

Choosing the Right On-Line Directory for You

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“So many directories, so little time” was a popular workshop during the PAII on the Road series last year. The number of internet B&B guides has continued to snowball, with 29 added to INNSTAR.COM last December and 10 deleted. Making your selection process even more complex is the continued evolution of the search engines toward “pay to play.” It’s confusing enough to web-savvy innkeepers; the novices have a very difficult task in selecting an appropriate mix of guides.

When I created INNSTAR.COM B&B Guidebook Reviews in 1996, I specifically rated the guides from the standpoint of a potential guest. The assumption was the consumer would use INNSTAR.COM to find the guides that would do the best job of locating the “perfect” B&B. It did not (and does not) evaluate how well the guide is positioned in the search engines and in other portals. As an innkeeper, however, this positioning is important because only a small number of potential guests will use INNSTAR.COM to find the guide best for them. So here’s what you as an innkeeper need to be looking for when selecting a guide:

1. Does the guide present information in a way that your target market can easily find you (searchability)?
2. Does the guide have a means to prove its effectiveness?
3. Does the guide have a solid search engine presence?
4. Is the guide affordable?

Searchability is important.

- A guide that allows only a search by city (generally an alphabetical list) is of greater value to the innkeeper in “Destination City” than to the innkeeper in “Nowheresville;” however, this is not necessarily true if the guide has very few listings in the state, a good map or an excellent “vicinity” feature.
- Guides that present lists of cities and don’t indicate which have expanded listings are probably of little value to the inn in “Nowheresville.”
- Guides that list inns alphabetically by inn name help only those at the top of the alphabet or with recognized names.
- Guides that list inns in the order in which they sign up may be worthwhile to the early adopters.
- A guide with a search mechanism for multiple amenities is worth more to the innkeeper with many amenities than to one who has few.
- Niche guides for business travel, Victorian inns, pet travel, gay & lesbian travel, or a specific location are worthwhile for inns that fit the specific profile, since they address a narrower target market.
- Some guides now provide accessibility to cell phone related technology, which is worthwhile to inns that market to the cross-country traveler.

Proof of effectiveness should be demanded by every innkeeper. Guides that have established relationships with on-line availability/reservation service providers have a definite edge, as it's easy to see where the reservation request came from. At the very least, guides should provide statistics on unique visitors and page views and an email information request form; you should be able to reconcile this data with the tracking software from your own site (yes, you must have your own domain). I am still waiting for a guide to develop a system that provides absolute proof that the reservation came from their site. Meanwhile, to allocate all those guests who say "I found you on the internet but I don't know where" I'd suggest using an allocation model developed by Jeremy Robinson (Hummingbird Inn, VA) – you can find it at www.ew3d.com/presentation/EvaluatingWebDirectoryEffectiveness.html

Search engine presence is critical. The problem is that it can't be evaluated in concrete terms because it's continually changing as different guides bid up the price of premium placement. I evaluate a guide's presence by viewing where they have listings, then searching for "that city bed breakfast" on several search engines. If they don't show up then perhaps it's not for me. Other good places to search are Yahoo.com, where you check for banners at the top of a search page, and google.com, where you look for the premium listings on the side. Since premium placement costs the guide money, you should expect these guides to cost more. Steve Demarest's "Marketing Guestrooms Online," available from the PAII bookstore, is a useful resource. It can also be ordered directly from my website (www.innstar.com/sources.html).

Each innkeeper must decide what's affordable for your operation since you can easily spend thousands of dollars on B&B guides. Get yourself on the free guides, but don't expect too much return. Then, set up a budget and prioritize your listings based on that budget. The mega-sites generally will have a better search engine presence and often better presentation, but it's easier for your listing to get lost among the many other ones there. These mega-sites also have systems to give priority placement to the inns that spend the most money, which can be a problem for the smaller inn. Look for guides which include a link to your domain site, and don't ignore a smaller guide if it seems to fit your niche well.

INNSTAR.COM is one of many resources for evaluating on-line guides. Other well-known sources include Blizzard Internet Marketing (www.bbinternet.com), Scott Crumpton's Moriah Mountain (www.moriah.com), and Stephan Spencer's series of articles that just started in "Innkeeping". Whatever resource you use, make sure you understand the approach used and any relationships between the advisor and the guide.