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Selling Travel With Words, Not Images

By ANDREW ADAM NEWMAN

TRAVEL industry advertising tends to focus on the fantasy of travel, beckoning cubicle dwellers with film of remote beaches where couples run in slow motion, and where opulent hotel rooms include flowers and Champagne.

But new commercials for Oyster.com, the hotel review and booking Web site, suggest that it is not just those beaches but also travel marketing itself where hot air abounds.

Messages in a series of text-only commercials reveal only a few words at a time in the manner of cue cards.

"Find out," begins one ad, with the screen next saying, "which hotels," then "will make you want," then "to smack someone." Begins another, "You," then, "can't return," then "a bad," then, "vacation."

All ads in the campaign, by Korey Kay & Partners in Manhattan, close with "Oyster.com — The hotel tell-all."

While Web sites like TripAdvisor, which is owned by Expedia, amass consumer reviews, Oyster relies instead on 45 full-time reviewers who stay in hotels incognito and post their reviews and photographs.

Unlike TripAdvisor, Oyster is also a booking site. But unlike booking sites like Orbitz, Expedia and Hotels.com, Oyster eschews the photographs and descriptions provided by hotels.

A regular feature, Photo Fake-outs, contrasts promotional photos from hotels with photos taken from the same perspective by Oyster reviewers. The promotional photo for the beach at the Gran Bahia Principe Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic, for example, shows just a few beachgoers and about a dozen unoccupied chairs, while the Oyster.com photo shows a beach packed with chairs and vacationers.

"Oyster is meant to be very simple, easy, straightforward and truthful, where what you see is what you get," said Elie Seidman, chief executive of Oyster. "And the goal in the ads was to convey that."

To date, Oyster has reviewed about 1,300 hotels in 32 destinations.

This is the first advertising campaign for Oyster, which went

YOU ARE
NOT TAKING

A FAKE
VACATION

SO WHY
ARE YOU

LOOKING
AT FAKE
PICTURES

AND
READING
FAKE
REVIEWS?

 oyster.com
THE HOTEL TELL-ALL.

Stills from a commercial for Oyster.com.

online in 2009. Oyster drew 156,000 unique visitors in August, a small fraction of the six million who visited Hotels.com, according to comScore.

The campaign, which began on Sept. 2, will introduce four more spots over the next three months. All follow the same template: up-tempo bossa nova music accompanies text-only ads with messages more bracing than the music seems to promise, such as, "We tell it like it is, and like it isn't," and, "Good hotels rejoice. Bad hotels beware."

Allen Kay, chief executive of Korey Kay & Partners, said the tension between the music and text was critical.

"When you juxtapose two ele-

ments that are not necessarily compatible, it forms a third element that is interesting," Mr. Kay said. "People don't listen to things they've heard before or seen before, but the juxtaposition jars them into paying attention."

Mr. Kay said he knew early on that suggesting a campaign for a travel-booking site that showed no images of travel destinations or hotels, especially for a medium as visual as television, could be a nonstarter.

"If we showed this to any other client, they would have said, 'Oh, we got off on the wrong floor,'" said Mr. Kay. "A different client in a million years wouldn't buy this."

Mr. Seidman of Oyster said the approach appealed to him because "so much of travel advertising is so generic and similar — and so much of it is unrealistic."

Consumer reviews, heralded as a wisdom-of-crowds force on the Internet, have lost some luster as the system has been gamed. News reports have pointed to examples on sites like Yelp, Amazon and TripAdvisor of supposed customer reviews that in fact are merchants lauding themselves or panning competitors, or freelancers hired to do the same. The sites respond that they have systems to ferret out the fakes.

Earlier this month, the Advertising Standards Authority in Britain announced it was investigating the veracity of a TripAdvisor marketing slogan, "Reviews you can trust." The investigation stemmed from a complaint by KwikChex, a brand reputation management company, which said as many as 10 million of the more than 50 million customer reviews on the site were bogus.

Tom Botts, a managing partner at Hudson Crossing, an advisory firm dedicated to the travel industry, said Oyster was under the radar for most consumers.

"The challenge is that if you asked, 'Have you gone to Oyster to book a hotel?' nine out of 10 people would say, 'Isn't that a seafood restaurant?'" he said.

He called the advertising approach by Oyster bold and said it should resonate with travelers.

"Consumers are desperate to break through the marketing hubris to understand, 'What am I really going to get when I get there?'" Mr. Botts said.