Case Study: citizenM Hotels

How The Trendiest Hotel In The World Manages their Online Reputation with ReviewPro
The citizenM concept began with the observation that over the past few years, a new type of traveler has emerged.

“The traveler of today travels in jeans, a cheap t-shirt, an expensive watch, drinks champagne, and takes public transport” – Michael Levie

Michael Levie, Chief Operating Officer at citizenM, said this during a recent keynote presentation at an EyeForTravel conference. According to Michael, citizenM was created with “a blank slate” along with the founder of Mexx clothing brand, Rattan Chadha. Starting with no prior constraints enabled the founders to design a hotel concept that was revolutionary from the ground up.

CitizenM Hotels aims to provide a new type of hotel experience for a new type of traveler: guests that may not want to stay in their rooms for the entire duration of their stay. “Our guests just want a good bed, a good shower, and then they spend most of their time out in the city or in our hotels’ social spaces,” said Michael. This focus on public social spaces plays a key role in the way the brand develops social media content, and is a topic we will explore in detail later.

An innovative building system (hotels are constructed from pre-fabricated modules) in offsite unit factories allows the company to consistently maintain high quality standards while accelerating the building process. Headquartered in Voorschoten, The Netherlands, citizenM’s founders include professionals from both the hospitality and fashion industry. With an experienced management team, citizenM is preparing itself for a rapid European expansion.

CitizenM Hotels opened its first Amsterdam Schiphol property with 230 rooms in 2008, followed by citizenM Amsterdam City 215 rooms in 2009 and citizenM Glasgow 198 rooms in 2010, and has plans to open 20 additional properties throughout Europe in their first phase of expansion.
In keeping with their innovative product design, citizenM relies on the latest technology and digital communications to grow their business. “We are very dependent on online feedback and technology for driving reservations,” says citizenM’s Social Media and Internet Strategist, Diego Sartori. “Fast, free WiFi attracts an always-connected crowd, and our guests carry their iPads and iPhones everywhere.”

But regardless of how innovative a hotel concept is, hotel marketers around the world face a similar problem: developing information for social media publishing. “The biggest challenge we face is content creation,” shared Diego. “How can we continue to keep relevant information coming in, and share this with everyone in our social network?”

The citizenM brand has a few advantages over other hotels when creating online content. Voted “The Trendiest Hotel in the World” by TripAdvisor two years in a row – 2010 and 2011 – the team at citizenM is known for adopting cutting-edge technologies and operational practices. “Since we’re a lifestyle hotel we have a lot of material to work with. There is a diverse range of content we can create and share.” Instead of just passively waiting for social media users to build content, the citizenM team proactively reaches out to bloggers, writers, and other social media influencers. “We invite bloggers to our hotels that share the same lifestyle. And then we ask these people to share something that represents the lifestyle of our brand.”

While many hotels use a blog to anchor their social media presence, citizenM took a different approach. “Instead of having a blog, we created a digital magazine to share brand information and curate lifestyle content for everyone.”

The partner agency that produces this digital magazine has strong network of writers, which serves as a resource for creating each issue. These contributing writers are not compensated financially, but working together provides mutual benefits. The writers get valuable exposure with a global, trendsetting audience. CitizenM receives interesting material to use in producing their magazine. Unlike publications from some hospitality companies, this magazine does not focus exclusively on travel, but follows a different subject theme for each issue.

To ensure a consistent voice in the content created by multiple authors, citizenM has created a style guide that encourages a very informal, international style. Each contributor to citizenM publications has either stayed at the property or is very familiar with the citizenM concept & lifestyle, making their work a natural fit with the other pieces of content.
This natural approach is one of the best practices we can learn from citizenM. When their team was in the beginning stages of setting up their social media presence, they aimed to post something every two or three days on Facebook. But they found that their audience did not interact well with that. Now, they only post something when they have something relevant and valuable to share. “If it’s just about posting for the sake of posting, we don’t share anything.”

In their experience, Twitter is a faster communications channel, which allows them to share more information. Not only promotions, but real-time information, advice, and support. While Diego manages most of the Twitter brand activity, other team members can step in if needed to provide a different voice or perspective.
Case Study: citizenM Hotels, June 2011

Besides working with writers, citizenM’s digital communications strategy also involves guests. “We always try to incentivize our guests to share their experience online: to write or blog or share content about us. People only share online if they have a terrible experience or if they have a very good experience. If it’s just ‘okay,’ they see no value in sharing with anyone. But our rooms are very innovative and our concept is very different. We try to always exceed expectations creating a WOW factor that gets guests talking.”

The unique citizenM design concept and service-oriented social media presence organically encourages people to talk about the brand online. CitizenM intentionally developed an environment of social spaces within their hotels to spontaneously encourage conversations.

“Whenever we have the opportunity, we casually bring up our social media presence. We encourage guests to share photos of the hotel with their followers. Our goal for Facebook isn’t necessarily to generate room sales, but to increase our brand visibility and encourage word of mouth,” said Diego. This natural approach works much better with their clientele than trying to be too pushy in asking for online content contributions.
Encouraging guests to leave online reviews

Encouraging more online guest reviews is a challenge for many hotels, but citizenM uses a system that works very well with their clientele. Each of their three properties receives many more guest reviews than the average hotel.

The company has developed a standardized procedure for use during the checkout process. Like many hotels, citizenM staff, called Ambassadors, ask guests how they enjoyed their stay as they are checking out. If there was any issue, direct communication with a manager is encouraged for prompt resolution. But if the person had a good experience, they are asked to share their thoughts on TripAdvisor.

The guest invoice is sent automatically by email, providing one more touchpoint and opportunity to ask for a review. This followup reminder significantly increases the reviews received, since many travelers forget to post a review immediately after the stay.

According to Diego Sartori, citizenM’s Social Media and Internet Strategist, the number of the reviews is a result of everything else. “You have to deliver good service and create clear expectations of what people can expect. This is what encourages more reviews. We get people saying, ‘I usually don’t write a review, but my stay at citizenM was so special because you did this specific thing that made me think WOW.’ So that’s why we always try to set the right expectations, deliver excellent service and then surprise guests with something unique.”
"We don’t respond every single review” said Diego. “If a guest wants to communicate with you, they will contact you directly.” At the same time, if something is posted that is negative or that requires explanation, the citizenM team makes sure to respond and tell their side of the story. “If someone complains that something doesn’t work – alarm, WiFi, etc – it is important to recognize that, apologize, and give an explanation for what happened.

Just as things break in your own house, things will break at a hotel, even though we work hard to prevent from happening.” Effective reputation management requires an understanding of this reality, and the knowledge of how to respond in a satisfactory manner.

Since the citizenM concept is so revolutionary, it is inevitable that sometimes guests arrive that immediately dislike the design. Perhaps they might think the room is too small. Or since the hotel does not offer room service, a guest that wants this may complain when they cannot get it. “We respond and say we created a specific hotel concept that is not for everyone. We are honest with what we offer. Other people will read about our amenities and say, ‘Wow – this is really special!’”

What ultimately happens is that these online reviews act as a self-selecting mechanism that, in the end, only attracts guests that are interested in the brand’s concept. People who are looking for a traditional hotel or with full-service may read reviews and decide citizenM isn’t for them, but it would be good for someone they know. “It happens that many guests who do not choose us still end up ultimately referring our hotels to others.”
Involving staff in online reputation management

An effective reputation management program includes doing everything possible to encourage guests to leave positive reviews, but it also involves creating an internal culture of reputation management.

Building awareness about reputation management with everyone in the organization is an essential part of a reputation program. CitizenM takes some unique approaches to achieve this. It begins with posting printed copies of ReviewPro reputation reports in the staff break room.

Each team briefing is used to raise awareness of their online reputation. “Whenever we get specific feedback, we discuss it at our team briefings – both the negative and positive – so everyone is always aware of it.”

CitizenM goes a step further. Right now, the company is planning to use the Global Review Index™ (GRI) from ReviewPro to run an internal competition among their three hotels. “We try to keep the GRI above 90% at all times. So this new program will be like a game among the staff at our properties: who can deliver the best service?” Constant innovation is a critical component of citizenM, and these internal competitions will help them continuously improve.

Perhaps the most remarkable indicator that citizenM takes online reputation seriously is that reputation scoring affects employee pay. A percentage of the salary citizenM hotel staff receive is tied to guest satisfaction. The way an organization configures its compensation scheme reflects what is important to them, and it’s clear citizenM is making online reputation a top priority.
When citizenM began their social marketing program, it quickly became clear that they needed a tool to track, monitor and manage their reputation online. Reports were originally created manually, but this approach was far too time consuming (and this was with only two properties). With big expansion plans ahead, another solution was needed.

When citizenM’s Social Media and Internet Strategist, Diego Sartori, started at the head office, the management team asked him to do some research on which solution would be best to manage this whole process.

“I started looking for tools, and came across ReviewPro among others,” Diego recalls. “I had demonstrations from many different tools, and ReviewPro was the one that fit our needs best: it is the most complete and has shown more reliability than the others.

That’s the reason we started working with ReviewPro. It’s a great product that offers exactly what we need, and has some helpful features like social media tracking, task assignments, and so on.”
ReviewPro’s search and reporting functionality is especially important to the citizenM management team. Semantic analysis reporting provides insights that each of their departments can use. For example, if guests are having issues with the showers, the team works with the maintenance staff to prevent similar complaints from happening in the future. “For any element of our hotel, I can type the keyword into ReviewPro search, and see all the things guests say about it. Before I’d have to spend several hours to go through everything – and even then it was not complete.”

Semantic analysis of feedback across review sites is also used for product development and improvement. A recent example is the room at the properties in Amsterdam, originally built without proper working desk. (“We wanted guests to make full use of the living rooms downstairs and network with other guests.”) But reviews were often pointing out the lack of a working desk in the room – and how guests wanted to have one there. “The newly open hotel in Glasgow came with the working desk and just a few weeks ago, we modified all rooms in Amsterdam to include one.”

The results

The approach citizenM uses to create compelling social media content and improve their online reputation through the participation of people inside and outside of their organization has yielded impressive results.

Over the past year, the number of active and engaged Facebook fans has increased by nearly four times. Twitter followers have doubled in the past three months. And on review sites like TripAdvisor, citizenM hotels typically appear near the top of rankings for each local market.
What’s next?

See how ReviewPro can help you

ReviewPro enables hoteliers to efficiently aggregate, organize and manage their online reputation and presence in leading social media sites. ReviewPro provides the analysis, customer intelligence, competitive benchmarking and reporting needed to help hotel professionals more effectively manage their organization.

Get a demo of ReviewPro today

Keep learning! ReviewPro monitors what is changing in the world of online reputation management and passes along practical ways to use that in hospitality.

Read the blog for more articles and reports like this:
http://reviewpro.com/blog

Follow us on Twitter for daily ideas and tips:
http://twitter.com/ReviewPro

Case Study: citizenM Hotels, June 2011