Abu Dhabi folds reviews into hotel ratings

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The emirate will become the first government entity in the world to incorporate social media reviews into its official hotel classification system.

Photo Illustration.

Highlights

- Abu Dhabi will hold hoteliers accountable by monitoring online reviews.
- The new program launches during Q1 2014.
- The inclusion of

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GLOBAL REPORT—Abu Dhabi will soon become the first place in the world to integrate social media ratings in its official hotel classification system.

The trailblazing move by Abu Dhabi's government-run Tourism and Culture Authority will monitor social media ratings of hotels

social media is the next step in the evolution of classification systems.

and hold their operators accountable, in terms of stars, for bad reviews and negative feedback. The program also will recognize properties that receive exemplary reviews with a 5-star-plus designation.

The updated ratings system will launch during the first quarter of 2014, beating out the likes of Germany and Switzerland who have dabbled with social media as a ratings criterion, according to Omar Al Bishr, head of the organization's Licensing and Classification Planning department.

Omar Al Bishr, Tourism and Culture Authority

"It will be the first system in the world to incorporate online guest ratings for the determination of hotel classifications," he said.

Reto Wittwer, Kempinski Hotels

Since 2011, German Hotel and Restaurant Association has incorporated consumer ratings and review findings from social media monitoring platform TrustYou.com into a new star rating process for its 240,000 members, as has its sister association Hotelleriesuisse.

"We believe social media ratings give a clear indication on how satisfied travelers are with a hotel," Al Bishr said. "At the same time we find that the travel industry is still warming up to the idea of having subjective guest opinions dictating their place in the market, and therefore the first inclusion of social media ratings in our hotel classification system is an indirect one."

As hotels in the emirate acclimate to being held accountable by social media, the classification program initially will start by checking ratings against social media reviews before cracking down, he said.

"What we do is we monitor the ratings from a wide range of platforms collated in one dashboard and assess that the average online rating for a specific hotel does not drop below a minimum that we have established for that rating," Al Bishr said. "If it does,

we will organize a mystery shopper audit that will review if the negative feedback is accurate. If this is confirmed, the hotelier will be asked to present a plan for improvement, and if targets are not acceptable or not met, one or more stars can be taken away."

The vetting will be done using an umbrella platform that lists the ratings of several dozen websites, including TripAdvisor, Booking.com, Hotels.com and Expedia, Al Bishr said.

"If the service delivery is in line with the infrastructure and services offered in the hotel, the social media ratings will not have an impact at all," he said. "Initially, it is simply used to identify hotels that offer poor service and push them into increasing their performance.

"If they don't, they can be removed from the respective classification band."

The authority will use social media to reward as well as reprimand strong social media performance.

"We intend to launch awards for 5-star hotels that exceed the status quo of what can be expected in that category. A prerequisite of being considered for these awards are exceptional scores on average online ratings," Al Bishr said.

Growing influence

Wouter Hensens, academic dean of Stenden South Africa and hotel industry consultant who specializes in social media, sees a growing and necessary influence of guest reviews on rating systems.

Hensens has been actively involved in the Abu Dhabi launch. Following its "spectacular" lead, he said, classification systems worldwide must evolve to include social media.

"For hotel rating systems to be effective and relevant to traveler's

desires, social media impact can no longer be ignored," he said. "Classifications must take on board the need for promises to travelers to be lived up to—and when they are not, action to be taken."

Hensens predicts rating systems that do not live up to social media test quickly will find themselves irrelevant and possibly obsolete.

"With a continued growth of online review platforms, hotel classification systems need to step up if they want to continue to justify their existence.

"The biggest challenge that many destinations face is that hotel rating is voluntary, resulting in only a percentage of the hotels buying into and using the system. Online review platforms appear to draw more hotels away from conventional rating systems as it may be costly, or hotels simply do not receive the rating they feel they should have," he said.

The Middle East's strict reliance on classification systems eliminates this problem, he said.

"Hotel rating is tightly controlled, and thus one will find no deviations between the rating supplied by the government and the one that appears on online review platforms," Hensens said.

"The key focus of government's aspiring to such control is to ensure that all accommodation is on board and to align the rating system with the guest experiences expressed on social media," he said. "Dysfunctional systems that do not have industry buy in and that are not reinforced by what consumers want and experience will very likely cease to exist."

Hensens believes incorporating social media reviews on the quality of a hotel's services and infrastructure can help address the inconsistency, duplicity and subjectivity of ratings systems.

"The answer lies in the incorporation of online feedback and a rating system that focuses on the tangible and measurable elements of the hotel product," he said.

Hoteliers on board

Hoteliers in the Middle East already place a big emphasis on self-monitoring and marketing within the confines of social media ratings.

The spotlight given to reviews on websites such as that of the Kempinski Emirates Palace in Abu Dhabi exemplifies how hoteliers in the region are taking it upon themselves to promote guest ratings at the risk of exposing warts.

"When hotels first placed reviews on their own websites, this was seen as a bold step. After all, why would you risk having bad reviews published on your own marketing tool?" said Reto Wittwer, president and CEO of Kempinski Hotels.

"However, hoteliers soon realized that this was an efficient and valuable source of feedback to better understand their own business, and more importantly to improve their product and service offering. In taking that a step further, the new Abu Dhabi ratings system is a welcome innovation," he added.

Wittwer said the weight given to individual social media websites depends on the market.

"Some markets have other sites, networks and portals that may be more influential than the popular and established ones in the western world. U.S. travelers have different behavior to Europeans as do customers in the Middle East, Africa and Asia when it comes to online referencing and peer recommendation," he said. "A ratings system that incorporates social media in its framework needs to look at integrating aggregators that are capable to harvest myriad sources online and translate it into the preferred

ranking algorithms."

As Abu Dhabi plunges into the deep end of social media impact on hotel ratings, other countries are slowly heading in that direction.