



**STEVE WILLIAMS**  
CASTS HIS EYE  
OVER HOTEL  
PHOTOGRAPHY,  
AND HOW  
STARWOOD IS  
ADAPTING TO THE  
FAST MOVING  
LANDSCAPE WITH  
A NEW STRATEGY

# STARWOOD REIMAGINES PHOTOGRAPHY

BY GIVING IT THE CORRECT EXPOSURE

## I stay in hotels. A lot.

As a global traveller, writer and photographer, the images of a hotel play a major role in my booking decision - like most people, I tend to head straight for the images on a hotel website. I want to see the hotel first, then read about it.

Images tell a story - they communicate an instant snapshot of what my experience could be like. I picture myself checking in at reception, my suitcases in the room, having a workout in the gym, sitting by the pool, even what table I would like to sit at in the restaurant. Photography should also be aspirational and inspirational and with respect to Starwood's many unique brands, images need to capture the essence and individuality of each property. Images are important in driving user engagement. In simple, non-marketing jargon, if people like the images and feel connected to them, they'll be more likely to book the hotel.

Starwood understands this. The company is currently focusing (pun intended) on reimagining the way they create and use photography across various channels, including property websites, social media, food and beverage and everything else.

Daniel Kerzner, Vice President Digital, Loyalty & Partnership Marketing explains, "Our guests want to see more photography and we need to be cost effective in how we deliver more for less to our hotels. With our new strategy, our guests will spend more time on our websites getting a better sense of our product, which drives conversion. We're already seeing increases up to 150% from guests who interact with photos. The opportunities are endless."

In addition to the perfect 'cover', or brochure image, guests are looking for real, honest shots and more of them. Kerzner confirms this, "We know our guests want to see more pictures of our hotels.

They want to get a real sense of the entire experience." Travel blogger and SPG Member Sven Luckermans agrees, "People are more sophisticated than ever and they expect images to reflect reality, in the possible light.



QUINN WHARTON



Photographer Quinn Wharton has worked extensively with Airbnb, and now Starwood, shares a similar perspective, "I think authentic imagery is one of the most important, differentiating factors that a hotel can implement. The rise of Instagram, TripAdvisor and great smartphone cameras has raised expectations amongst consumers." Matthias Hamel, one of Starwood's approved professional photographers says, "Stunning yet authentic imagery is essential for a trusting relationship between the hotel and the guest." He adds that Starwood professional photographers will optimise whatever is possible on location to create an ideal, yet realistic take on the space. "Limited digital retouching may be done afterwards to help create an impression, which is as close as possible to the real thing."

An interesting case study on photography is Airbnb, a disruptor in the hospitality space. The company has grown at a tremendous rate and originally catered to budget travellers, expanding to offer high-end accommodation and now successfully targets business travellers. With over a million rooms available across two hundred countries, Airbnb offers more places to sleep than Hilton and Marriott, and last year they generated over \$5.5 billion in revenue, and is valued at \$20 billion. Photography is key to their success.

In 2010, Airbnb embarked on a bold plan, offering the service of photographers for free. As of 2014, Airbnb photographers (including Wharton) had completed over 200,000 photo shoots in 8,500 cities shooting 3.3 million photographs. As Airbnb's Director of Product Joe Zadeh says, "Good photography highlights the listing in the best light and professionally photographed listings get two to three times as much business." Again, more evidence of the power of photography to drive revenue.

Zadeh suggests that professional photography creates a brand that makes people want to book. "If we're creating different experiences, people are talking about that. It's all about understanding your customers, and photography helps differentiate the product." Airbnb is also focused on the importance of honesty through images, "We're very careful to make the photos look like the places do in real life".

Photography, and the importance that people assign to it, has changed dramatically in the last few years and continues to evolve as technology advances. By 2020, 80% of the world's population will have a smartphone. That means that 6.4 billion people will have a camera in their hands.

Wharton suggests that everyone is a photographer these days who can capture good images, but he points out that, "Although anyone can take 3,000 photos and get some good ones, how do you string them together to tell the most cohesive story?" Photographs need to tell a story.



Sven Luckermans credits TripAdvisor as the catalyst in completing the story between guest experiences through reviews and photography. "Other social media followed as travellers started sharing the good,

the bad, and everything in between. Hotels now need to find the right balance in their own story."

Finding that balance is the challenge. Kerzner says, "Our guests expect us to have the best photography anywhere. As such, we've taken a blended approach. We are now working closely with selected professional and semi-professional photographers and we're expanding our user-generated content (UGC) approach. Our new strategy will produce more content than ever before at the lowest possible cost."

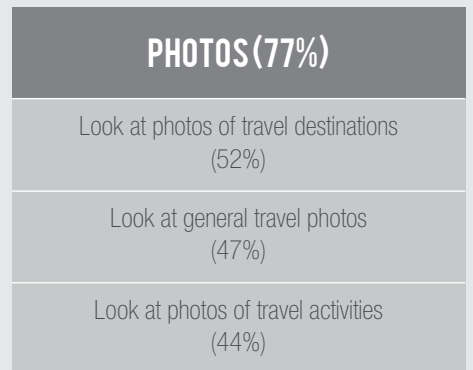
The UGC idea is changing the game and forcing companies to think differently and reimagine their approach. Guests upload images to social media, online forums and blogs to share their story about their hotel experience, what they liked (or didn't like) and travel tips. The decision-making process is forever changed by this change in behavior.

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LEWIS HINE

A fascinating study was commissioned by Expedia to discover the best and worst images for hotel companies to include online. Using electrodes to measure emotions while subjects browsed hotel websites, the study found that images of a clean, bright room with a great view evoked the most positive response. No real surprise there.

Booking.com has often said that the top three items guests want to see are the bedroom, bathroom, and television.

Yahoo Travel asked 700 U.S. millennial travellers ages 18 to 34 what type of travel content inspires them to book a trip, as well as other U.S. adult travellers ages 35 to 54, who also took part in the overall survey. The percentages of travellers favouring photos to make a travel purchase decision is 77%, followed by video. Online travel videos measured at 64% but the data all points to the fact that images are crucial when making a travel purchase decision.



Source: Yahoo Travel

So where is hotel photography heading in the future? Guests are demanding to see more professional, semi-professional and UGC pictures and they will play an increasingly active role in the process. Wharton agrees, "Guests desire more. No longer is it acceptable to only include a few images, they expect a broader image gallery as part of their decision making process."

The final word from Kerzner, "For some of our brands, like Element, conversion rates have increased by 175% from guests who have viewed UGC. We're finding the sweet spot between user generated photos and working with professional photographers. Our goal is to give our guests what they demand, which drives conversion and increases business to our hotels."

**WATCH THIS SPACE ...**