

All for One

Two hotel industry professionals have set up an innovative new online booking site with the help of an intriguing little fella called Ned. Pat O'Neill and Eamon Fennelly filled SARAH GRENNAN in on their progress.



Pat O'Neill, managing director and Eamon Fennelly, sales and marketing director, Hotelsinone

If you're wondering who the hell Ned is, don't worry, you're soon about to find out. A man about town and social networker with the inside track on where to go, what to do, and most importantly, where to stay, Ned can be found as easily quaffing cognacs with Gerald Keane & Co in No. 27 Bar in the Shelbourne or hanging out with Colin Farrell and the rest of the jetset in Dylan. And you're sure to find some of Ireland's hottest models and society belles draped on his arm as he makes his way around the circuit. Ned is literally the man who's been there, done that and earned the loyalty points and now is ready to share his intimate knowledge of the Irish hotel industry on the web.

Which is where Pat O'Neill and Eamon Fennelly come in. The two, who met while working together in Choice Hotels Ireland, have more than 25 years combined experience in the industry, working in the key areas of revenue management and sales and marketing. Following the sale of Choice's Quality and Comfort Inns arms last year to Pat McCann and TVC, the pair decided to take a leap out on their own to set up Hotelsinone.ie, a new online hotel reservations site with an innovative approach to driving bookings.

With O'Neill hailing from a revenue management background, honed during his years with Starwood Hotels and Choice Hotels Ireland where he was group revenue manager, and Fennelly bringing sales and marketing experience to the project, the partners have hands on experience in dealing with the myriad of booking sites currently on the market. As a result, they know what works, they know what really doesn't work, they know what drives clients mad and perhaps most importantly, they know the value of branding in the hotel and leisure industry.

And so we return once again to Ned. Some nine months in development, Hotelsinone.ie is fronted by main man Ned, a fictional character who drives all brand activities and has the inside track on the best seasonal rates and promotions in Irish hotels. Ned is to be backed with a very high profile above and below the line campaign (expect him to make plenty of personal appearances,

guerrilla marketing style) which will help raise awareness of both himself and Hotelsinone, while his catchy mantra 'If you need a bed, talk to Ned' is designed to emotionally connect the site with users.

Just a few short months up and running, the site is already making that connection. Going live at the close of 2007, the site currently lists 80 hotel partners, with new properties being added to the fold at a rate of three a day. O'Neill and Fennelly's strong links with the industry has helped them bring key partners such as Clarion, Quality, Comfort Inns, Carlton Hotel Group, Brennan Hotels and Dunne Group Hotels on board and news of their business proposition is spreading. 'As marketers, our hotel partners love that we are positioning Hotelsinone as a lifestyle brand and creating a real emotional connection with our customers and the product via Ned,' explains O'Neill.

What they also love, we're sure, is the 10% commission rate - one of the lowest in the sector - and the no sign-up or annual fee, which is a pet hate of Pat O'Neill's. 'Joining fees were the one thing that used to drive me absolutely crazy when I worked in revenue management. Effectively these sites are charging you for you to give them business.'

Eamon Fennelly is keen to stress the partnership approach the pair are taking to the project. 'I worked with plenty of reservation sites in the past who take your fee, list you online and then you don't hear from them for another year until it's time to pay your next fee. That's not the way we want to work at all. For us it is all about building relationships between ourselves and our partner hotels and building the right package that is right for their business.'

Delivering the right package is core to Hotelsinone's offering. 'Coming from Choice we could see the best performing rates and packages. We knew the specials you offer in Youghal to families would be very different to the B&B packages in city hotels. At Hotelsinone we will be selling more to market leads than on rates,' explains Fennelly. 'There will be family friendly offers, group bookings and so on.'

Believing that it will take a year to achieve their target of 400 member hotels, the following challenge, once O'Neill and Fennelly have their Irish site up and running, will be to tackle the UK market and overseas and already the two have secured www.hotelsinone.org to that end. Supported by a €300,000 investment, the pair are keen to remain at the forefront of technology and new initiatives coming down the line include a text messaging service, where guests can have their booking reference texted directly to their mobile.

But in the meantime they have enough on their hands. There's Ned to unleash for a start, and now that they have a critical mass of 80-plus hotels online, O'Neill and Fennelly feel that they can really start driving the message home to consumers. 'The stats show that we are already getting repeat customers back and we've only just launched which is very encouraging,' says Pat O'Neill.

And once Ned gets out there and starts weaving his magic, who knows what can happen. The sky is the limit. ♦

'If you need a bed, talk to Ned'. Check out Ned's blog on www.hotelsinone.ie.

