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Adopting Rich Internet Applications: What it is and how your hotels can use it

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Today's most technologically advanced Web sites may appear to have more in common with your PC desktop applications, such as word processors, spreadsheets and email, than with your hotel brand's consumer-facing site.

The advancement of rich Internet applications (RIA) allows Web designers to build a high degree of interaction into a single Web page, which enables visitors to navigate through a process much faster as additional mouse clicks and page loads become unnecessary. In fact, RIAs push the definition of the term Web page because it is now possible to design a site worth of functionality into a single "page."

While very few Web sites are as rich as Google Maps or social networking sites such as Facebook or VibeAgent, elements of RIA – which may be as basic as highlighting an image when you move your cursor over it – have become common across industries, including hospitality. Many hoteliers are reassessing their sites in light of this broad acceptance of rich functionality. How can my site benefit from RIA? What degree of implementation is right for my brand?

RIAs represent a real opportunity for hoteliers to improve their online offerings because they are the tools that provide Web designers the greatest flexibility in meeting the needs of your brand. But added richness will not always equate to an improved (or even a good) experience. At every point, you must think about what the best possible experience is for your customers.

Is RIA Right for You?

Most hoteliers realize the importance of their Web face to their customers and the extent to which customers interact with the brand through that medium; therefore, we should always invest in the best possible experience for our visitors. RIAs provide the potential to take that experience to the next level. The best way to decide if RIA is right for you is to recognize your current Web site's unique problems and identify optimum opportunities for improvement.

Are there areas of your site today where visitors struggle with load times or accessing information that could benefit from RIA solutions? What are the new opportunities that customers may not yet be considering that can improve your site's offering? Many times, customer issues come down to, "How many clicks do I have to make to get to the information I need?" Reducing the number of clicks improves the experience, and when designed properly, RIAs can do that.

The Broadmoor Colorado Springs' resort (www.broadmoor.com) single-page registration process is an ideal example of how RIAs can effectively shorten the reservation process while elevating the overall customer experience. After the site visitor selects stay dates from an interactive calendar and inputs the number of guests, the site instantly displays room availability. Descriptions and photos assist the visitor in choosing a room. Once a room is selected, the customer inputs credit card details and any special requests to complete the reservation.

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How to Avoid Risks

There is always risk involved when adding new capabilities that alter an existing process. In fact, you can actually deteriorate the user experience by adopting a technology without considering it thoroughly. Remember, for example, during the 1990s when Macromedia Flash was emerging as a popular Web animation tool. Online marketers assumed animated Web sites were better than static versions, and they raced to build Flash sites – jumping into the technology with both feet. However, many of those who discarded their effective, but static, sites in favor of “flashy” online experiences found site performance slowed to a crawl with features their customers didn’t value. One way to reduce that risk is through the process of simulating and testing to validate that the RIA site enhancement is actually an improvement over the non-rich experience.

When you prototype a proposed RIA implementation in a simulation tool such as iRise, your Web site stakeholders can interact with an accurate, data-driven model of the new experience before it is built, thus enabling you to validate the design and prove the benefits of the RIA functionality. At the same time, any unforeseen issues can be resolved during this process; thereby, significantly reducing risk.

If your company incorporates user experience testing into its Web development process, you can present a simulation during focus group sessions to elicit customer feedback during the definition phase rather than waiting until the project is complete or approaching its deadline.

5 Pitfalls of Adopting RIA

Rather than considering whether or not to adopt RIA capability into your Web site, your business will be better served if you consider the problems with your current site and the opportunities you wish to exploit. With that information in hand, you may look at RIA as a means to the end. RIA for the sake of richness is neither a prudent technology investment nor a benefit to your customers.

1. *Not Understanding Customer Needs*

Look at your Web site as a tool customers use to interact with your brand and do business with your company. Studying site metrics will give you a good idea of how visitors use your site and help identify problems. Where are users getting stuck? Are they finding key information? How can you better bridge the gap between entrance and objective?

Other tools such as polls, surveys, forums and blogs can be used for more direct feedback, which may reveal those opportunities that are most important to customers. Conducting usability testing with customers using interactive simulations helps drive real-time feedback which can be incorporated into the project specification up front, thereby increasing adoption down the road. Armed with customer data from various sources, you will make better technology decisions and further reduce risk.

2. *Implementing for Technology’s Sake*

It is quite possible that your hotel Web site meets the needs of your customers without the use of RIA functionality. Don’t be drawn in to modifying a successful site’s user experience simply for the sake of adopting new technology. If you do not recognize areas where RIAs can reduce problems or exploit opportunities, it is probably not the right time to implement this technology.

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3. Creating a Distracting Experience

During a typical visit to your Web site, your customers are seeking information or looking to make a transaction. In an ideal experience, the visitor finds the information or completes the transaction in as little time and as few mouse clicks as possible. As you add complexity to your site, you run the risk of confusing the visitors and ultimately increasing transaction time.

4. Reduced Web Site Performance

By definition, RIAs shift some Web page processing responsibility to the site visitor's computer, so even the best designed RIA may result in performance erosion on low-end computers and slow Internet connections. Badly designed RIAs run the risk of downright poor performance.

Customers go online for convenience and speed. If your site falls short, you run the risk of losing a sale. At best, the visitor will book through more expensive means, such as a phone call or an online travel portal; at worst, you will lose that customer to a competitor which has a comparable hotel in the vicinity.

5. Limited Metrics Tracking & Reporting

Traditional Web metrics focus on site visitors and page views. How many unique people came to my site in the past month and which pages did they access during their visit? Depending on the purpose of your site and additional content, you may be tracking other metrics such as newsletter subscriptions, downloads and transactions.

However, because RIAs allow multiple actions within a single page, a traditional metrics report may become obsolete in measuring site performance. Ensure your RIA features are built so that individual applications on the page send unique data to your server, enabling you to understand visitor interaction and determine the ROI of your investment.

In terms of technical advancement and user experience, the current state of hotel Web sites is strong. According to the latest Market Metrix Hospitality Index (MMHI, February 19, 2007), online reservations continued their dramatic rise in 2006, and for the first time in three years, individual hotel brand sites surpassed travel portals, such as Expedia and Travelocity, as the market share leaders for online bookings.

As hoteliers evolve their online ventures along with the Internet business community as a whole, continuing to adhere to best practices both in technology and methodology will empower us to remain innovative and drive business success in this continually developing medium.

Maurice Martin founded iRise on an early and accurate prediction of Java acceptance and Internet growth in 1996. In addition to his business management role, he shapes the iRise corporate vision, and guides the product strategy and roadmap. He gained his business and technology acumen during tenures at Deloitte Consulting and Accenture, working with clients such as Capital Group, Kaiser Permanente and Southern California Gas Company prior to founding iRise. Maurice earned a B.S. in electrical engineering from the University of California at Santa Barbara. Mr. Martin can be contacted at 310-426-7886 or mmartin@irise.com