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April 7, 2009

SMS messaging boosts online accommodation bookings

The benefit of SMS messaging has allowed SafariNow.com, an innovative Cape Town based online accommodation booking service, to successfully boost service excellence in the tourism industry.

“SafariNow uses SMS to complement email bookings as people do not always have easy access to emails or may not regularly check their emails. In looking for something that allowed for a quicker response time we found SMS to be the most effective way of reaching people,” says Riaad Nordien, technical manager at SafariNow.

The company deployed SMS alongside email notifications to accommodation providers alerting them of a new online booking enquiry. These communications direct establishment owners to the SafariNow website to complete the booking process. This has resulted in improved quality of service within the hospitality sector by ensuring quicker turnaround times in converting bookings into confirmed bed-nights.

The SafariNow travel booking website has booked over 1 million bed-nights since its launch in January 1999. It offers international and domestic travelers a means of searching, selecting and securing a booking with a range of establishments in a number of African destinations. By reviewing booking options from B&B's and backpackers to guesthouses and safari lodges, travelers are able to make informed travel plans and secure their bookings via the Internet or by calling the company's customer service centre.

“Once an accommodation owner or seeker registers on the SafariNow website there is an option to receive SMS notifications. What we have found is that there has been a significant uptake of the SMS alert service among both our clients and customers. A total of 65% of all our business communications use SMS,” says Nordien.

Automated and scheduled messaging are key requirements

On the cutting edge of digital technologies, SafariNow turned to SMS early in its history. Five years ago, after a review of per message pricing and technical offerings, the company decided on the electronic application programming interface (EAPI) solution provided by BulkSMS.com, a global SMS messaging service provider with headquarters in Cape Town.

“SafariNow chose the BulkSMS EAPI to send automatic SMS notifications. Their ready-made SMS solution enables us to send a message to the relevant party and to keep a record of the message delivery status,” says Nordien. This enables SafariNow to keep an audit trail of each SMS sent out via the BulkSMS EAPI.

Besides key tracking and reporting functionality for notifications of booking enquiries, the BulkSMS messaging system and gateway also met two other SafariNow key requirements. The BulkSMS messaging gateway had to offer the ability to send SMS's internationally as SafariNow operates in numerous countries and has clients from all over the world. In addition, the messaging solution needed to support scheduled messaging to ensure that an SMS is received at the time of a client or customer's own choosing.

The latter requirement emerged from client feedback. According to Nordien, “SafariNow previously had complaints from clients who received confirmation messages in the middle of the night. With the built-in scheduling application, clients can now choose at what time during the day they wish to receive notifications of a booking made online.”

SMS is good for business

In stimulating efficiencies within its market, SafariNow is also improving its bottom-line. Its online pay-as-you-use business model benefits from increasing the frequency of converting online enquiries for accommodation into firm bookings.

“Once a client makes an online booking, SafariNow establishes contact between the owner of the accommodation and the client. The faster they respond to each other the more business SafariNow gets to do,” says Nordien.

There is a further business case for adopting an automated SMS messaging solution. According to Nordien, SafariNow has been able to improve its overall customer service as clients receive instant notifications. The company has also saved time and money by staff not having to call people manually.

He goes on to say, “If we had to follow up with clients by way of phone calls, we would have had to hire more people for our customer service centre.” SafariNow has a staff of about 20 people of which 10 are involved in customer service.

The company’s online booking system has received several accolades from the tourism and technology sectors. The company won the Jump E-commerce Award in 2006 and 2007 for the best travel booking website in South Africa. In 2007 SafariNow was the recipient of the Bed and Breakfast Association of Namibia Award.

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About BulkSMS.com

BulkSMS.com, a division of Celerity Systems (Pty) Ltd, has been in operation since 2000 and is headquartered in Cape Town, South Africa. BulkSMS is a leading wireless application service provider offering bulk SMS messaging solutions to large and small businesses, public benefit organisations, and individuals. BulkSMS.com has a global market presence, including Europe, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. To further an organisation’s SMS communication needs, BulkSMS offers two-way bulk SMS messaging, premium rate solutions and supports mobile marketing campaigns. BulkSMS flagship messaging solution is the BulkSMS Text Messenger, a desktop application. BulkSMS is a member of the Wireless Application Service Provider Association (WASPA).

For more information on BulkSMS’s commercial messaging services visit www.bulksms.co.za and for details on BulkSMS’s messaging service offering discounted bulk SMS message prices for public benefit organisations (such as schools, NGOs and faith-based organisations) visit <http://community.bulksms.com>. For direct enquiries email info@bulksms.com or contact BulkSMS telephonically on +27-21-552 6321.