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Starwood Mobilizes Hotel Experience With Blackberry Mobile App



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STARWOOD MOBILIZES HOTEL EXPERIENCE WITH BLACKBERRY APP

by Jim Battey

Over the last decade, the BlackBerry® smartphone has become the “can’t live without” device for business travelers. Its developer, Research In Motion® (RIM®), has fed the BlackBerry user community’s growing hunger for mobile applications with offerings that fulfill a multitude of needs. CSC and Starwood Hotels & Resorts recently developed the Starwood Preferred Guest (SPG) app (launching soon) so members with a BlackBerry smartphone can book hotels and keep track of their accounts while on the go.



One of the world's leading hotel companies, Starwood's global franchise includes more than 1,000 hotels in 100 countries, operating under well-known brands such as Sheraton, Westin, W Hotels, St. Regis and more. In the highly competitive hospitality industry, loyalty programs such as SPG are vital for providing personalized customer service and influencing buying behavior. The SPG BlackBerry app will fit nicely into Starwood's marketing strategy to have a presence on all the leading mobile platforms and social media networks.

Staying connected

Travelers today expect always-on access to information. Chris Holdren, Starwood's senior vice president of SPG, says, "One of the key goals of our SPG program is to have a presence on the devices our members use to help make their traveling as easy as possible. We want to make sure we are adding value to their lives when they're on the road."

Among hospitality companies, Starwood has been a leader in embracing Web 2.0 and mobile communications. Starwood was the first leading hotel company to launch a blog and the first to establish a major presence on Facebook. After developing the SPG iPhone app in-house in 2009, an app for the BlackBerry was the obvious next step. Upon a recommendation from RIM, Starwood tapped CSC to take on the development work.

With the BlackBerry app, SPG members will be able to locate hotels, get directions, make reservations and access real-time updates on their account activities. "We've been very focused on the mobile space," says Holdren. "I think it has the ability to transform the hotel experience for our members when they travel and stay with us." SPG members will also be able to use the BlackBerry app to keep track of their Starpoints balances, view details of their upcoming stays and check their itineraries.

Tapping into deep knowledge

CSC develops mobile applications for all platforms. Our BlackBerry development experience includes enterprise products that are used by companies internally as well as customer-facing apps for financial services clients such as insurance carriers. Holdren notes, "What CSC brings to the table is deep knowledge of the BlackBerry platform and all its capabilities to help us achieve our vision for this application on that platform. We didn't have that in-house, so it was a critical need for us to be able to create this application."

By monitoring traffic to mobile versions of the SPG Web site, Holdren could see a significant number of customers were BlackBerry users. When RIM opened the BlackBerry App World™ storefront, Starwood knew a BlackBerry app would fit perfectly into the company's mobile strategy.

Tyler Lessard, RIM's vice president, global alliances and developer relations, says, "CSC is a very strong partner of ours who brings an established and trusted brand with many of our large customers such as Starwood." Lessard says one important advantage we provide is our knowledge of the back-end business processes at large companies. "CSC is going to play a very key role in not only helping enterprises build internal applications for their own employees, but also build consumer or external-facing applications.



"We are very excited to be working with CSC and leveraging what we both bring to the table: our expertise in mobility and CSC's expertise in various industries. CSC understands these customer bases and how to build end-to-end solutions in a very reliable and robust way," Lessard adds.

Cost-effective app development

With our application development expertise, CSC is helping companies like Starwood save money. Our global presence gives customers the flexibility to choose the most cost-effective sourcing options. Much of the nuts and bolts development

work for the SPG BlackBerry app was performed at a low-cost offshore location.

Ken Powell, a partner in CSC's systems integration and development practice, says we are getting more and more requests for mobile application development, and many additional projects are in the works. With the BlackBerry app from SPG, much of CSC's work was to re-engineer Starwood's existing iPhone app. Building on this, Powell says it is essential for CSC to help companies fine-tune their overall mobile application strategies: "Our ultimate goal is to develop a mobile application that is cross-platform supportable. You don't want to have to reinvent the wheel every time."

For Starwood, bringing CSC on board meant hiring a company that could take the existing iPhone app and improve upon it, without making it too different. Holdren says many SPG members carry multiple mobile devices, such as a BlackBerry for business and an iPhone for personal use. He wants them to have a very similar experience no matter what device they use.

Starwood wants to be where their customers are, and the BlackBerry app is just one of the many communications platforms they are targeting. "Whether it's on common Web-based platforms such as Facebook, popular travel message boards, or mobile devices such as the BlackBerry smartphone, we want to have a presence," Holdren explains. ■

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The mission of CSC is to be a global leader in providing technology-enabled business solutions and services.

With the broadest range of capabilities, CSC offers clients the solutions they need to manage complexity, focus on core businesses, collaborate with partners and clients, and improve operations.

CSC makes a special point of understanding its clients and provides experts with real-world experience to work with them. CSC is vendor-independent, delivering solutions that best meet each client's unique requirements.

For more than 50 years, clients in industries and governments worldwide have trusted CSC with their business process and information systems outsourcing, systems integration and consulting needs.

The company trades on the New York Stock Exchange under the symbol "CSC."