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Interview : Mokhtar Ramadan

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Michael Verikios - Monday, December 11, 2006

Mokhtar Ramadan, CEO of Voila Hotel Rewards analyzes in TravelDailyNews the challenges and opportunities of independent hotels and how a good loyalty program can boost their operations.

TravelDailyNews: How do you see the future of independent hotel and resorts in the international market? Could they be as competitive as the great hotel chains?

Mokhtar Ramadan: I think that one reason for launching this product was to give a hand to them of competing with the big hotel groups. I think that they have a very good future as they are unique, different and attractive to the segment of the market we are going after but they do not have loyalty programs to compete with big names. Hopefully, with the Voila product they will have the chance to compete and effectively promote themselves to the market rather than relying on third parties such as Expedia or the ones that cost them a lot of money.



TDN: What kind of problems do small groups and independent hotels face in co ordinance with the mega-brands?

M. R.: Geographic coverage, access to markets around the world, recognition and the lack of dollars in the market as one or five hotels together they do not have the power to compete with big players. We hope that we will make this better with Voila. We are going to be in 50 countries and so they will be able to communicate with 5 million members in 50 countries in many languages and that will give them a great access to members around the world and thus to have a great geographical coverage. They will have the technology tools to communicate with all these members.

TDN: How Voila Hotel Rewards can boost the operations of these establishments?

M. R.: Launching the loyalty program to the proper markets we are guaranteeing them a 15% increase in their members so they will be able to rely less on Expedia and the third parties, less on tour operators and focus more on the corporate market. And our goal with every hotel that we work with is to give a 30% increase of occupancy. This means that the hotel will focus on the corporate traveller who spends a lot more on the hotel and it is going to have a much better average rates than it will receive from tour operators.

TDN: In what way could a good loyalty program help groups with limited resources?

M. R.: What we are doing now is a product that pulls its strength by the number that we are generating. The power comes from the hotel and the power comes from the members. And now those small independent hotels will have the ability to access to all these members from all around the world which means that suddenly they are all going to see a wide and major change. They will not be like Intercontinental but having access to our global members they will have more power and they will be able to maximize their benefits.

TDN: Do you feel that there is a strong competition between you and Expedia and other third parties?

M. R.: The markets we are going after for this program are not the markets that go to Expedia. We are going after the corporate travel market not the leisure market. In fact if we look today most people who go to Expedia they are searching rather booking the hotel directly.

TDN: What challenges are the guest loyalty programmes of independent hotels facing today?

M. R.: The incredibility and that their programs are not easy to use. There is a lot of incredibility because what clients see on the internet doesn't always reflect the reality. We

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give a great attention to our credibility and this is how we design our product.

TDN: *Recently you have signed an agreement with Great Hotels Organization. Tell us about the key-points of the agreement and what are your expectations from this?*

M. R.: Great Hotels have a variety of products in the market today and many brands. They represent about 650 hotels and we work with them because we felt that they will give us quicker and better access to independent stand alone hotels. Right now we are not able to put in the Voila program single hotels; we have to go with the groups. They have a very good access to the market and many countries around the world, they do very good marketing and they have a lot of sales people in this market and we felt that having our elements to their products it is much better for us rather than trying to go by our own. They are like a marketing agent for us. We are expecting them to bring on board about 100 hotels next year.

TDN: *What are your plans for US – Canada and Asian markets?*

M. R.: We are starting in Europe now but we will start in the United States in January 2007. In US our focus will be on tough marketing and we think that our largest member of hotels will come from the US eventually. In Latin America we only have two groups but Latin America is under control. We have six groups from Asia and a lot of people are coming to learn the product now but we will go on tough marketing as well in January. The main countries in Asia are Singapore and of course the big market of China where we are working very hard to have good results.

TDN: *What are your estimations about China?*

M. R.: We have been working in China 11 years now and it is a fantastic market as far as our company is concerned and we believe that it is going to be a very good market for Voila. We have talked with many hotels owners and hopefully they will be the ones that we are going to work with. But China has huge market coverage and we are working very hard to cover it.

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