

MARKETING AUTOMATION LARGE-SCALE PERSONALISED CUSTOMER SERVICE

Filipe Machaz, co-founder and vice president for North America, GuestCentric



Marketing automation has become popular in recent years: personalised messages tailored to a person's needs and interests are helping build stronger relationships which could increase conversions and revenue. How can marketing automation transform marketing teams and their outreach? *Donald Gasper* asks some hospitality professionals

Customer relationship management (CRM) pioneer Salesforce says that marketing automation is technology that manages marketing processes and multifunctional campaigns, across multiple channels, automatically.

It refers to software platforms that help businesses automate their marketing and sales engagement processes to generate more leads, convert more leads to sales, and optimise marketing spend.

One such platform is SharpSpring, a U.S.-based firm. It says that marketing automation allows marketers to automate repetitive tasks such as sending e-mails, maintaining social media, tracking website interactions and managing various other tasks. In effect it centralises all of the features and functions that make up the marketer's role in an organisation. A marketing automation platform, it adds,

should have the ability to integrate with other sales and marketing tools (CMS, CRM, social media, meeting software, etc.) to provide a centralised platform for data management and analysis.

"Marketing automation solves the digital marketer's paradox of providing a personalised customer experience at scale," says Kristian Valk, co-founder and CEO of Hotelchamp, an Amsterdam-based company that provides smart technology solutions for hotel websites resulting in direct bookings.

"Throughout history, traditional brick-and-mortar businesses have been able to leverage quality one-to-one conversations with just a handful of customers – understanding each customer's needs and offering them real value in real time."

"In order to function in the digital space, businesses must sacrifice a lot of the intimacy they're known for and replace it



"Throughout history, traditional brick-and-mortar businesses have been able to leverage quality one-to-one conversations with just a handful of customers – understanding each customer's needs and offering them real value in real time. In order to function in the digital space, businesses must sacrifice a lot of the intimacy they're known for and replace it with immense volumes of quantified digital insights"

Kristian Valk, co-founder and CEO of Hotelchamp

with immense volumes of quantified digital insights, Valk says. "Clicks, conversions, and purchase funnels – digital measurement has us drinking from a firehose of data. Of course, this is highly valuable information, but these quantified learnings have led to an approach that may be right for most – but not all. For most websites, they're now more 'mob-rule' than hospitality – a static, one-size-fits-most customer experience. For all its benefits, the age of digital has now replaced that quality with quantity. This divide is of course most clearly evident in the hospitality industry."

One hospitality firm that has experience of marketing automation is GuestCentric, a provider of cloud-based digital marketing software that helps hoteliers protect their brands, drive bookings and connect to their customers on all digital platforms. GuestCentric's all-in-one platform provides hoteliers with responsive websites for mobile, tablets and desktops; a user-friendly booking engine; a social marketing module to publish on social networks; and a channel manager to offer rooms on Booking, Expedia, and hundreds of other channels.

"In my experience, working with an

extensive portfolio of hotels, we've seen that average booking engine conversion is around 3 per cent," says Filipe Machaz, co-founder and vice president for North America of GuestCentric. "So the big question is: how can we convert the 97 per cent of visitors that only look at your website once and then disappear without a trace?"

Without a doubt, the answer is technology. Nowadays, hoteliers have a wide range of tools at their disposal that they can use to personalise the experience and push their website visitors into the e-commerce funnel. "And from my experience of closely monitoring the flow of direct bookings and working to improve those rates, there are two marketing automation techniques that I've found to work exceptionally well," says Machaz.

"The first one is called 'Shopping activation' where we use real-time e-commerce information to create a feeling of urgency in guests to check the booking engine. A good example of this is a dynamic widget (a layer on top of the website) which tells visitors that a room was 'Just booked'. "We've seen this technique lift direct bookings around 5 per cent."

The second technique is called 'Shopping recovery'. "This is a strategy where we automatically target guests that visit our booking engine but for some reason decided to abandon the booking process midway through. Here's how it works. When the browser detects that these visitors are going to close the booking engine, we send them a personal message and ask for their email address, in exchange for a special offer. The beauty of this functionality is we can then send these visitors personalised emails with a link to the booking engine, which returns them to their original booking process, with the dates and special offer pre-selected. This technique also yields, on average, an additional 5 per cent lift."

"In my opinion, a successful hotel marketing and e-commerce operation is one which is continuously exploring new techniques and adapting best practices to push guests into the e-commerce funnel and increase booking engine conversions. Because, if average conversion is around 3 per cent, by adding 5 per cent here and 5 per cent there, we're able to more than double a hotel's production on their most profitable channel." **AHCT**