

**Boost Occupancy and Increase Revenue**

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WHAT IS THE BOOST OCCUPANCY REPORT?	4
WHO SHOULD READ IT?	4
WHO WROTE IT?	4
INTRODUCTION	6
DISCLAIMER	7
SECTION I: HERDING THE CATTLE	8
1. USE A SCALPEL, NOT AN AX – LOCATE YOUR GOLDEN KEYWORD**	8
2. FLAUNT LAST-MINUTE DEALS, EVEN IF THERE ARE NONE TO BE HAD*	9
3. GOOD PHOTOS BOOK ROOMS*	10
4. CREATE AND PROMOTE VIDEOS. MAKE SURE THEY PORTRAY YOU ACCURATELY.**	10
5. CONVEY PERSONALITY, TRUST WITH A BLOG: ONCE THEY’RE HOOKED, CONVINCe PEOPLE TO BOOK**	11
6. INSTITUTE A CALL TO ACTION AND OBSESS OVER IT**	12
7. BE ACCESSIBLE, ALWAYS*	12
8. THE BOOKING ENGINE: MIMIC MAJOR HOTEL BRANDS TO GET BOOKED LIKE THEM*	13
9. GO MOBILE**	14
10. GUARANTEE A SAFE PLACE TO PAY*	14
11. WHEN ADDRESSING GUESTS, DO IT IN THEIR NATIVE TONGUE*	15
12. DON’T TRY TO SAY IT ALL YOURSELF. REBROADCAST THE WORDS OF YOUR GREATEST ADMIRERS*	16
13. DON’T UNDERESTIMATE THE NEWSLETTER**	16
SECTION 1 SYNOPSIS	17
SECTION II: PERFECTING THE CONVERSION	18
14. ACCEPT THE FACT THAT YOU’RE PROBABLY THROWING AWAY MONEY ON ADWORDS***	19
15. CHERISH THE PHONE CALL: PLAY ON PEOPLE’S DESIRE TO TALK TO SOMEONE**	20
16. PERFECT THE SCIENCE OF EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE**	21
17. USE UPSELL TACTICS: SMART GUESTS WILL ACCEPT SMART OFFERS*	22
18. PLAY TETRIS USING SELECTIVE AVAILABILITY**	23
19. ENFORCE A CANCELLATION POLICY – BUT BE SENSIBLE*	23
20. GET ANALYTICAL: MEASURE WHAT WORKS SO YOU CAN DITCH WHAT DOESN’T***	24
21. HONOR THE GOAL CONVERSION: IT IS THE ONLY THING THAT REALLY MATTERS**	25
22. THERE IS NO SURER PREDICTOR OF VACANCY THAN BAD CONTACT FORMS**	25
23. PRACTICE STEADY SURVEILLANCE*	26
24. ALWAYS AIM TO BREAK YOUR OWN RECORDS*	27
SECTION 2 SYNOPSIS	27

## SECTION III: DEVELOPING A REPUTATION 29

25. <b>PLAY THE SOCIAL MEDIA GAME**</b> .....	29
26. <b>PIGGYBACK: UTILIZE THE READERSHIP AND TRUST OF ESTABLISHED TRAVEL BLOGS**</b> .....	30
27. <b>ADD FUEL TO ARTICLE ENGINES*</b> .....	30
28. <b>FREQUENT THE FORUMS: DEMONSTRATE EXPERTISE TO DRAW PEOPLE IN**</b> .....	31
29. <b>CONQUER THE FREE PRESS RELEASE**</b> .....	31
30. <b>YOUR TRIP ADVISOR PROFILE IS YOUR FORTRESS: GUARD IT WITH YOUR LIFE**</b> .....	32
31. <b>BE PICKY IN SOLICITING REVIEWS*</b> .....	33
32. <b>AVOID BAD REVIEWS LIKE THE PLAGUE: COMMUNICATE WITH UNHAPPY GUESTS ASAP*</b> .....	34
33. <b>BE CORDIAL IN YOUR TRIP ADVISOR MANAGEMENT RESPONSES**</b> .....	35
34. <b>IT'S BETTER TO LET OTHERS DO THE BRAGGING*</b> .....	36
35. <b>INFILTRATE PRESS CIRCLES*</b> .....	36
36. <b>ENGAGE LOCALS: GET HIGH ON YOUR OWN SUPPLY**</b> .....	37
SECTION III SYNOPSIS.....	38

## SECTION IV: FORMING PARTNERSHIPS 39

37. <b>COMMIT TO SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS**</b> .....	39
38. <b>GET LISTED: OPEN THE FLOODGATES*</b> .....	40
39. <b>USE AWARDS NOMINATIONS TO INCREASE RESPECT*</b> .....	40
40. <b>BE PERSUASIVE ON RENTAL AND CLASSIFIEDS SITES**</b> .....	41
41. <b>GET A LEG-UP ON YOUR COMPETITION: REGISTER WITH GOOGLE PLACES AND GOOGLE MAPS*</b> .....	43
42. <b>BE WARY OF TRAVEL AGENCIES**</b> .....	43
43. <b>DON'T BE TIMID. COLLECT COMMISSIONS. **</b> .....	44
44. <b>LET OTHER SITES BOOK RESERVATIONS FOR YOU**</b> .....	45
45. <b>MAKE THE GRADE*</b> .....	45
SECTION 4 SYNOPSIS.....	46

## SECTION V: MAKING DO WITH WHAT YOU HAVE 47

46. <b>EMBRACE THE LOW SEASON*</b> .....	47
47. <b>ACCUMULATE ADVERTISING CREDIT*</b> .....	48
48. <b>PRICE MATCH EVERYONE*</b> .....	48
49. <b>INCREASE YOUR PRICES; NO ONE WILL NOTICE*</b> .....	49
50. <b>GIVE IMPORTANT PEOPLE FREE STUFF*</b> .....	49
51. <b>SCHEDULE MAINTENANCE AROUND VACANT ROOM NIGHTS*</b> .....	50
52. <b>REPACKAGE SUNK COSTS AS GREAT DEALS**</b> .....	50
53. <b>WACKY DEALS GENERATE RESERVATIONS AND PRESS**</b> .....	51
54. <b>DANGLE THE FREE TRANSFER LIKE A CARROT*</b> .....	52
SECTION 5 SYNOPSIS.....	52

## **What is the Boost Occupancy Report?**

The Boost Occupancy report was written by Matt Landau in 2011. Its name and objective derives from the one common ambition of all small accommodations owners, which is to acquire more reservations and increase annual revenue without investing in costly marketing infrastructure. The report is dedicated to analyzing and sharing techniques as well as sparking new creative ideas in the pursuit of higher occupancy.

## **Who should read it?**

Many think the hospitality industry is a glamorous one, which it can be. But not reaching your full potential occupancy – feeling helpless with empty rooms – is a bitter pill. The Boost Occupancy Report is a highly collaborative project culminated over almost two years of research. It represents an attempt to arm mom-and-pop tourism operators with enough secret weaponry to combat (or at least hold their own) against larger, richer chains. This Report is a must-read for any level of boutique hotelier: from those who are new to the industry and struggling, to experienced veterans who know there's always room for improvement. Suffice it to say, if these techniques worked for us, they will definitely work for you.

## **Who wrote it?**

My name is Matt Landau and I'm a writer, online marketer, and at the age of 28, have owned a boutique hotel in the historic district of Panama City, Panama for almost 5 years. I studied international economics at the University of Richmond, Virginia and Spanish at the University of St. Louis in Madrid, Spain.

Ever since I bought Los Cuatro Tulipanes, it has been a crash course in hospitality. The business was not born with four aces. I came in lacking experience, deep pockets, and probably a healthy amount of restraint.

A business major, I grew to appreciate statistics. So when I began marketing the business in 2006, it seemed only natural that every bit of marketing experimentation be documented, analyzed, and either improved (if it worked) or tossed out (if it didn't). The successful fruit of the past 5 years' findings – what to do and what not to do – is documented in this report.

Learning the industry also inevitably meant meeting others on the same journey. As I travel frequently, I formed something of a fellowship of men and women who owned or operated their own accommodations. Many long meals have been spent venting each other's experiences (and horror stories) and heeding each others' advice. Many hours have been spent trying to collectively solve everyone's common goal: to increase occupancy and more money.

After years of accumulating tidbits that read like a who's who list of guerilla marketing tactics, I decided to get a little more scientific about it and coordinate some research – including 9 leading accommodations around the globe – over a period of 18 months. The valuable, innovative, and hugely unpublicized techniques that emerged from this research are contained in this report as well.

## Introduction

Biblically speaking, the battle of David versus Goliath is remembered as a lesson in the miraculous: an anomaly. But political scientist Ivan Arreguín-Toft tends to disagree. His book, *How the Weak Win Wars*, examines over 200 years of conflict between strong and weak opposition. The Goliaths, according to Arreguín-Toft, won 71.5% of the time as expected. These were conflicts in which one side was more than ten times more powerful (measured by armed might and population) than its combatant.

As the story goes, David initially prepared for his battle against Goliath with a conventional sword and clunky armor. But then, realizing that he could barely maneuver, David discarded the armor and sword and picked up five smooth stones and a slingshot. We all know what happened next. Harping on this, Arreguín-Toft chose to explore what happens when underdogs approach competition with an unconventional strategy. Reanalyzing his data, Arreguín-Toft finds that David's winning percentage jumps amazingly from 28.5% to 63.6%. Which is to say, when less-endowed powers choose not to play by conventional rules, they tend to win.

From research, we now know that such is very often the case in the hospitality industry. Scrambling to arm themselves against competitors and larger chain hotels, boutique accommodations – besides just providing personalized accommodation and services – must also use innovation and flexibility to maintain high occupancy rates. It is not easy, but substituting effort for ability is (sometimes) all us independent entrepreneurs have. This report will reinforce the idea that creativity and persistence can turn the less powerful enemy into a

formidable foe. When it comes to beating out your big-money competitors for bookings, consider this report like David considered the slingshot. What follows is a disclaimer that's aimed to calibrate your expectations.

## **Disclaimer**

The fundamental basis of this disclaimer is that you should not rely on the information in this report. Instead, you should use what you read here as a starting point for ideas, collaboration, and independent experimentation, then judge for yourself the merits of the material consisted below.

As you plough through the torrent of expensive PR services, industry hit words, and terribly persistent email spammers promising to increase your occupancy (for only three easy payments!) one thing should be abundantly clear: no amount of tricks or insider marketing techniques are ever a substitute for substance. This guide is written based on a number of assumptions, the most overarching of which is that you already run an honorable business.

The old adage “actions speak louder than words” rings especially true when it comes to a successful vacation lodgings. Everyone in the age of global competition needs to promote themselves, but it can be easy to forget that *the most important facet* of any marketing initiative is the quality of your product. Which is to say that

if you do not already offer an accommodation that meets acceptable standards, the remedy for your problems is probably far more complex than 50 pages of advice. This report addresses marketing strategies only: you will not find advice pertaining to any other aspect of your operation. Each technique is classified into easy (\*), intermediate (\*\*), or advanced (\*\*\*)

## **AND NOW FOR A COUPLE FREE TECHNIQUES FEATURED IN THE REPORT...**

### ***22. There is no surer predictor of vacancy than bad contact forms\*\****

Not all contact forms are equal: finding the right combination for your guests requires experimentation. In our research, we found it most effective to offer two types of contact forms on the website: a rapid inquiry (or shortened) form and a more traditional form. Keep the following tips in mind when tweaking your forms because they make a huge difference in reservation conversions: Choose vertical layout over horizontal, emphasize your header. Be objective and minimize the time to completion; request only necessary information (avoid optional fields as they can distract and discourage). Convey character: be creative with your intro. Enable CAPTCHA<sup>1</sup>. Show your map and address nearby (this weeds out many inquiries). Illuminate a course to completion (showing the SUBMIT button without the need to scroll helps). Use top-aligned labels (almost doubly effective as right-aligned labels). The asterisk (\*) is best for required fields: not text. Offer as much field space as you can afford (without looking too long/bizarre). Blend the form style with colors/feel of site. When appropriate, clearly communicate that a submission

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<sup>1</sup> Captcha is the tool that generates and grades small tests that humans can pass but current SPA< programs cannot. You may not be familiar with its name, but you have probably used it a number of times.



has been successful (using a Thank You page redirect is recommended). Tweaking your contact forms can have dramatic impacts on your reservations. Spend valuable time experimenting and referencing Google Analytics: you will see your reservations regularly increase.

### **30. Your Trip Advisor profile is your fortress: guard it with your life\*\***

Managing an impeccable Trip Advisor profile is synonymous with increased reservations. Dedicate a large portion of your time to Trip Advisor and you'll see more reservations. First, register for a Business Listing<sup>2</sup>, apart from a traditional listing, this will allow you to add your contact details so that users can contact you directly. It will also allow you to offer special coupons to users to make your property stand out from the competition. Next, ensure that your profile is featured with a spectacular photo (according to Trip Advisor, properties with more than 20 photos get 150% more engagement). Photos are oftentimes the only thing people look at, so it's imperative that yours conveys a clear and alluring message. Lastly, obsess over your reviews: whether you want to believe it or not, they are inarguably the most important facet of your marketing. To rise in the Trip Advisor popularity rankings is to watch your reservations soar.

### **35. Infiltrate press circles\***

Most people think that getting featured in major magazines and news publications is reserved for the uber-rich, the well connected, or the annoyingly lucky. But with the advent of free<sup>3</sup> and inexpensive<sup>4</sup> PR repositories, all you need is persistence, a unique writing style, and some creativity to land your hotel or vacation rental on

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<sup>2</sup> Price for Trip Advisor Business Listing is tiered according to your location and number of rooms.

<sup>3</sup> Sign up for Help A Reporter Out (HARO): <http://www.helpareporter.com/sources>

<sup>4</sup> Sign up for PR Leads (\$99/month): <http://www.prleads.com/pr-leads-monthly-signup>

the pages of The New York Times, Travel and Leisure, CNN or whatever publication you choose. These PR services are designed to connect professional reporters with sources who may be relevant to their story, regardless of their fame or expertise. This is to say that if you can make a good pitch, you'll get featured in an article. In the travel and business niches, you'll find between 50 and 100 leads per day coming from these story engines. Pitch just one of them the right way to land that big media opportunity boosting your reservations for months – if not years – to come.

### **37. Commit to special interest groups\*\***

The travel industry is stocked with specialty pockets, each with a rich core of enthusiasts who make remarkable commitments to visit places and stay in recommended lodgings. Gay travel is the best example. Regardless of *your* sexual preferences, the good news is that you can affiliate yourself with specialty groups like these simply by becoming a member of their associations or groups online. Memberships can be free or paid, but once you hit a pocket of the right consumers, their loyalty can be astounding. Owners in our study found an average of 7% increased bookings purely from their affiliation with gay travel associations<sup>5</sup>. Similar success stories can be attributed to eco-friendly travel associations<sup>6</sup>, select small hotel groups, state or country-sponsored tourism agencies, and medical tourism associations.

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<sup>5</sup> The most powerful and influential site in the industry is Gay Journey. Submit your listing (for extra umph, say that it is not only gay-friendly but also gay-owned): [http://gayjourney.com/site/submit\\_listing.html](http://gayjourney.com/site/submit_listing.html). Finishing a close second is Purple Roofs offering both free and paid inclusions: <http://www.purpleroofs.com/index-addedit.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Become a member of The Green Travel Network: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/green-travel/>

### **38. Get listed: open the floodgates\***

If you are starting a new website or have an existing website that doesn't see much traffic, it is absolutely vital that you submit your site to these two online directories. The Open Directory Project (aka DMOZ<sup>7</sup>) is the most comprehensive human-reviewed directory on the Internet. Submit and submit again and submit again until you are included. Be persistent. The Yahoo! Directory<sup>8</sup> is the gold standard of paid directories and submission is as easy as a one-time fee (\$299). These two directories dovetail with Google's internal systems as well as a plethora of other search engines. In other words, getting listed with these two authority sites will generate a harvest of inbound links to your site, thus transferring trust, relevance, and web traffic to your hotel or vacation rental homepage. More quality web traffic means more reservations!

### **39. Use awards nominations to increase respect\***

Reputation is the cornerstone of increased reservations. As mentioned elsewhere in this report (See also [Guard Trip Advisor Reviews With Your Life](#)), it is important to boost the profile and reputation of your accommodation repeatedly and in innovative ways. One secret weapon is the awards industry. It can be termed an industry because a lot of these "unbiased" awards organizations are nothing more than clubs. Being nominated by an association like the World Travel Awards<sup>9</sup> is tremendous PR you can brag about on your website and use to in your correspondence with guests (See Perfect your correspondence). Realize that you don't need to be a world-class accommodation to apply for nomination.

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<sup>7</sup> Submit to DMOZ: <http://www.dmoz.org/add.html>

<sup>8</sup> Submit to Yahoo! Directory: <https://ecom.yahoo.com/dir/reference/instructions>

<sup>9</sup> Entry application for the World Travel Awards: <http://www.worldtravelawards.com/entry2011>

#### 40. **Be persuasive on rental and classifieds sites\*\***

Attention-grabbing property listings generate more reservations. Use classified websites and for-sale-by-owner websites<sup>10</sup> to tap target niches. If you own a small hotel, you are not prohibited from using these sites. Simply feature your most popular or most emblematic room. Use eye-catching photos (See also [Master The Photograph](#)), compelling descriptions, and the all-important property title. This must be short (keep it under 50 characters), descriptive, and it must provide the user with a reason to explore your listing further. Realize that most of the property listings on these websites run together so it's important to make yours stand out. Here are two examples of property listings submitted and published simultaneously with the juggernaut of all classifieds websites<sup>11</sup>. Check out the differences that tiny adjustments can make!

Winning Title				Losing Title		
“Announcing Myrtle Beach’s Most Comfortable Oceanfront Vacation Rental!”			<<< <b>Potential            Gain</b> +62%	“Furnished oceanfront apartment in downtown Myrtle Beach”		
Clicks	Impressions	CTR		Clicks	Impressions	CTR
318	92,464	.34%		201	92,464	.21%

<sup>10</sup> In the vacation rental world, the top two players are VRBO (<http://admin.vrbo.com/global/owner.htm>) and Vacation Rentals (<https://www.vacationrentals.com/list-your-property.htm>) each of which charge nominal annual fees.

<sup>11</sup> Craigslist: <http://www.craigslist.org/about/sites>

Winning Title				Losing Title		
“Visiting San Diego? Try Our Boutique 9-BR Home w/ Pool, Jacuzzi, and Private Beach Access”			<<< Potential Gain +47%	“4-BR San Diego house close to ocean with great views”		
Clicks	Impressions	CTR		Clicks	Impressions	CTR
145	28,932	.50%		99	28,932	.34%

Notice how words like “Announcing” and “Private Beach Access” attract more eyeballs. Notice how variations of words such as “Home” instead of “house” make a difference and how punctuation like the exclamation point draws more attention. Always capitalize every meaningful word in your listing and utilize questions: “Visiting San Diego?” tends to immediately engage the user.

#### **41. Get a leg-up on your competition: register with Google Places and Google Maps\***

To capitalize on free-flowing organic Google traffic, register with both Google Maps and Google Places. Google Maps has been around for a while and is used to help users identify your geographic location. By registering your accommodation with Google Maps (free), you’ll be granted one of those red teardrops on the display map and integrated into Google searches. When clicked, this teardrop will reveal your address, phone number (great for walk-in reservations), and website. Google Places (free) is designed explicitly for local searches (that is to say, people who are in town and need a place to stay ASAP). Google Places is more complete – like a directory – in that you can submit detailed information such as check-in

hours, room rates, payment methods...etc. Submitting<sup>12</sup> to both Google Maps and Google Places will generate great last minute, geo-targeted reservation inquiries. It'll also prompt your competition to wonder why the hell you're listed and they aren't.

#### **47. Accumulate advertising credit\***

To boost occupancy, small hotels and vacation rentals must have exposure in the media. But oftentimes, marketing budgets can be too low, giving the upper arm to bigger, richer local accommodations. This is something of a Catch-22: you need expensive exposure to increase profits, but you can't afford expensive advertising without increased profits. Combat this in the low season by offering unbooked rooms – essentially sunken costs – as barter to magazines, newspapers, websites, TV shows, radio programs, billboard providers: anyone willing to make the trade. In exchange for credit towards their marketing medium, offer these entrepreneurs last-minute blocks of room nights (rooms that would sit empty otherwise). Then cash in on your accumulated advertising credit when and where you need it most.

#### **48. Price match everyone\***

Only the stubborn<sup>13</sup> refuse to lower their prices in low season to beat out close competition. Slow periods offer an amazing opportunity to build a following of loyal guests by offering the absolute best deal in town. Show these discounted guests a good experience and you'll most likely see them again, perhaps during high season. Price matching is also a great way to offer up specials to your local community. If your accommodation is in an isolated region, seeing as they're only

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<sup>12</sup> Sign up for Google Places and Google Maps: <http://www.google.com/local/add>

<sup>13</sup> There are those who will argue that lowering their prices lowers the reputation of their brand. These are not people who are in dire needs of reservations.

a short distance away, offer BEST RATE deals to locals from the big city. It makes the ideal short getaway and provides a reason for them to recommend your lodging to friends. Price matching extensions<sup>14</sup> on your website offer users the best discounts and the lowest prices at just the right time. But use price matching at a discretion: of course you cannot match a \$30/night fleabag hotel nor would you want to considering the clientele that it might bring in.

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<sup>14</sup> Use the Price Match Extension: <http://ecommerce.aheadworks.com/magento-extensions/price-match.html>