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Hotel Proxy fills vacancy

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While William Shatner helps advertise Internet technology to hotel consumers, many hotels are stuck in the mid-20th century when communicating with each other.

Hotels within the same market are still using phone calls and faxes to communicate with each other, using up hours each day, even as customers could be waiting at the front desk.

Three Rochester Institute of Technology students, recognizing the need for quicker data gathering, have launched a Web site, HotelProxy.com, which they say keeps hotel staff members off the phones and at the front desk.

The students — Breana Snizek, 22; Chris Geiss, 22; and Marc Baumbach, 23 (all RIT graduates as of last week) — thought hotels should streamline the daily process of keeping up with the local market, which is important if full hotels need to send guests to a competitor.

But most hotels know where to send people only because of those dozens of phone calls made at least twice a day.

The RIT students came across the business idea when Snizek, who received a bachelor's degree in hotel and resort management, mentioned the problem to Geiss and Baumbach.

Snizek, who is from Lewisburg, Pa., has worked at hotels while in school and currently works at the Radisson-Rochester Airport on Jefferson Road.

She told her friends about the regular phone calls made in the morning and evening to query other hotels about their rates and availability. And sometimes hectic calls to find a room elsewhere are made with the guest waiting.

Software experts Geiss and Baumbach, both of Syracuse, jumped into the problem. Meanwhile, Snizek worked on a feasibility study during the fall quarter of 2007, and on Jan. 24 the team presented its beta Web version of Hotel Proxy to the Rochester Hotel Association.

Five hotel units registered, "and within a month we managed to get to over 30," said Geiss. "With no further marketing."

The Web site has been operating for several months.

"We use it every day, at least three times a day," said Christina Fuhlbruck, general manager of the Fairfield Inn-Rochester South in Henrietta.

Fuhlbruck said the idea came up 10 years ago at a meeting of Rochester-area hotel managers, but nothing came of it.

Now the Web site is being aggressively pushed by area hotel officials such as Jeff Shutt, general manager of the Courtyard by Marriott in Greece. Shutt, also vice president of the Rochester Hotel Association, said the Web site is a useful tool.

Only a handful of area hotels are not registered, Fuhlbruck said. Most hotels are, making it worthwhile to update and check the database.

Fuhlbruck said the site is even designed to allow selective browsing within a hotel's competitive group in the Rochester area. Or a

hotel can view the data throughout the region.

Some hotel officials said they have gone from making 20 calls a day to no more than two. Entering their own data and checking Hotel Proxy suffices, they said.

Geiss said the team learned not to try to introduce the Web site to other regions piecemeal. If only a few hotels in a metropolitan area are using it, they will give up. So for now, Rochester is the only beta-version market, though Geiss said plans are to take the system nationwide.

Geiss and Baumbach are funding it themselves but plan to devise a revenue stream.

Geiss and Baumbach have accepted jobs with IBM in North Carolina. Snizek is remaining in Rochester to work on a master's degree in business at RIT.

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