "who does my customer want to be?" Think about the products and services that you have purchased, but never used. This purchase was likely due to who you wanted to be at the time.

Identifying the most trafficked areas of the property could support a similar campaign. Positioning an article in a zone that is exposed to fewer consumers is likely to yield a smaller return. A few methods of identifying highly trafficked areas are (1) observe, (2) review metrics and analytics, and (3) speaking with the janitorial and cleaning crews. The cleaning crews are likely to know which sections of the floor are usually the dirtiest from traffic. It is likely that your organization may have items that consist of RFID chips that help track consumer behavior. Lastly, watch. Take a seat to observe the activity, similar to developing a qualitative study. Manually observing behavior, or conducting qualitative research to view the phenomena can be time-consuming but could yield a return if the other options are not available. Each organization should measure their actions against their returns and ensure the return on investment is significant when measured against the employed resources for each campaign.

In the business of business, which is revenue generation, engagement is a means to an end, and that end is increasing profit. The idea is that the more engagement you get, the more likely it is that people will know and trust your brand, and hopefully purchase a product or service at your business. It is part of the consumer's journey and their individual behavior that helps us target them with niche methods. Moreover, even though pursuing engagement can be much fun.

Be unique, be un-uniformed and be odd. Don't follow the pack of competitors. Understand your consumer's behavior and use that to develop products, services, and designs that entice posting behavior. Change the default and bring the content to the consumer to avoid long hours of curating content behind a computer. Consumers are smart, and they know what curated content looks like, but they are not likely to identify the nudge of positioning or using items that they want to post.

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