Travel 2.0

“The Times They Are A-Changin”

This week I spent three days in Los Angeles with Bill Sthay, Lisa Tojo, and Chris Kelley at a conference focused on the state of the Internet as it relates to the many systems, companies and applications that now comprise the vast, dynamic travel distribution system. It is truly an amazing network that enables people around the world to instantly get information about and book a vacation at an Outrigger or OHANA hotel—and many of our competitors—any time of the day or night, 365 days a year. The exciting news is that it is improving and becoming more powerful daily, and what was state-of-the-art just a few months ago may soon be outdated. As singer Bob Dylan put it:

Then you better start swimmin’
Or you’ll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin’

Attending the conference was a humbling experience for me. I found myself the oldest person in a room full of about 500 bright, young 20- and 30-somethings who are leading a charge that is drastically altering the way we contact our customers and the way guests communicate with us. The room was literally vibrating with energy. Everyone seemed to be multitasking all the time—working on a laptop computer or sending/receiving messages on a Blackberry handheld computer or cell phone while at the same time listening to some fascinating presentations by business leaders and technology developers. Everyone there knew that this is a time of tremendous challenge and change in the worldwide travel distribution systems and not a minute of any day is to be lost.

Consider the legacy airline computer systems are nearly half a century old and consumer use of the Internet to plan and book travel has been going on for almost a decade. Add to that a significant increase in broadband access to the Internet in the U.S., Europe and Asia. Finally, there is now a large enough number of customers getting information about travel and booking travel on the Internet to make it financially attractive for a number of companies to try to significantly improve the experience and information available throughout the travel distribution networks. The changes are significant enough that it is looked on as a new generation of travel software. Thus the designation “Travel 2.0.”

The changes are coming in two areas.

• Travel providers are going to know a lot more about the people who look at their Web sites and will be able to provide content that is most relevant to each potential customer.
• Customers will know a lot more about travel providers—hotels, airlines, etc.—including their pricing strategies, facilities, equipment, and how they treat the people who use their services.

In the first area, by using customer information gathered from a number of sources, including that volunteered by the customer, travel providers will be able to customize their Web offerings specifically to that customer. Amazon.com has achieved this in sales of books and other retail products. When I visit Amazon.com, I am offered book suggestions based on my previous purchases and other personalized information they have stored on me as well as millions of other customers.

Travel Web sites are becoming equally sophisticated. If you are a repeat customer, they know a great deal about you. If you are new to a vendor’s site, such as homeandabroad.com, you have the option of spending about five minutes entering personal information on those in your party and your interests. In a flash you get back a recommended itinerary.

Traveling with a number of friends to attend a group event such as a family reunion, sports event, graduation, class reunion, corporate incentive trip, etc.? Then visit the Web site groople.com, which is specifically designed to handle group reservations. Give the site information about your group and their requirements and groople.com will come up with recommendations.

Likewise, our customers are learning a lot more about travel providers on the Web. New hotel Web sites will include more maps, better descriptions, photos and videos of rooms and facilities, plus information on a variety of optional events and sightseeing, which may also be booked through the hotel’s site.

Travelers themselves are also providing a great deal of information about every aspect of travel through social network Web sites such as myspace.com, yahoo360 and friendster.com. Other sites such as tripadvisor.com specialize in publishing travelers’ comments about their experiences—the good, the bad and the ugly. Guests love to write. A quick check of tripadvisor.com revealed 273 reviews of the Outrigger Reef, 298 for the Outrigger Waikiki, and 80 for the OHANA East.

The “Court of Public Opinion” is in session 24 x 7 x 365!
Don’t have a friend who wants to go with you to the place you want to visit? Go to tripmates.com where it is likely you can be matched up with potential traveling companions for destinations from Las Vegas to Antarctica.

Want the very best price on a flight or a hotel room available today? Go to a metasearch site such as kayak.com or sidestep.com and it will immediately scan the online travel agencies and give you a selection of prices available. For example a three-day post-Thanksgiving stay at the OHANA Waikiki Malia could be booked at the following agencies and prices: orbitz: $97, cheaptickets: $97, jetaway: $118, hotelbook: $122, skoosh: $128 and lastminutetravel: $130.

Other Web sites such as flyspy.com and farecompare.com are researching and analyzing historical data on airline fares and then, getting into the mind of the revenue manager, predicting when is going to be the best day in the coming weeks to get the lowest price. I am sure there will soon be similar sites that will predict future prices for hotel rooms, if they are not already out there.

It is mind-boggling. However, Outrigger and OHANA Hotels & Resorts will continue to probe these electronic frontiers to keep ahead of the competition.

While all that will help us get bookings, the real job starts when a guest arrives at the Front Desk of one of our properties across the Pacific. That’s the moment of truth and we must never forget that. We must stand and deliver top-notch customer service at all times!

Every guest who checks in will eventually check out and a good number of them will write in their personal blogs or on a Web site like tripadvisor.com, not about the brick and mortar of the hotel, but about you and how wonderful your “aloha” spirit was in making their dream vacation. Each of you is not only an ambassador of Outrigger and OHANA Hotels but of Hawaii itself and of our other Pacific destinations.

Smile, you are live on the Internet in Travel 2.0.