An Interview with George Corbin, Senior Vice President, Digital at Marriott International

How would you describe your digital leadership role?

George Corbin: I’m responsible for Marriott.com and the referral channels that drive traffic and revenues through Marriott.com—my group is essentially the Marriott.com sales funnel. My team handles acquisition, conversion and the post-booking piece of the equation. We do everything from mobile booking to mobile guest services. I’ve been with Marriott for about 10 and a half years and have been responsible for digital strategy throughout that time.

What are you most focused on in your business?

Corbin: Managing Marriott.com, which was an $8.5 billion website last year. Also, driving revenue growth, conversion, up-funnel acquisition and mobile—a significant emerging channel for us.

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What are the biggest challenges in your category?

Corbin: One is the degree of intermediation—we have other hotel suppliers like Hilton and Starwood—and then of course, intermediaries such as Expedia and Travelocity. We’re competing for the same customers and the same visibility. Other third-party channels like Google play a hugely influential role in winning customer traffic. Essentially any group or website that comes between us and the customer is both a challenge and an opportunity. We’re partnered with many of those groups, so I would call it a kind of healthy co-opetition.

The online travel aggregators have made some substantial investments in new platforms, and they’re seeing a payoff and gaining even more traction. But there’s also another challenge for the category overall and that’s the ascendance of the Gen Y traveler—who is 18 to 34 years old. As a
travel shopper and buyer, this customer’s behavior is different from our past customers. So how do you equip yourself to be ready and relevant to the Gen Y traveler?

This affects every part of the business including the hotels that we now design with that sort of traveler in mind. The fact is this generation of traveler is a digital native, not a digital immigrant. That means even more attention and emphasis need to go toward improving all digital channels and touchpoints, especially mobile. Among this generation, there’s more brand-agnosticism, less brand loyalty and more of a propensity to use online travel agencies.

**How do you meet the challenges presented by millennial travelers?**

**Corbin:** You have to make sure you understand the problems they’re trying to solve when they travel. We make a point of talking to them a lot to understand what they’re trying to address right now, in this moment. And then we figure out the best way to tackle that.

This generation has a different set of needs, and technology gives us different ways to reach it at points we never could before. We are focused on recalibrating how, when and where we can be most relevant to give millennials an excellent service experience that will subsequently increase their intent to recommend us.

The challenge in any situation is how you remain relevant. For example, as more of our engagement shifts to digital channels, we have to make sure we adapt our service strategy to keep pace. Mobile will play a pretty pivotal role in that.

**Can you give me an example of what role mobile plays in customer service?**

**Corbin:** Self-service is a very important theme. For the past several years, our emphasis was first and foremost around the mobile booking experience. That’s fairly straightforward because you have people whose flights have changed and they need to rebook a hotel. You want to be there for them when that happens. That’s why our mobile revenues have grown substantially year over year. In 2012, we did roughly $730 million dollars in mobile bookings.

But there’s a lot more to the travel experience than just the booking portion, such as guest services. As is the case with other hotel chains, Marriott is experimenting with things like mobile check-in and mobile checkout.

In addition, when travelers are looking for restaurant recommendations, Yelp or foursquare play a role—those are important things for our hotel customers.

We’ve done a lot of research by asking customers, “What do you need, and when do you need it?” Mobile will be an important platform for how we want to respond to some of those needs. It’s going to come down to a digital service proposition. It now makes sense to offer any aspect of our traditional services on a self-serve basis on the mobile platform—that’s on our agenda.

**How do you and your team use eMarketer in developing plans to offer these kinds of mobile services?**

**Corbin:** First of all, we do a lot of primary research ourselves. The stakes are too high to rely only on third parties. We’re constantly doing user testing and research in real-time and looking at our own web performance data to identify opportunities for improvement. We’re constantly doing multivariate testing to see what works best and what we should shelve or discontinue.

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But we augment all of that with additional data from third-party sources. This is where we’ve regularly tapped into eMarketer. At any given time, I have mobile initiatives going on, and eMarketer provides a good aggregation and interpretation of what’s happening in the mobile space—overall macro trends and shifts. I spend a fair amount of time looking up some of the information you have on personalization because it’s pretty important to how we think about the future of marketing online.

I know sources vary a lot. We’ll look at PhoCusWright. We’ll look at IDC and others as well. In some places we have gaps that eMarketer fills nicely. And sometimes, if the gap is important enough, we’ll do some of our own primary research. eMarketer is often good for validation of direction. When we’re building a business case, it’s helpful to have a third-party source to illustrate to senior executives and decision-makers that, “It’s not just us talking.”
What do you like most about eMarketer?

**Corbin:** I appreciate the diversity of the topics because they tend to touch on the array of things that I’m thinking about or grappling with at any given time—whether that’s intermediation in the industry, personalization or digital entertainment. Some of these trends have clear and present applicability. Some represent a developing story that will be important in the future.

How important is it to have the ability to access intelligence on multiple industries on eMarketer?

**Corbin:** It’s always helpful to see the choices there. I probably won’t pay much attention to automotive or financial services. But there are aspects of retail that have direct applicability to travel. Having that information available gives me a chance to ask, “Does this apply to us?” When I’m looking at some of the interviews, I look for best practices and often find that the best thinking comes from outside our industry.