

## Hospitality Matters

# The Importance of Being Earnest



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When **Scott Thornton** caught sight of a sign inviting guests to a Full Irish Breakfast in the up-market Dublin hotel in which he was staying, little did he know that the eventual meal would fall so short of the mark. Indeed, when he arrived in the dining room, the food he encountered was a soggy, sorry affair that would've been more at home in a greasy spoon café than a five-star hotel in the tourism capital of Ireland.

However, the quality bypass he experienced there made him think seriously about the consequences of raising customer expectations too far, and of exaggerating an establishment's positive points while conveniently - and perilously - ignoring its flaws. Here he provides some pointers on how best to promote one's business, and outlines some of the risks associated with over-egging the pudding...

**THERE WERE** the usual suspects at breakfast that morning: rubbery bacon; coagulated eggs; flaccid sausages languishing under heat lamps; a 'choice' of cereals; a single bowl of prunes and another of natural yoghurt. If that was a full Irish breakfast I'll eat my shillelagh. My fellow guest and I - and doubtless many others - were left

In my opinion, a client should only be taken on by a PR firm after a visit to the hotel or restaurant premises, which should, if practical, include an overnight stay and/or meal experience. While it might seem indulgent, it's really the only way a consultant can accurately appraise an establishment and form a picture of what it offers.

that are used for touting special offers which, on closer inspection, are often nowhere near special enough.

Having been a member of The Fourth Estate in Scotland and around the world, I have always enjoyed working with journalists and I spend a large proportion of my professional day helping them to whet

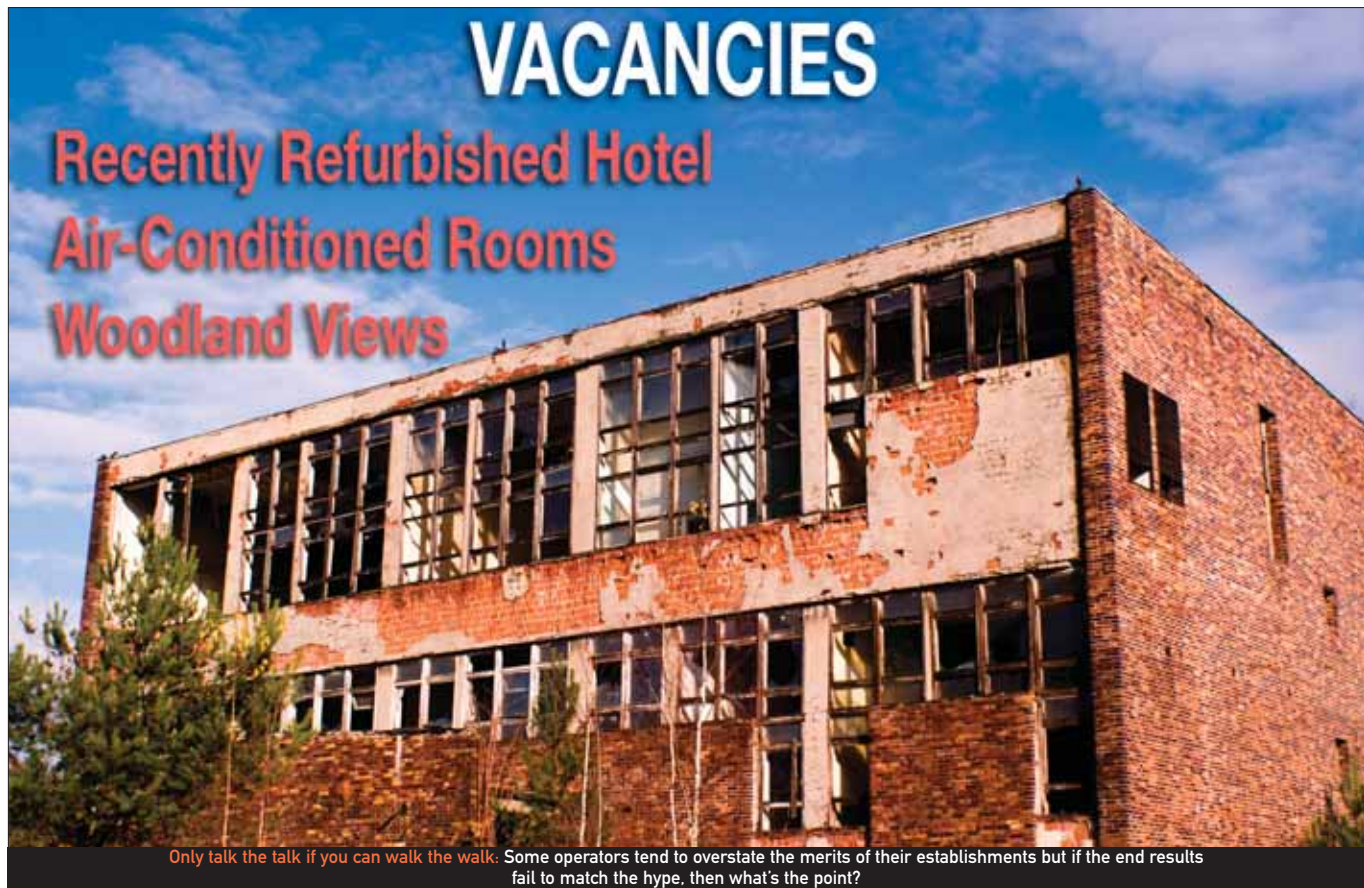


**Michelin-Star food served here:** Try to avoid raising your customers' expectations too high, or you could be forced to eat your words

heavily disappointed, particularly since we had been led to expect fare of a far higher standard. There's an important lesson here for operators and PR strategists alike; namely that guest expectations should not be raised unduly in advance, especially if the end product has little hope of living up to the hype.

Disappointment with service or food is one of the main sources of complaints on TripAdvisor and other ratings websites, but much of this can be avoided if establishments or suppliers stay within the limits of their businesses' abilities. This also applies to postings on social networking sites; far too many Twitter pages these days are mere advertising hoardings

prospective guests' appetites. However, it's worth noting here too about raising undue expectations. Rave reviews in the press can be an effective way of attracting increased custom - especially if you add the article or even just the highlights onto your website - but the business owner or manager should always meet the journalist and provide a realistic



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Only talk the talk if you can walk the walk: Some operators tend to overstate the merits of their establishments but if the end results fail to match the hype, then what's the point?

summary of the establishment's strengths in advance. And while the PR's job includes painting as positive a picture of a client as possible, we know only too well the dangers of gilding the lily.

Strictly speaking, the text that appears in the finished article is at the discretion of the editor so, unless you know the journalist personally, avoid asking for a proof before it goes to print. And don't believe PR consultants who tell you they can guarantee a great feature - they're not in charge of the final version. Your own promotional material and press releases shouldn't try too hard to impress, either. Journalists know an exaggerated statement when they see one and chances are that over-flowery prose will end up being edited out.

And the same applies for online information, too; is your website promising something that you can't really deliver? Indeed, many sites often need partial or entire redrafts because readers might (understandably) expect too much

on arrival and end up leaving disillusioned and short changed.

**Positive editorial is a powerful tool, and its importance and potential cannot be overstated. However, for an operator to benefit from its effects, it's essential that the reality reflects the hype**

Back in Dublin last month at a different hotel, and there was another misrepresentation - possibly unintentional - which nevertheless amounted to a form of mild deception: I remember a sign in the entrance hall which said: 'Compliment (sic) - Glass of Prosecco or shared platter with dinner in our restaurant.'

The member of staff no doubt meant to write 'Complement your dinner' - that is, with an 'e'. However, because of carelessness (or plain ignorance), it inevitably led to some guests assuming that the offerings were free of charge, and

they were consequently left disappointed when they discovered otherwise. So, it's clear that a decent marketing manager and/or PR consultant can help manage your customers' expectations while assisting you as an operator to reach your commercial goals. That said, they are only able to do so if the information they have to hand is both current and accurate, because if one thing is certain in this relentlessly subjective business, it's that truthfulness ultimately buys loyalty in the long run. It's all very well to insist that you run a 'beautiful, unique hotel', and that your 'award-winning chef's food is the best in Scotland', but these claims will only stand up to scrutiny if they are infused with a healthy blend of veracity, modesty and - above all - realism.★

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