

# Strategy of Enhancing Online Brand Image for the Hotel Business

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## Abstract

In today's highly competitive market, hotel operators face the challenge of increasingly sophisticated demands from their customers. The customer may perceive one hotel to be more desirable than its competitors solely because of the difference in brand image. Customer perception about a hotel is created from both offline and online channels. This paper is an attempt to generate an understanding of online brand image in the hotel industry. A detailed review of factors determining online brand image was undertaken. Website attributes (e.g. site appearance, content), brand personality, prior offline brand image, and online marketing (e.g. social media) influence customer perception of hotel brand. In addition, this is one of the few studies to discuss six strategies for enhancing hotel brand image. These strategies (e.g. providing consistent brand image and message across all channels) were found from reviewing the previous literature relevant to brand image in both offline and online contexts especially for the hotel business.

**Keywords:** Hotel, Online Brand Image, Strategy, Marketing, Internet

## บทคัดย่อ

ในปัจจุบันธุรกิจโรงแรมมีการแข่งขันสูงขึ้น ผู้ประกอบการธุรกิจโรงแรมต้องเผชิญกับความต้องการของลูกค้าที่ซับซ้อนมากขึ้น ภาพลักษณ์ของโรงแรมเป็นองค์ประกอบสำคัญที่ทำให้ลูกค้าเลือกที่จะพักโรงแรมแห่งหนึ่งมากกว่าโรงแรมคู่แข่ง การเรียนรู้และการรับรู้ของลูกค้าต่อภาพลักษณ์ของโรงแรมเกิดขึ้นจากการสื่อสารกับลูกค้าทั้งทางออนไลน์และออฟไลน์ บทความนี้ได้อธิบายและสร้างความเข้าใจเกี่ยวกับการสร้างภาพลักษณ์สำหรับธุรกิจโรงแรมทางออนไลน์ ปัจจัยที่มีผลต่อการสร้างตราสินค้าทางออนไลน์ได้แก่ องค์ประกอบของเว็บไซต์ (เช่น ภาพ และเนื้อหา) บุคลิกภาพของตราสินค้า ภาพลักษณ์ของตราสินค้าที่ลูกค้ารับรู้มาก่อนจากทางออฟไลน์ และการตลาดทางออนไลน์ เช่น การใช้สื่อสังคมทางออนไลน์ ล้วนมีผลต่อการรับรู้ของลูกค้าเกี่ยวกับตราสินค้า บทความนี้นำเสนอกลยุทธ์ 6 ข้อ ที่ผู้ประกอบการธุรกิจโรงแรมควรนำไปปฏิบัติเพื่อช่วยส่งเสริมภาพลักษณ์ทางออนไลน์ของธุรกิจโรงแรม กลยุทธ์เหล่านี้ เช่น การนำเสนอภาพลักษณ์และข้อมูลของตราสินค้าที่ถูกต้องและคงเส้นคงวาในทุกช่องทางที่ใช้สื่อสารกับลูกค้า ได้มาจากการทบทวนวรรณกรรมที่เกี่ยวข้องกับภาพลักษณ์ของตราสินค้าทั้งทางออฟไลน์และออนไลน์ โดยเฉพาะ ซึ่งสามารถนำไปใช้พัฒนาภาพลักษณ์สำหรับธุรกิจโรงแรมได้

**คำสำคัญ:** โรงแรม ภาพลักษณ์ของตราสินค้าทางออนไลน์ กลยุทธ์ การตลาด อินเทอร์เน็ต

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## Introduction

The concept of brand image has been discussed in marketing and consumer research since the early 1950s; brand image plays a major role in providing a basis to position and differentiate a brand from its competitors (Aaker, 1991). Brands can be seen as an image in the consumer's mind (Keller, 1993), and brand image incorporates the idea that consumers buy brands not only for their physical attributes and functions (i.e. product), but also because of the meanings connected with the brands (Levy & Glick, 1973). In addition, brand image can be considered to be a mirror reflecting the company's brand personality, which will be accumulated in consumers' thoughts, feelings and expectations towards the brand (Sirgy & Danes, 1982). From a psychological aspect, brand image is a symbolic construct created within the minds of people, consisting of all the information and expectations associated with a product or service or the companies providing them (American Marketing Association, 2011). These broad definitions contribute to a clear understanding of the brand image concept as the customer perception of products and services (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990).

Companies are facing with the challenge of developing brand image that can build an emotional and rational bridge from customers to the company and its products or services (Knapp, 2000). Many hotel companies use the Internet as a sales and marketing tool to advertise and promote their hotels and communicate with their customers (Murphy, Forrest, Wotring, & Brymer, 1996). Customer brand perception about a hotel is not only shaped by offline marketing communication (e.g. magazines, newsletters) but also from various online sources such as hotel websites, online third party websites, and social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter). These online marketing tools used by hotels not only provide brand-related messages and hotel information but also help to communicate and reinforce their brand image and brand personalities (Mauri & Minazzi, 2013). Therefore, it is essential to understand how to manage and enhance brand image for the hotel business in an online context. This paper, therefore, firstly discusses online brand image formation, and then further elaborates on the importance of online brand image for the hotel business. In addition, a theoretical model of online brand image is presented in this section. Then, the paper discusses strategies for enhancing hotel brand image in the online context, giving also both academic and theoretical implications. Finally, the conclusion is given in the last part of the paper.

## Online Brand Image Formation

Several studies have examined the formation of brand image offline (Aaker, 1997; Keller, 1993; Kotler, 1994; Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986) but far too little investigated the dimensions of online brand image. They suggest that brand concept, brand attitude, brand personality, a customer's previous experience and market communication are important elements that form brand image in the offline context. Regarding to online brand image, Christoudoulides and de Chernatony (2004) suggest that a "brand" is a universal concept regardless of setting (Offline or Online). This means both offline and online brand images are not different. Companies should present the same brand identity in both offline and online context, and customer perception of the brand (Brand Image) either in offline and online channels should be the identical. Online brand image can be seen from three different perspectives:

- 1) Online brand image is built from scratch. This refers to the pure online retailer or online company that starts its business online, as opposed to ‘bricks and clicks’ counterpart companies who can leverage their offline brand awareness. Some examples include Amazon international electronic commerce company, the world’s largest online retailer, and some new small hotels that launch their own hotel website to create brand awareness and brand image (Nunthapirat, Lockwood, & Stangl, 2014)
- 2) Online brand image is built as another channel for multichannel shoppers. This refers to the company that extends its offline operation to online contexts such as, in the hotel industry, customers can view a hotel’s product and service online then book the hotel online or offline (Kwon & Lennon, 2009b). In this case, customers respond to a brand’s marketing activity according to the brand’s image or associations that they have formed from their past experience with the brand (Brand Knowledge) (Brady, Cronin, Fox, & Roehm, 2008; Keller, 1993). Therefore, in order to boost and sustain a positive halo effect from the existing offline brand image, the website performance should perform well in order to ensure that customers have positive online brand experience.
- 3) Online brand image is determined by website attributes (such as personalisation, ease of use, security and customer care) and website personality (the idea that customers view company name as a person) (Aaker, 1997; Da Silva & Syed Alwi, 2008)

The intangible nature of hotel services requires customers to “tangibilize the intangible hotel experience” (Berry, 2000) via both online and offline communication. Therefore, it is important for hotels to build strong brands in both offline and online contexts; then customers can use the strong brand

image to make tangible the intangible hotel experience. The next section discusses online brand image for the hotel business.

### **Online Brand Image for the Hotel Business**

The continued growth of the Internet affects the role of brand and the way hotel companies manage their brand image is changing. In order to remain competitive in the market, many hotels have developed information technology in order to gain the benefit of high conversion rates and lower distribution costs (Scaglione, Schegg, & Murphy, 2009). From the perspective of consumers, IT-based systems are used as information distributors and reservation facilitators, which allow them to make bookings at a fraction of time, cost and inconvenience of traditional methods (O’Connor & Frew, 2002). The Internet and web help companies to provide the right information efficiently, at the right time to the right individuals (Williams & Rattray, 2005). However, it appears that there are few studies on strategies for enhancing hotel brand image in an online context. Previous studies focused on website quality, e-marketing in the hotel industry, and brand strategies for hotels in offline contexts (Da Silva & Syed Alwi, 2008; Jeong & Lambert, 2001), while few studies discussed strategies to enhance online brand image especially for the hotel business. This study, therefore, collects and reviews literature relevant to online brand image dimensions and online branding strategies. Table 1 shows previous research themes relevant to hotel branding strategies.

**Table 1** Previous studies relevant to brand image for hotel business

Previous Research Themes	Authors	Methods
Online branding	Rowley (2004)	Case study and Qualitative approach
Differential pricing and segmentation on the Internet	Yelkur & DaCosta (2001)	Secondary data
Online distribution for hotels	Gazzoli, Woo Gon, & Palakurthi (2008)	Qualitative approach (interview) and secondary data
The effects of perceived price and brand image on value and purchase intention towards online hotel booking	Chun-Fang & SooCheong (2007)	Quantitative approach
Website quality for hotels (turning visitors to customers)	Jeong & Lambert (2001); Jeong, Oh, & Gregoire (2003)	Quantitative approach
Effect of pictures, and video clips in hotel websites	Kim & Mattila (2011)	Qualitative approach
Online hotel reviews and e-complaints	Vermeulen & Seegers (2009); Zheng, Youn, & Kincaid (2009)	Qualitative approach and Quantitative approach
Online brand image for hotel business from both hotel managers and customers' perspectives	Nunthapirat, Lockwood, & Stangl (2014); Nunthapirat, Lockwood, Stangl, & Al-Sabbahy (2014)	Qualitative approach

From the reviewed studies in Table 1, many scholars have supported the idea that websites not only play a major role in providing product and service information and educating customers about brands, but they also enhance overall brand image (Bai, Law, & Wen, 2008; Muller & Chandon, 2003). Da Silva and Syed Alwi (2008) suggest that website attributes, such as ease of use, personalisation, security and customer care, help online retailers such as online bookstores to achieve a positive representation of their corporate brand image in an online context.

In addition, online marketing (e.g. via search engines, social media, facebook) influences customer brand perception (Lewis & Chambers, 2000). Due to the intangible characteristics of hospitality and tourism services and the fact that tangible hotel/hospitality products cannot be evaluated before consumption, the emotional risk of reference group evaluation (via social media) is an essential element of the customer's decision-making process (Lewis & Chambers, 2000). Customers tend to have a certain level of perceived anxiety before the purchase of hotel products; interpersonal communication (e.g. via social media) reduces the level of anxiety and may turn the prospective customer into an actual buyer (Bai, Hu, & Jang, 2006).

Based on the previous discussion, it cannot be ignored that online brand image has been influenced by prior offline brand image (i.e. customers' previous experience with the brand in offline contexts). Kwon and Lennon (2009b) found that there are direct and indirect halo effects of offline brand image and a direct effect of online performance that may influence customers' perceptions, expectations and loyalty regarding multi-channel retailers. Brand image can be formed based upon information either from all channels customers have experienced or from a specific channel for a specific brand image (Kwon & Lennon, 2009a). Therefore, many researchers have suggested that seamless integration between these two channels enhances customer experience, strengthens the brand image of companies, and cultivates customer loyalty in both channels (Bailer, 2006; Gefen, 2000; Kwon & Lennon, 2009b). The unsatisfactory performance of a company in one channel may impact the customer's image and expectations of the company in the other channel.

Last but not least, the concept of brand image is linked to brand personality. Both concepts are multidimensional and both appear to operate at the same level of abstraction. Plummer (1985) asserts that one component of brand image is the personality or character of the brand itself, characterized by personality descriptors (e.g. youthful, gentle). Brand personality is developed and created based on typical users (Jin-Soo & Back, 2010). It can be defined as the set of human characteristics (traits) associated with the typical user of a brand. This means the personality traits of brand users are directly intertwined with the brand for self-expressive or symbolic purposes (Aaker, 1997; Keller, 1993). Similarly, Biel (1993) proposed that brand image has three contributing sub-images which are the image of the provider or the corporate image, the image of the user, and the image of their

product/service itself. The image of the provider and the image of the product or service are formed by companies. The perception of brand personality is formed and influenced by any direct or indirect contact that a consumer has with a brand (Aaker, 1997).

In summary, from reviewing the relevant literature, brand image can be considered as the combined effect of website attributes, brand personality, prior offline brand image, and marketing communications held in the consumer's memory (Da Silva & Syed Alwi, 2008; Aaker, 1997; Biel, 1993; Keller, 1993; Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986). The theoretical model of online brand image is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** Theoretical Model of Online Brand Image Formation

**Source:** Da Silva & Syed Alwi (2008); Aaker (1997); Kotler (1994); Keller (1993); Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis (1986)

Based on previous literature about the importance of brand image for the hotel business in an online context, the next section is devoted to discussion of recommendations for hotel managers regarding how to enhance hotel brand image which consequently helps hotels to remain competitive in the market.

## **Strategies of Enhancing Online Brand Image for the Hotel Business**

By reviewing the literature relevant to brand image in both offline and online contexts (Da Silva & Syed Alwi, 2008; Nunthapirat, Lockwood, & Stangl, 2014), six strategies have been identified that hotel managers need to consider in order to enhance hotel online brand image. They are 1) increasing strength, favourability and uniqueness of website attributes, 2) ensuring the matching between brand identity and brand image, 3) providing consistent messages and images across all channels, 4) developing good relationships with online travel agents (OTAs), 5) being transparent and continuing to improve and maintain quality of product and service, and 6) viewing customer reviews as a voice and opportunity to improve hotel product and service. Each issue is discussed in detail below:

### **1. Increase Strength, Favourability and Uniqueness of Website Attributes**

Many scholars claim that brand attributes drive brand image in offline contexts (Keller, 1993; Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986). In relation to brand image in online contexts, a website can be considered a product-related attribute representing brand personality and providing brand benefit (functional, symbolic, and experiential) when customers navigate online (Da Silva & Syed Alwi, 2008). For example, a recent study shows that site appearance (e.g. pictures) has a significant influence on customers' assessments of hotel websites (Stringam & Gerdes, 2010). In addition, recent interviews with hotel customers show that websites influence their perception of hotel brands (Nunthapirat, Lockwood, & Stangl, 2014). This suggests that website attributes are the main drivers of online brand image and, therefore, the strength, favourability, and uniqueness of website attributes influence customer perception

of hotel brand from the customers' viewpoint (Da Silva & Syed Alwi, 2008; Nunthapirat, Lockwood, & Stangl, 2014). Kwon and Lennon (2009a) support the importance of website performance and claim that online brand image is reflected by a customer's previous brand belief and influenced by online brand performance (i.e. on its website). Therefore, hoteliers need to ensure that website attributes (including ease of use, site appearance, content, structure and layout, download time, reliability, and price) perform well and meet customer expectation.

### **2. Ensure matching Brand Identity and Brand Image**

Brand success in the market depends on how a company develops and uses brand identity to develop brand image (Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986). This is supported by Kapferer (2004) who promotes the idea that brand image is used as an instrument to communicate the significance of brand identity to customers. The difference between brand identity and brand image from a communication perspective is that brand identity stems from the company while brand image is what is perceived by the receiver or the consumer (Nandan, 2005). It is interesting to find that the brand identity that is created by a firm may not be perceived in the same way by consumers because they ascribe a persona or an image to the brand based on subjective perceptions of a set of associations that they have about the brand (Nandan, 2005). It is important that the brand messages and projected images presented to customers convey the uniqueness of their hotel brand identity. Therefore, hotels need to ensure that their presentation of brand image matches with their brand identity, and creating brand positioning in customers' minds (Nunthapirat et al., 2014).

### **3. Provide Consistent Messages and Images Across All Channels**

Based on previous discussion, Kwon and Lennon (2009a) suggest that customer online brand perception has been influenced by offline brand image, therefore providing consistent brand messages and images the reinforce customers' perceptions (i.e. brand knowledge) about a hotel's brand, signal to them about the consistent quality the hotel offers and, thus, enhance brand positioning. For example, 'Best Western Hotel' consistently conveys to customers the brand message of "hotels with personality" on both marketing collateral materials (offline communication) and on the website (online communication). Therefore, in order to enhance hotel brand image in both offline and online contexts, hoteliers need to provide consistent messages and images across all channels (both online and offline channels). For example, marketing collateral materials (e.g. magazines, newsletters), hotel websites, and online third-party websites should present the same hotel logo, colour, image, and message that represent brand identity.

### **4. Develop Good Relationships with Online Travel Agents (OTAs)**

Online travel agents websites (OTAs) play a major role in hotel distribution channels, and many hotels still depend on those online third-party websites to increase brand visibility and increase room sales (Gazzoli, Woo Gon, & Palakurthi, 2008). Hotel information on online third-party websites turns out to be an important factor influencing customer perception of hotel brands. This suggests a hotel brand image is not only shaped by the hotel's own website (Da Silva & Syed Alwi, 2008), but also by online travel agent websites (OTAs) (Ye, Law, Gu, & Chen, 2011). Therefore, it is essential for hotel managers to monitor content and images on third-

party websites regularly to ensure that they present the real hotel brand identity (Law & Hsu, 2006). Hotel pictures and content uploaded on third-party websites need to come from their hotel's head office in order to prevent OTAs posting out-dated pictures and content online and consequently diluting hotel brand image. The cooperation between these two parties not only helps to ensure that OTAs present up-to-date hotel information and pictures on their websites but also to reduce the rate parity problem.

### **5. Be Transparent and Continue to Improve and Maintain the Quality of Products and Services**

In online contexts, brands become transparent; customer brand perception is shaped not only from the hotels' side but also from the customers' side over the Internet (Kwon & Lennon, 2009a). The evidence from previous research suggests that negative online reviews affect customer attitude and purchase intention (Sen & Lerman, 2007; Xia & Bechwati, 2010). This point to the fact that online marketing (such as online reviews and ratings sites) has significant impact on customer perception of hotel brands, although a single negative review might not impact on the overall image of a hotel brand. This suggests that hotels should be active in regularly monitoring customers' comments (either positive or negative reviews) and responding to negative reviews rapidly. In addition, it is essential to ensure that a view (e.g. given in an online review) that is seen by customers is not in conflict with the image a brand wishes to convey. In order to prevent hotel customers from posting negative reviews and ratings on sites, hotels should be consistently providing quality products and services to customers, so they will be happy and will write positive reviews rather than negative ones. This consequently sustains and enhances a given hotel's favorable brand image.

## 6. View Customers' Reviews as a 'Voice' and an Opportunity to Improve Hotel Products and Services

Negative reviews lower consumer attitude towards a hotel but simultaneously enhance hotel awareness (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). From a marketing manager's point of view, negative reviews and ratings are considered a major issue that may (in fact almost certainly will) damage their hotel's brand image (Nunthapirat, et al., 2014). Foux (2006) suggests that social media is perceived by consumers as a more trustworthy source of information regarding products and services than other channels of the corporate promotion mix. Therefore, hotels need to have well-mannered interpersonal communication between customers and service representation throughout email and call-centres in order to reduce e-complaints (Zheng, Youn, & Kincaid, 2009).

In addition, hoteliers should view customers' reviews in a positive way and see this feedback as a source of inspiration (i.e. voice from customers) that helps them to improve their hotels' products and services, which consequently will enhance customers' brand experience. In order to be proactive and avoid getting negative reviews from customers, hotels need to maintain and continue improving the quality of hotel products and services (Nunthapirat, et al., 2014).

## Conclusion

The implications of brand image for the hospitality industry in an online environment is significant as now hotel customer brand perception is created not only from offline collateral materials but also from online communication with hotels or other hotel customers (Hsu, Zhu, & Argrusa, 2004; Jeong, Oh, & Gregoire, 2003). This paper identifies the dimensions of online brand image from a holistic point of view, and additionally discusses how the

Internet may have changed the way customers develop the overall brand image and, in turn, how operators have responded to this.

Website attributes, brand personality, prior offline brand image and online marketing determine online brand image for hotel businesses. Six strategies have been introduced for hotel managers to enhance hotel brand image in online contexts. Furthermore, the online branding presented in this paper can be applied to other online retailer businesses such as online apparel businesses and online travel agencies.

Future studies are encouraged to replicate the framework of online brand image to other sectors of the hospitality and tourism industry, such as restaurants, tourist attractions or destinations or other business contexts. Comparison of results from different research contexts not only enhances understanding of online brand image, but also allows a realistic comparison to be drawn from real practices, enabling thus better consideration of future implications. In addition, this study only touches some elements (online reviews and ratings) of user-generated content (Web 2.0); it would be interesting to explore further other elements of Web 2.0, such as Youtube and blogs, to discover how these elements impact on customer behaviour or customer perception of hotel brands. ♥

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