

Role of Digital Marketing in Strengthening Indian Hospitality Industry During Covid Pandemic 2020: A Case Study of Taj Hotel

Dr. Ashima Singh

Amity School of communication,

Amity university, Noida, Uttar Pradesh

Received 2022 March 15; **Revised** 2022 April 20; **Accepted** 2022 May 10.

ABSTRACT

2020 was the year when the world was strangled with a new way of living. The new normal, the pandemic which affected the daily lives of each individual and also churned many businesses into shambles. The same could be seen with the most hit sector, the hospitality industry. We are living in an era where almost everything around us is operated digitally. In the world of marketing as well, digitization has created a huge impact – brands, products, and services are reaching the people or the mass audience via the most popular online and social media platforms. We all have a basic idea about digital marketing, it is actually a digital or online method of promoting products and services through online portals and media platforms. The entire process requires a lot of involvement of the public or common people which is why it is also a great PR tool. After a long period of lockdown, the hotels and restaurants are now re-opening in full swing and are coming up with a new and advanced set of protocols to ensure a safe experience for their guests. With the introduction of the latest trends like contactless payments and the use of artificial intelligence for instance, instead of getting a physical menu at a restaurant we can now scan the bar-codes and explore the menu in digital form on our smartphones. In this paper, we shall examine the strengthening role of digital marketing in the hospitality industry by taking live case studies of the Indian hospitality industry giant The Taj group.

Key Words: Digital Marketing, Hospitality, Covid-19, Taj.

INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 took over the world in a few short weeks. As a result, the hospitality industry, among many others, was shut and because of this, the industry was heavily impacted.

According to the Federation of Hotel and Restaurant Association of India (FHRAI), the Indian hotel industry in the fiscal year of 2020-2021 had taken a hit of over 1.30 lakh crore in revenue. Hoping for some support from the government the Federation of Hotel and Restaurant Association of India (FHRAI) had proposed an EMI and interest payment freeze in the hospitality sector. The sector has been struggling to meet its statutory and capital spending commitments since March 2020. According to FHRAI Vice President Gurbaxish Singh Kohli, repayment of debts with interest is not only difficult but impossible in a more harsh economic situation due to the current increase. (Business Standard, 2021)

Even before the pandemic businesses were slowly digitalizing everything and with the help of new digital platforms coming up, it had become easy for them to connect with their audiences. To overcome the losses incurred during lockdowns and during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic the hospitality industry took the support of Digital Marketing to stay connected with its audience and to maintain its active presence in the industry.

Digital marketing, often known as online marketing, is the promotion of companies using the internet and other kinds of digital communication in order to engage with potential clients. As a marketing channel, this comprises not just email, social media, and web-based advertising, but also text and multimedia messaging. (Mailchimp, n.d.)

The industry uses digital marketing to maintain a hotel's presence online, to share the activities or the safety measures they have taken with regards to covid-19, and to keep the audiences involved with them so that they don't forget about their presence.

To keep with the digitalization of the world and industry, there are different tools and platforms which are widely used to promote hotels, their services, and the latest happenings in the hotel. (eZee Absolute, 2022)

The tools and platforms used are:

1. SEO- Search Engine Optimization

Search engine optimization, or SEO, is a digital marketing technique that focuses on the visibility of your website in search results on search engines like Google. It's also known as "the science and art of making web pages appealing to search engines".

When optimizing a web page, the following are the most significant factors to consider:

- The level of user involvement is determined by the quality of the material.
- Mobile-friendliness.
- Inbound link quantity and quality.

SEO is a science because of the planned use of these parameters, but it is an art because of the unpredictability.

2. Content Marketing

Content marketing, like any other marketing strategy, is focused on the delivery of valuable, relevant, and useful content to the target audience. The aim of this marketing strategy is to attract audiences and influence them into becoming the brand's customers. SEO plays a major role in content marketing.

3. Social Media Marketing

By involving individuals in online discussions, social media marketing may increase traffic and brand exposure. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are the most popular social media marketing platforms, with LinkedIn and YouTube not far behind.

Because social media marketing entails active audience interaction, it has grown in popularity as a means of attracting attention. Built-in engagement metrics in social media marketing are highly important in determining how successful you're in reaching your target audience. You get to choose whatever kinds of interactions are most important to you, whether it's the number of shares, comments, or overall website clicks.

4. Pay-Per-Click Marketing (PPC)

PPC, or pay-per-click, is when you place an ad on a platform and get charged every time someone clicks on it.

It's a little more difficult how and when people view your ad. When a place on a search engine results page, commonly known as a SERP, becomes available, the engine fills it with what amounts to an immediate auction. Each accessible ad is prioritized by an algorithm based on a variety of parameters, including:

- Ad quality
- Keyword relevance
- Landing page quality
- Bid amount

These are the few digital marketing tools and platforms which are strategically used for the benefit of the brand. (Mailchimp, n.d.)

INDIAN HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

History of Hotel Industry in India

India is a country of traditions, rich dynamic cultures, and a believer of a Sanskrit term "Atithi Devo Bhava" which means The Guest is God, these traditions, cultures, and beliefs are what the Indian Hospitality industry is made of and has been witnessed by many guests both local and international. (Sanskriti, 2014)

Up until the 1990s, the middle-class society of local travelers did not have any decent, affordable hotels available for them to stay in. The travelers majorly relied on their friends and family or the tourist homes which were run by the state, since the available options were either shabby lodgings with poor sanitation or luxurious five-star hotels such as the Taj or the Oberoi, which were expensive for the middle-class travelers of the country. (Penguin, 2020)

The Indian economy in 1991 saw huge growth and development which was seen throughout the country in the 1990s and 2000s. Chains of socialism were broken, policies were introduced which were both service-oriented and benefited the market. As a result of these policies, there was a surge in the number of decent hotels which served the mid-market with an experience of the luxuries seen in the five-star hotels.

By the 2000s, the big three of the hospitality industry- Taj, ITC, and Oberoi- were not the only premium giants who had dominated the industry for so long. Because of the policies, new budgeted hotels were coming up that served the majority of middle-class society all the while providing their customers with the luxury and taste of these big branded hotel segments because of which these giants had to work towards maintaining their status, position, and customer loyalty. (Penguin, 2020)

ABOUT TAJ

Founded by Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata (also known as Jamshed Ji Tata) in 1899, the Indian Hotels Company (IHCL) is South Asia's largest hospitality company, with some of the world's most luxurious hotel brands. The inspiration to build hotels came to Jamshed Ji Tata when he was not allowed to enter Watson hotel (one of the reputed hotels of British time) which had restricted its entry to only white people. This insult was taken personally by Jamshed Ji tata and he felt that not only he was being insulted but his whole country was being insulted. This is when he decided to build a hotel where everyone could stay without any restrictions and without any discrimination, everyone would be welcome there. This one insult led Jamshed Ji Tata into building India's first ultra-luxury hotel Taj Mahal Palace, Mumbai which is also known as "Diamond by the Sea".

The Taj group has grown and prospered since then, under the Tata Group, and has gone on to become one the best, reputed, and respected hotel chains in the world that value both its employees and guests. (Tiwari, 2021)

GROWTH OF HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY IN INDIA

The Indian hospitality industry was growing at a slow pace. In the year 2002, the government of India launched a campaign by the name of "Incredible India" to boost tourism in India. The aim behind the campaign was to increase awareness about showing many facets of Indian culture and history, such as yoga and spirituality, to promote India as a desirable tourist destination to global audiences. This campaign turned out to be a huge marketing success and attracted lots of international tourists as well as international hotel chains who wanted to create their presence in the Indian landscape. After the success of "Incredible India" campaign, the government of India also launched another campaign by the name of "Atithidevo Bhava" in the year 2008. "Atithidevo Bhava" is a public awareness programme aimed at giving inbound tourists a better sense of belonging in the nation. The campaign is aimed at the general public, with a particular focus on tourist sector stakeholders. Taxi drivers, guides, immigration officers, police officers, and other professionals that engage directly with tourists get training and orientation as part of the initiative.

The campaigns played their role in boosting tourism in India, however, the major growth in the tourism as well as the hospitality sector was seen because of growth in information technology.

Indian hotels have grown in popularity on a worldwide basis as a consequence of good marketing. In international markets, several of these hotel chains are well-known. This excellent image of Indian hotels aided hotel businesses in gaining an international reputation, and numerous hotel chains such as Taj, Oberoi, and ISTA Hotels have entered international markets.

(Madhav University, n.d.)

COVID AND HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

The coronavirus epidemic had wreaked havoc on India's hotel and restaurant industry, with lockdowns and economic slowdown decimating sales and profits, the Federation of Hotel and Restaurant Associations of India (FHRAI), the leading

industry group, requested rapid assistance from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration when the second wave of the virus was at its peak in April and May 2021.

It was a last-ditch effort to get government help to preserve the hotel industry from bankruptcy.

The FHRAI asked for a suspension on loan and interest payments, claiming that the industry would collapse if it didn't get help.

The Indian hotel business is without a doubt one of the worst-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, with demand at an all-time low. Global travel advisories, Visa suspensions, and the enforcement of Section 144 (prohibition against large assemblies) have put India, like most other countries, under lockdown, with unprecedented consequences.

Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) into India (especially leisure visitors) began to weaken in February 2020 as the spread continued apace to neighboring nations. The Indian government followed suit, suspending travel visas (with a few exceptions) until April 15, 2020, which got extended due to the rise in the cases.

Furthermore, the majority of prospective travel bookings for winter, i.e. October to March – the hotel industry's peak season – are made during the summer months, have essentially vanished.

All the sectors related to the hotel industry such as conferences, weddings both destination, and local, meetings, restaurants, etc have been severely affected. Because of the pandemic and as per the Federation of Hotel and Restaurant Associations of India (FHRAI) the industry had lost business worth over 1.3 trillion rupees in the FY 2020-2021 and around 20-25% of the 1,50,000 luxury branded hotels in India are at the risk of permanent closure. Apart from these chains being at risk of permanent closure, there were many jobs as well which were lost. (Lamba et al., 2020)

DIGITAL MARKETING IN INDIA AND THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

Between 1996 and 2005, India was the birthplace of digital marketing. However, the true rise of digital marketing began in 2008, when internet services became more widely available and individuals began to use search engines such as Google.

In the year 2000, few people had heard of SEO, and there were only a few firms in India that provided digital marketing services. In 2008, a slew of new digital marketing companies sprung up in India. Many company owners now recognize the value of increasing their brand's visibility on Google. Small and large businesses alike began operating organic and sponsored initiatives to create inbound marketing leads by 2010. In India, the digital marketing industry exploded after 2010, and it continues to do so now.

With the advent of Indian e-commerce firms such as Snapdeal, Flipkart, Myntra, Jabong, and others, the digital marketing business in India began to acquire prominence.

These Indian e-commerce companies, as well as other major internet firms such as RedBus, Zomato, OYO, and Ola, have altered India's digital marketing environment.

As a result, more individuals are utilizing smartphones for online activities including online shopping, banking, and home delivery services.

By the end of 2025, the internet penetration rate is predicted to exceed 55%. It's due to the rapid growth of telecommunications infrastructure.

According to Adobe's research, "2020 digital trends in the Asia Pacific," India is one of the countries where exciting technological breakthroughs are taking place.

By 2025, the Asia Pacific region is on track to become a global leader in IoT. These numbers show that digital marketing services in India will continue to expand and evolve.

(Bhattacharya, n.d.) <https://www.dw.com/en/india-covid-crisis-impact-on-hotels/a-58188605>

Hospitality Marketing or Hotel Digital Marketing is a new form of Digital Marketing. This type of marketing allows hotel chains to build, maintain and make their presence online on digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram along with search engines like Google.

In today's time, people like to do proper extensive research about the hotel and the services they provide before going ahead and booking it and this is how a customer's journey begins, from searching information on searching engines platforms to becoming a loyal customer. Hotels use techniques such as Search Engine Optimization (SEO), as well as a variety of sponsored and organic channels, to ensure the hotel's visibility during the research, consideration, and final booking phases.

Hotels use strategies like having a website, listing on Google, creating attractive advertisements, using social media to promote their hotel and offers, using SEO to make sure the hotel ranks higher on social engines, influencer marketing, email marketing, using YouTube to share videos of the hotel. These are the popular techniques used among many others. (eZee Absolute, 2022)

DIGITAL MARKETING TECHNIQUES USED BY TAJ HOTELS

Taj Hotels is one of India's most well-known hotel groups. It is noted for its hospitality and excellent customer service. It has 4 different brands which cater to different target audiences, for example, Ginger brand which is a midscale hotel caters to customers who are looking for a budget-friendly stay and Taj Hotels which is categorized as Luxury Hotel caters to customers who want a luxury experience and luxurious stay. The other two brands are Vivanta which is categorized as an Upscale Hotel and SeleQtions which is also categorized as Upscale Hotel.

Techniques used by Taj Hotels:

1. The Buyers Journey

The Buyer's Journey is the research process that a buyer undertakes prior to making a purchase. This is a concept that sales and marketing utilize to better understand a buyer's wants, challenges, and behavior throughout the purchasing cycle, so they can provide content that addresses each stage. Taj Hotels is broken into three parts. People seeking a premium hotel or restaurant who are unfamiliar with Taj Hotels make up the **Cold Audience**.

Warm Audience is when people learn about Taj Hotels, they go from being a chilly audience to being a warm audience. These are customers who are thinking about staying at the Taj Hotel but are still undecided.

When a member of a warm audience decides to stay at Taj Hotels, they become a **Hot Audience**. These customers, on the other hand, may still be seeking the greatest deals before making a reservation.



2. Google Search Ads

Taj uses non-branded keywords to attract its Cold Audience, for example, if someone searches for "Kanha National Park", an ad for Taj Hotels will pop up which targets people searching for the park. Along with the ad the customers may discover

more about Kanha, see their special deals, book tented suits, get directions, and even call Taj hotels right from the advertisement. When clients click on the ad, they are sent to a landing page. Customers can fill out an inquiry form on this landing page. When customers complete this form, a lead for Taj hotels is produced.

For their Warm Audience, they use branded keywords, keywords which include 'Taj' in the search. With ads specific to the warm audiences and branded keywords customers have a variety of alternatives. They may browse at 60+ hotels in 40+ places and book a stay online; they can look at Taj Hotels' holiday packages or reserve a table at one of their opulent restaurants. These consumers can also hire a space for meetings and events if they are company owners. The blue link in the ad also leads you to their main page, where you can see all of their popular destinations and vacation packages.

When it comes to Hot Audiences they target customers who use location-related keywords and branded keywords to look for a specific destination and hotel. For example, if you search for Falaknuma Palace on Google, the ad will directly take the customer to a landing page that would include all of Falaknuma Palace's rooms and eateries. This website allows visitors to book a room or a table directly.

3. Display Ads for Retargeting

Display ads are aggressively used by Taj to retarget lost visitors and bring them back to the website. The ad targeting the term "Kanha national park" is for a cold audience, as mentioned in the preceding section. Converting such an audience is quite challenging. Taj Hotels does several follow-ups in order to turn them into clients.

This is what remarketing advertisements like this do: they help bring back lost users. Furthermore, because these clients have already visited Taj's website and are familiar with them, they are no longer a cold audience. As a result, this is how they warm up a cold audience. The ad redirects people to the Taj Hotels landing page, where they may continue the reservation process.

4. Video and Facebook Ads

Making a video of the hotel, its rooms, restaurants, pool, spa, or any other attractive services and uploading it on their YouTube channels is how Taj hotels attract cold audiences who are planning a trip. By giving them insights and teasers about how luxurious and relaxing their trip can be if booked with Taj Hotels. A link provided in the video generally takes the viewer to the landing page of the hotel.

The same way they use Facebook to attract customers by promoting ads that are location specific.

5. Creating Brand Awareness Through Social Media

Social Media has become an integral part of everyone's lives. Every brand must develop some brand awareness for its target audience to recognize it.

Taj Hotels is one of India's most well-known hotel brands, showing that they have done an excellent job of building brand recognition. One of the reasons for their success is their exceptional service. Aside from their service, they have attracted their target audience through social media, where they provide a Royal experience for their followers where they share the customer experience through stories, posts, or by going live (all these features exist with social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook). These interesting and attractive posts or stories engage customers with the content and create a virtual experience for them hence creating a memorable presence for the brand in the minds of the customer.

(Thapak, n.d.)

TAJ GOING DIGITAL DURING COVID

Around the same time as covid 19 was found in China, Taj Hotels' parent company, IHCL, was embarking on a digital transformation project.

The Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL), a company with a 117-year history, opted to combat the problem with a comprehensive plan backed by technology. SVP and Head-Digital & IT, IHCL, Vinay Deshpande, was forced into the middle of the crisis. Even though Vinay had more than 25 years of expertise in the sector, it was still a difficult undertaking, as the hotel industry had never encountered a crisis of this size.

IHCL's senior management recognized the importance of creating trust in the eyes of customers and opted to invest heavily in technology to assure their safety. "In light of Covid 19, we have increased our technological adoption. We have created our suite of contactless, technology-driven solutions for every guest touchpoint since safety and hygiene are anticipated to remain a priority for guests in the hospitality area in the near future. These solutions are called I-Zest, which utilizes QR codes and digital interventions from guests straight from check-in to eating and invoicing, among other things," said Vinay Deshpande in an interview. "They also provide staff with a secure area to work in with touchless HR systems."

The world's most prestigious hotel company has taken a variety of steps to safeguard the safety of its staff and visitors. The goal was to avoid any interaction, from sterilized iPads to zero-touch attendance systems. Employees utilize face recognition technology to register their attendance on the zero-touch attendance system, while a thermal sensor mounted on top of the device monitors the temperature of employees entering the hotel. IHCL has worked with a succession of start-ups for technology-led advances, recognizing the need for cost-effective innovation. IHCL is also implementing a test program for a contact tracing app.

This will allow IHCL to track out the locations where the employee has been as well as the persons with whom he or she has communicated. The payment options are also totally contactless, and customers may purchase from computerized menus.

IHCL has also established a home delivery service and mobile application - Qmin – with the goal of generating additional revenue streams and enabling a more nimble approach to the market. "With the onset of the pandemic, the demand for online food delivery service has grown exponentially, with many guests missing the unique cuisines and offerings that they used to experience at the group's celebrated and iconic restaurants across the country," says Rahul Nair, Corporate Director, Digital Transformation, IHCL. India's e-commerce sector is expected to reach US\$ 84 billion by 2021 and US\$ 200 billion by 2026, making it one of the fastest-growing in the world. Qmin's debut not only makes use of this massive digital platform to meet rising consumer demand for online gourmet food delivery services, but it will also complement IHCL's F&B products and, in the long term, become a separate business area. For simplicity of use, we've also released a mobile application for Qmin, which is accessible on both the Google Play Store for Android users and the App Store for iOS users."

Signature cuisines from 40+ prominent restaurants from 20 of IHCL's hotels are accessible in 10 additional markets, including Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad, and Kolkata. According to Rahul Nair, the response has been very positive, since it allows visitors to bring the Taj to their homes.

IHCL and Tata Digital collaborated on the Qmin app, which provides a unique delivery experience with a smooth interface that allows consumers to tailor their orders, select menus, and track deliveries in real-time. The interface has been developed to be user-friendly and allows customers to pick their favorite food from renowned restaurants based on their location, according to Tata Digital's domain experience. It provides flexibility and convenience of service with features like multi-restaurant ordering, which allows you to order from various restaurants in the same hotel at the same time, and a scheduling assistant, which allows you to book orders for the same day based on your needs. IHCL is also looking into synergies within the Tata Group to tap into their knowledge in order to improve the app and extend and provide more initiatives through it over time.

IHCL does not want to promote the app as only a meal ordering service, and it has ambitions to go beyond stated goals as it considers the future after Covid 19. "Qmin is not simply a meal delivery service — it is a repertory of gastronomic experiences," says Rahul Nair. Qmin will expand its scope to open a gourmet Qmin store and will also extend to the company's loyalty scheme, where customers may earn and burn points using Qmin, in addition to extending to other cities and launching the app. We're also working on providing virtual meetings, which you can organize across many locations using the Qmin App — customized to suit your needs and the occasion, whether it's for planned virtual business meetings or a private get-together with loved ones. Furthermore, the app will evolve over time to include a variety of projects and goods, including culinary masterclasses, curated meals, comfort food menus, DIY kits, gourmet and confectionery products, and more." IHCL's two-pronged solution to combat the Covid 19 crisis – a mobile app and a completely contactless guest experience – is a proactive reaction from a famous warhorse in the hospitality sector, as it demonstrates to other peers how they may survive and prosper in this market.

References

1. Bhattacharya, J. (n.d.). History Of Digital Marketing In India. SEO Sandwich Blog. Retrieved January 12, 2022, from https://seosandwitch.com/digital-marketing-history-india/#Growth_of_Digital_Marketing_In_India_1996_8211_2005_and_2008_8211_Till_Date
2. Business Standard. (2021, May 16). Hotel industry says it lost Rs 1.3 trillion revenue in FY21, seeks helps. Business Standard. Retrieved January 12, 2022, from https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/fhrai-says-indian-hotel-industry-revenue-hit-in-fy-21-seek-govt-support-121051600214_1.html
3. Devendra, A. (2001). The Hotel Industry in India-The Past and the Present. Journal of Hospitality Financial Management, 9(1), 10. <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1044&context=jhfm>
4. eZee Absolute. (2022, January 6). 11 Hotel Digital Marketing Strategies to Maximize Your Bookings [Updated for 2022]. eZee Absolute. Retrieved January 12, 2022, from <https://www.ezeeabsolute.com/blog/hotel-digital-marketing-strategies/>
5. Lamba, M. S., Datta, A., & Mohan, D. (2020, April 1). COVID-19: Impact on the Indian Hotels Sector. HVS. Retrieved January 12, 2022, from <https://www.hvs.com/article/8725-covid-19-impact-on-the-indian-hotels-sector>
6. Madhav University. (n.d.). Growth of Indian Hotel Industry. Madhav University. Retrieved January 12, 2022, from <https://madhavuniversity.edu.in/growth-of-indian-hotel-industry.html>
7. Mailchimp. (n.d.). Digital Marketing Definition - What is Digital Marketing? Mailchimp. Retrieved January 12, 2022, from <https://mailchimp.com/marketing-glossary/digital-marketing/>
8. Penguin. (2020, February 7). The Evolution of the Hotel Industry in India. Penguin Random House India. Retrieved January 12, 2022, from <https://penguin.co.in/the-evolution-of-the-hotel-industry-in-india/>
9. Sanskriti. (2014, April 3). Atithi Devo Bhava – Sanskriti - Hinduism and Indian Culture Website. Sanskriti Magazine. Retrieved January 12, 2022, from <https://www.sanskritimagazine.com/culture/atithi-devo-bhava/>
10. Thapak, S. (n.d.). Taj Hotels' Digital Marketing Strategy. TNL Digital Marketing. Retrieved January 12, 2022, from <https://tnldigital.com/taj-hotels-digital-marketing-strategy/>
11. Tiwari, A. (2021, July 3). A Sweet Revenge Story That Inspired Jamsetji Tata To Build India's Iconic Taj Hotels. Indiatimes.com. Retrieved January 12, 2022, from <https://www.indiatimes.com/trending/human-interest/taj-hotels-a-sweet-revenge-story-of-jamsetji-tata-544117.html>