

About -- Good Reads

[About](#)
[Clients And Partners](#)
[Executive Team](#)
[Trophy Case](#)
[Press Room](#)
[Good Reads](#)
[Philanthropic Work](#)

A Picture's Worth More Business



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Leverage Photography and Rich Media to Increase Online Revenue and Build Brand Awareness

Many hoteliers and travel professionals are willing to spend a great amount of money on Internet marketing to promote their business. From copywriting to paid search marketing to the latest Web 2.0 trend, thousands of dollars are invested each year to capture market share from the competition in the online space. But many seem to overlook the basics behind Internet success – having a website that is appealing to the end-user. Some of the most appealing websites today are those that incorporate bold photography and imagery.

Communicating through images has become increasingly important in the online world, especially when it comes to travel. With over 60 % of travel expected to be booked online this year, it is crucial for your website to be attractive and catch the eyes of potential consumers.

A website that is both visually appealing while remaining focused on conversion is a goal that every travel professional should strive for. While the proper use of high-quality photography is just one of the key factors to creating a successful website for your hotel or destination, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of just how important a few snapshots really can be. Here are a few tips to equip you with the knowledge and expertise it takes to wow visitors through online imagery and convert them from casual lookers to online bookers:

- **Research, research, research**

This tip cannot be stressed enough. Your website photography is often the first glimpse your potential guests will get of your property or destination before they begin forming their opinions. You want to seize this opportunity and ensure that you make a good first impression. The most obvious decision when it comes to your website photography is whether to elect someone to snap your pics internally, or hire a professional. If you need to save costs by utilizing someone who already works at your property, take time to research best practices such as optimal lighting, best time of day to take outdoor photos, angles, backgrounds, and so on.

It is also important to do your research when hiring a professional. Ask to see the photographer's portfolio of prior work to ensure that he or she has the right experience for your needs. It is also essential to understand your photographer's policy on how the images he or she takes for your website can be used in the future. Be sure to hire a professional that will allow you full rights to your digital files so that you can use your photographs for other marketing needs such as seasonal promotions, email blasts, landing pages, and other online and print advertising. Additionally, if possible, involve a lawyer in the hiring process to help protect your rights and guarantee that the photos cannot be used in any other way, that your photographer will not charge royalty fees, and other legal items that you may overlook.

- **Plan ahead**

Identifying future marketing opportunities and promotions in advance of your photo shoot is a must. It is important to have photos planned out and taken well in advance for all seasonal events and promotions you will hold during the year. Take into consideration seasonal packages you have for Mother's and Father's Day, Valentine's Day, summer vacations, wedding season, and so on. Having descriptive photographs already in place for these promotions will expedite the creation of new interactive pieces such as banner ads, email blasts, and landing pages that coincide with your seasonal packages or giveaways. Not only will you want to have different types of photos, for example, pictures of mothers and daughters for Mother's Day or happy couples for Honeymoon packages, but you will also want to be sure to have a collection of images that vary in size, resolution, and position. Be sure to have both horizontal and vertical images taken as well as high and low resolution images for email marketing and other online advertising campaigns. Planning ahead and having your images taken in advance will help save you time and effort throughout the year.

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- **Target your market**

Lifestyle images can be a powerful conversion tool for your website. Does your current photography accurately represent your ideal clientele? When utilizing lifestyle images, it is essential to take your target audience into consideration. Make it easy for your site visitors to picture themselves at your hotel or destination. Be sure to include various photographs of your desired. Whether you are targeting families with young children, older couples, or college spring-breakers, you want to appeal to the right people to continue to grow your business.

A strategically placed lifestyle photo can also be a useful tool for influencing buyer behavior and increasing revenue through your site. The addition of photos of visitors enjoying your local attractions and on-site amenities, such as receiving a relaxing massage or enjoying a round of golf on a sunny day, might be the perfect incentive for pre-booking reservations and service packages.

Lifestyle images can also be influential when re-branding your hotel or destination. Attracting your new target audience can start immediately with a simple change in the lifestyle photographs displayed throughout your website.

- **Show off all that your property has to offer**

A photo gallery is nothing new to a travel website. However, most websites have one gallery that shows a handful of images. Why not showcase all your hotel or destination has to offer and feature multiple photo galleries? Take the time to incorporate a separate section into your website for images of each of your amenities: accommodations, meeting space, golf course, weddings, restaurants, pools, etc. Having several photo galleries provides you with the opportunity to highlight all of your amenities in greater detail and peak the various interests of your target audience. It also affords you the opportunity to give the consumer a true glimpse into what an actual visit to your property is like. Multiple galleries will also enhance the user experience and make the end user feel as if the website was customized to meet their unique travel needs – both of which can lead to the ultimate goal of higher conversion rates.

- **Optimize your photos**

Universal or blended search, the latest phenomenon in the search engine world, now allows users to perform keyword searches across all content areas, such as news, local, video, images, and so on, with one simple click. As travel professionals, this means that your website can now not only be searchable through its copy, tags, and meta tags, but also through its images. Now, optimizing your photography is just about as important as optimizing your website copy.

One way to help optimize your website photography is to include captions with the images in your photo galleries and throughout your site. Search engine spiders can recognize this text as well, so be sure to incorporate short, yet descriptive captions that contain optimized keywords whenever possible. This is yet another reason as to why you should have multiple photo galleries. The more captions you include, the better chance your photography will show up within your desired searches.

Another important aspect to consider is the file names of your images. For maximum optimization, use succinct yet descriptive file names rather than a series of numbers or a nickname. The descriptive names assist search engine spiders and allow them to distinguish the photos on your website. One tip to remember: when using multiple words in your file name, separating your key words with dashes rather than stringing the words together will also help improve with optimization.

One additional element to incorporate into your website to help optimize your photography is ALT attributes. ALT attributes are alternative text based descriptions that show up when images cannot be displayed or do not load. Whether due to slow Internet connections, older web browsers, email restrictions or text being turned off, ALT attributes will allow users to still know what your image portrays, despite the fact that it does not appear on the screen. Like the file names, your descriptions should be short and to the point, yet descriptive enough to take the place of an unloaded photograph. Search engine spiders can also recognize these ALT attributes, so be sure to integrate some of your desired keywords.

Optimizing your photography with appropriate file names, captions, and ALT attributes is an important step to gain more visible real estate in the natural search results and capture the eyes of travelers worldwide.

- **Explore rich media**

Rich media, a fancy term for interactive media such as video, flash, animation, and various other forms of motion features, has become increasingly popular over the past year. By integrating a virtual tour or video into your website, you have another chance to impress your visitors and make a positive first impression. Incorporating elements of rich media into your website offers another way to enhance a user's experience while learning about your property or destination. These elements encourage interaction, which in turn, increases the amount of time visitors spend on your website, ultimately leading to higher conversion rates. In fact, research indicates that rich media, such as virtual tours, generate 16% more bookings than still images.

Much like your website photographs, aspects of rich media, such as virtual tours and videos, can also show up through universal search when tagged appropriately with your targeted keyword terms.

If the idea of trying to create and implement rich media into your website seems overwhelming, there is help available. Companies like ICE Portal specialize in the production, management and distribution of rich media specifically for the travel industry. Such companies also have the ability to host, customize, and deliver your media content, such as photos and videos, in the proper format, size, speed, bandwidth and language to help boost your website and capture market share from your competition.

■ **Social photography**

By now you may be tired of hearing about the latest Web 2.0 trends. Too bad, Web 2.0 is the natural evolution of how consumers are using the Internet and it must be embraced, even when it comes to the world of photography. Consumers are not only sharing their travel experiences through written reviews on popular sites like TripAdvisor or through their personal blogs, they are also uploading and sharing their amateur photographs. On sites like Flickr, a photo sharing site that receives more than 18 million unique visitors each month, users can upload pictures from their travels, which become searchable for all visitors across the Internet. At no cost, your hotel can establish its own Flickr profile, share images of your property, and include a link to your own website for millions of potential guests to search and view – free advertising at its best! If you decide to use Flickr, or any other photo sharing website, be sure to always use friendly names for your image files. Just like for your own website, in order to appear within the search results on Flickr, the search engines must recognize your image, which is accomplished through the keywords in its file name.

It is important to understand that well planned and produced photography is just one of the many factors to consider when discussing your online presence. Your website still needs a user-friendly, optimized design and an aggressive online marketing strategy to drive users and increase your overall Internet presence. Once the users arrive at your website, however, your dynamic, appealing photography can then sell for itself.

Please visit www.TIGGlobal.com to learn more about how TIG Global's custom e-marketing solutions can meet your unique business needs and deliver unrivaled results to your property or destination.

About TIG Global:

TIG Global (<http://www.TIGGlobal.com>), based in the Washington, DC metro area and London, is the leading provider of interactive marketing services for the hospitality and travel industry. TIG Global is dedicated to educating travel professionals on the latest internet marketing and travel trends and defining how destinations and hotels can boost revenue and build brand awareness through the online channel. To serve clients worldwide, TIG Global offers multi-language websites, a vast network of internationally based strategic linking partners, email and pay-per-click marketing campaigns tailored to all international markets, custom Web 2.0 solutions including our proprietary HotelProtect (<http://www.HotelProtect.com>) solution, and websites optimized for major search engines around the world.

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