

# Sustainability marketing: US hotels vs. international hotel chains

Lana Brackett and B. Nathaniel Carr II

*Gabelli School of Business, Roger Williams University, Bristol,  
Rhode Island, USA*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to determine whether US-only hotels and US-based international hotel chains similarly promote sustainability marketing.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A qualitative exploratory research study reviewing the web site marketing of the US-only hotels and US-based international hotel chains.

**Findings** – The research indicates that there are differences in the sustainability marketing of US-only and US-based international hotel chains.

**Originality/value** – This is a unique research study. The hotel industry has a diverse body of stateholders due to its large market and impact on sustainability.

**Keywords** Marketing, Sustainability

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The global hotel and resorts industry revenue is \$593bn according to the IBISWORLD (2013) Global Hotels & Resorts Market Research report. Such a large industry obviously has a huge environmental impact. Surprisingly, studies of sustainability marketing in the hotel industry are relatively sparse. This is indicated by Yoo *et al.* (2011), who report that the top four hospitality journals published only 12 articles pertaining to sustainability marketing (2.1 per cent) of the 570 that have been published over a ten-year period (2000-2009). This led the authors to wonder about the actual sustainability marketing of US hotels and international hotel chains. Thus, the purpose of the exploratory research presented in this paper is to determine whether US-only hotels and US-based (meaning incorporated in the USA) international hotel chains have similar sustainability marketing.

Sustainability marketing is also known as green marketing and is generally considered to be environmentally responsible marketing. Definitions of sustainability marketing: Barron's Marketing Dictionary definition: "promotion of environmentally safe or beneficial products" (Answers.com). The American Marketing Association definition: "1. (Retailing definition) The marketing of products that are presumed to be environmentally safe. 2. (Social marketing definition) The development and marketing of products designed to minimise negative effects on the physical environment or to improve its quality. 3. (Environments definition) The efforts by organisations to produce, promote, package and reclaim products in a manner that is sensitive or responsive to ecological concerns". And according to the United Nations, World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), "sustainable tourism reflects a 'quadruple bottom line' of environmental, social, economic and climate responsiveness".



---

## Sustainability in the hotel industry

Sustainability is an important issue in the hotel industry. There are over 800 different worldwide green hotel certifications according to the Green Hotels Association (GHA) whose “purpose is to bring together hotels interested in environmental issues”. That association does not green certify, nor do they recommend green certifications because: “it is very expensive and time consuming, and if a guest doesn’t understand what a particular certification logo means, that logo or piece of paper can’t possibly make any difference to the guest”. However, the GHA does recommend that hotels get free surveys, audits and certifications from government and utility entities to enhance and market hotel properties. The GHA does promote that being green directly improves the profitability of hotels with cost savings and guest and staff appreciation and does not lower luxury status (GHA).

In contrast, Sabre Holdings (which includes Travelocity), has created an innovative green “Eco-Certified Hotel” flag label for hotels that have earned any of a dozen international sustainability certifications whose standards are closely aligned with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council. This green flag appears both on Travelocity.com search results and in the Sabre Global Distribution System (sabre.com). A Cornell study analysed the sales and rates for 9,000 Travelocity Hotels and compared the revenue results for 3,000 green flagged hotels to 6,000 non-green-certified hotels. That study found that sustainability is overall revenue neutral for the hotel industry (Chong and Verma, 2013). Does that Cornell study perhaps prove the GHA to be right about green certifications not making a difference to guests?

Consumers do consider sustainability to be an important issue: 44 per cent of US travellers consider environmental impact to be important to them when planning travel; and environmental awareness has gained mainstream status in the USA (Rheem, 2009).

## Research design

A qualitative exploratory research study was conducted by reviewing the web site marketing of US-only hotels and US-based international hotel chains. The web sites were accessed in December of 2013 and January of 2014.

The hotel web site sustainability statements are used as a surrogate for hotel sustainability marketing. For the purpose of simplicity, three indicators were determined to be significant sustainability-marketing indicators on the web sites:

- (1) if the web site has a statement about sustainability activities;
- (2) if sustainability awards are stated on the web site; and
- (3) if sustainability future plans are stated on the web site.

Since this qualitative exploratory research is meant to provide a quick snapshot of sustainability marketing, a small convenience sample of 16 hotel web sites was chosen. Statistical significance is obviously not the goal of this research; if it were, then a much larger sample would have been required and therefore obtained.

For a representative convenience sample of international hotel chains, the US-based (incorporated in the USA) top worldwide hotel brands that are listed in the web site [www.mkg-hospitality.com](http://www.mkg-hospitality.com) were chosen. This web site has a list (Year 2013) of the top worldwide hotel brands (with the biggest size in terms of number of rooms) and it is dominated by the US international hotel chains; 11 of the top 15 brands are USA (MKG Hospitality). However, six international hotel company groups own the 11 US-based international hotel brands. The six are: Best Western, Marriot International, Choice Hotels, Hilton Hotels, Starwood Hotels & Resorts and Wyndham Hotel Group. The six

US international hotel company group corporate web sites were accessed, not the individual hotel brands.

For the convenience sample of hotels that are only in the USA, hotel brands that are affiliates or owned by the US-based international hotel companies were obviously excluded. Therefore, only independent US brands were chosen. For a representative sample of the US-only hotels a convenience sample of hotel brands familiar to the authors and having representation on the east and west coasts of the USA were chosen. It was decided to separate the US-only brands into two categories: luxury hotels and non-luxury hotels (the categories of luxury and non-luxury are based on the information on the hotel web sites). The two categories were determined based on the important factor of guest expectations and experiences. The international chain hotels offer some level of consistency in terms of guest expectations and experiences, but independent brands lack that consistency. Also, in terms of guest expectations and experiences, the luxury hotels are distinct from all other hotels. The five US-only luxury hotels are: The Thayer Hotel, Mountain View Grand, Dan'l Webster Inn & Spa, Miramonte Resort and Spa and The Huntley Hotel. The five US-only non-luxury hotels are: Bird-In-Hand Family Inn, Highland Lake Resort, Nob Hill Motor Inn, Jack O' Lantern and the Snowy Owl Inn & Resort.

Findings

Table I summarises the information from the hotel web sites:

- Group 1: every one of the six US-based international hotel chains has all three sustainability-marketing indicators on their corporate web sites. It is interesting to note that the web site locations of the sustainability statements vary, and the Wyndham Hotel Group is the only one to have the sustainability statement on the home page.
- Group 2: US-only luxury hotels – two of the five have the sustainability-marketing indicators; and only one of those has all three sustainability-marketing indicators; the other one has two of the indicators, but does not have the third indicator: sustainability future plans.
- Group 3: US-only non-luxury hotels – only one has the sustainability-marketing indicators.
- The research indicates that there are differences in the sustainability marketing of US-only hotels and US-based international hotel chains. The US-based international hotel chains all have the three sustainability-marketing indicators, and only three of the ten US-only hotels have any of the three sustainability-marketing indicators.

Hotel web sites (US web pages) accessed December 2013 and January 2014			
Hotel groups	Sustainability awards	Sustainability statements	Sustainability future plans
Group 1	6 yes	6 yes	6 yes
Group 2	2 yes, 3 no	2 yes, 3 no	1 yes, 4 no
Group 3	1 yes, 4 no	1 yes, 4 no	1 yes, 4 no

**Notes:** Numbers indicate the number of hotel web sites that yes – have or no – do not have sustainability statements, sustainability awards and sustainability future plans stated on their web sites in each of the three hotel groups; Groups: 1 – (six) US-based international hotel chains (corporate web sites), 2 – (five) US-only luxury hotels, 3 – (five) US-only non-luxury hotels

Table I.  
Summary of results

---

To summarise the results: 100 per cent of the US-based international hotel chains and only 30 per cent of the US-only luxury and non-luxury hotels have the sustainability-marketing indicators on their web sites.

Because this exploratory research effort was qualitatively designed, the results are obviously not statistically significant, but they convey a quick impression that is relevant. Therefore, these results achieve the objective of qualitative exploratory research by bringing greater clarity in identifying important major hotel-related sustainability marketing research questions:

- (1) Would a statistically significant sample and quantitative study verify or refute these qualitative results?
- (2) Does country of ownership impact hotel sustainability marketing?
- (3) In other countries and world regions, is there a difference in sustainability marketing for international hotel chains and independent country and world regions hotel brands?

### Research limitations and implications

The scope of this exploratory study is limited to a small sample of US-only hotels and US-based international hotel chains. Reviewing the hotel web sites using the three sustainability-marketing indicators stated above is the single metric used to determine sustainability marketing; this is obviously not a complete review of such marketing activities. Future research could address these limitations and more importantly, should research the reasons for the differences in the sustainability marketing. Also of particular interest are the consumer perceptions and attitudes about sustainability marketing and the most effective ways to market sustainability.

### Conclusions

The actual sustainability activities of hotels cannot be inferred from their sustainability marketing. The actual sustainability practices could either exceed or fall short of the hotel sustainability marketing. These differences would be another interesting research topic in addition to the research topics mentioned above. The hotel industry has a diverse body of stakeholders due to its large market size and huge impact on the environment. This study is meant to provide a quick snapshot of sustainability marketing in the hotel industry. Hopefully it will help spur more voluminous research on sustainability marketing in the hotel industry.

### References

- Chong, H. and Verma, R. (2013), "Hotel sustainability: financial analysis shines a cautious green light", Cornell, available at: [www.hotelschool.cornell.edu/research/chr/pubs/reports/abstract-17463.html](http://www.hotelschool.cornell.edu/research/chr/pubs/reports/abstract-17463.html) (accessed December 2013).
- IBISWORLD (2013), "Global Hotels & Resorts Market Research report", December, available at: [www.ibisworld.com/industry/global/global-hotels-resorts](http://www.ibisworld.com/industry/global/global-hotels-resorts) (accessed December 2013).
- Rheem, C. (2009), "Going green: the business impact of environmental awareness on travel", PhoCusWright, available at: [www.phocuswright.com](http://www.phocuswright.com) (accessed December 2013).
- Yoo, M., Lee, S. and Bai, B. (2011), "Hospitality marketing research from 2000 to 2009 topics, methods, and trends", *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 23 No. 4, pp. 517-532.

### **Further reading**

American Marketing Association, available at: [www.marketingpower.com](http://www.marketingpower.com)

Barrons's Marketing Dictionary, available at: [www.answers.com/topic/green-marketing](http://www.answers.com/topic/green-marketing)

MKG Hospitality, available at: [www.mkg-hospitality.com](http://www.mkg-hospitality.com)

Sabre Holdings, available at: [www.sabre.com](http://www.sabre.com)

United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), available at: [www.unwto.org](http://www.unwto.org)

### **Web reference**

[Travelocity.com](http://Travelocity.com)

### **About the authors**

Lana Brackett is a Professor of Marketing at the Mario J. Gabelli School of Business at Roger Williams University and has a Master's in Economics from the State University of New York at Binghamton and an MBA from Bryant College. Her professional experience includes 12 years at the Foxboro Company. Professor Lana Brackett is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [lbrackett@rwu.edu](mailto:lbrackett@rwu.edu)

Dr B. Nathaniel Carr II is the most senior member of the Mario J. Gabelli School of Business at Roger Williams University. During 45 years of service, he has held the titles of Professor of Marketing, Marketing Area Coordinator and University Institutional Researcher. His most prideful academic accomplishment is the enjoyment experienced in teaching.