



The importance of First Impressions

SOURCE: HomeAway.com

It's 11:30pm. For the last 3.5 hours, you've been on an airplane in the middle seat sandwiched between two individuals with questionable hygiene. The rental car company gave someone else your reserved SUV and left you (and your family of 5) with a sub-compact. The kids are hungry, so you stop at the only restaurant in sight—a McDonald's—and you hate McDonald's.

As you pull away from the drive through, enjoying the aroma of greasy fries and secret sauce, you refer to the directions to the vacation home you rented to find that the homeowner detailed the way to the home from every direction—except from the airport. As you pull into a gas station to buy an area map, you grumble to yourself: “This had better be the nicest vacation home I've ever seen...”

The “travel” part of traveling isn't always fun—especially if you have kids in tote (or a spouse who gets grumpy when hungry). While you can't control every aspect of a guest's vacation, you can ensure that your part of their vacation experience is as seamless as possible.

The traveler experience begins with your listing

Long before a traveler even sends an inquiry, they've assessed your vacation rental as it appears in your listing, and in turn made a judgment about you as the homeowner. If your listing has no descriptions and features a calendar that hasn't been updated in the past three months or longer, a traveler may decide that perhaps you're not very serious about renting your home and may skip to the next listing. Conversely, if your listing features lovingly staged photos and carefully crafted descriptions that not only note the size of the bed in each bedroom, but the color and thread count of the sheets, a traveler is more likely to conclude that you're an owner who will take care of them and their family or group.

As a homeowner, we never know how many travelers view our listing and seriously consider our home, but never send an inquiry.

When a traveler sends an inquiry they expect a response in a timely fashion

The typical traveler sends anywhere between two and ten inquiries and guess what? They expect owners to respond. One of the most common traveler complaints is not receiving a response to their inquiry. Respond to inquires even if you're booked or the traveler is asking for a ridiculous discount and you never know—the traveler may be willing to switch their dates or pay your advertised rates. Either way, they'll definitely appreciate the effort and may keep your home in mind for future vacations.

Refer to miss manners... talking to potential guests on the phone

Since you may never have the pleasure of meeting every guest face-to-face, talking to them on the phone will be your best chance to get to know them—and for them to get to know you. When you speak to a potential guest on the phone, put on your customer service hat and be cognizant of your tone and your surroundings.

If possible, try to give prospective guests your undivided attention and be prepared to play travel agent a little bit if

the traveler is unfamiliar with your area. By forging a connection with the traveler, you'll be much more likely to secure the booking and you may even earn yourself an annual renter.

Before you take a booking... The importance of full disclosure

You know your home and should know the things that renters tend to complain or at least grumble about. If there's nothing you can do about the object of the complaints, you should be upfront about it to potential renters. While you may worry that disclosing a less-than-stellar aspect of your home might turn away potential bookings, many renters will book your home anyway and will appreciate your candor. You'd be surprised how flexible your guests can be if you're just upfront and honest with them. Either way, it's better to lose a rental early in the game, than to have an angry guest who feels bamboozled in your home.

A few examples of things you should probably let potential guests when you talk to them on the phone and before you take their booking:

Your home doesn't offer a modern convenience that some travelers likely expect: indoor plumbing, air conditioning, electrical outlets, dishwasher, etc.

Your home features an item that some travelers may not be used to: composting toilets, a rainwater collection system, well water, etc. Your second bedroom is 6' x 6' You've had pets stay in your home Your complex is beachfront, but your actual condo is not You're located in a very remote location Your property is teeming with local wildlife You have satellite television and don't get local channels

Set clear expectations to avoid check-in day surprises

The best way to avoid unhappy guests is to make sure that they have all of the information they need—upfront. If your third bedroom has bunk beds and you're talking with a group of 3 couples, your place may not be the best one for that particular group... and that's okay. Your home isn't going to be the best option for every single traveler group out there. Be upfront and honest with the group of couples and let them know about the 3rd bedroom bed setup. They may love other aspects of your home and its location enough to book your home anyway. This principle doesn't just apply to bed setups. The best way to avoid miscommunication with your guests is to have a thorough rental agreement, directions, and photos of your home from every angle.

A huge mistake you could be making... underselling your home

Setting clear expectations can go the other way as well. We've found that most homeowners actually undersell their home and find that their guests are surprised at just how nice the home is when they arrive. If your guests consistently tell you that your home is much nicer than your photos... it's time for new photos.

Convey professionalism in all rental documents

Build your credibility with potential renters by creating rental documents (rental agreement, invoices, etc.) that not only serve their purpose, but that do so in a professional manner. Your guests are likely sending you a lot of money upfront for a future stay in your home. Allay their fears by providing documents that will protect their interests-- and yours.

The quickest way to a traveler's heart... thorough directions

Providing your guests with clear directions to your home will make their trip easier and will decrease the number of phone calls that you get from lost guests.

Sending your guests a link to a Google Map is likely not going to cut it. In many markets (especially vacation destinations), the Google Maps either misplace the property or provide directions using different terminology that the roads are actually marked with. For example, on the Big Island of Hawaii, Google tends to give directions using the proper name of the highways rather than the highway number, which is basically useless because most of the highways are marked only by the number. For more tips on creating directions for your guests, view our [Sample Directions](#)

Upon arrival... dazzle with cleanliness and convenience

When your guests finally get to your vacation home, they'll likely open the door—and make a beeline for the bathroom. So guess what? If your bathroom floor isn't spotless and you don't have a roll of toilet paper waiting for them, they're going to get grumpy and could end up looking for things wrong with your home. Beyond a clean bathroom, they'll probably talk a quick tour of the property before going to the car to bring in their luggage. Surprise them with unexpected extras like a welcome basket or a vase of flowers to really win them over.

When you're creating your listings and interacting with travelers, remember that the first impression of your vacation home and you as the homeowners comes not when guests arrive at your property, but forms from the time a traveler clicks on your listing until they actually cross the threshold of your home.

About Blaine

Blaine Wiggins is a former Fortune 500 company Vice President turned full-time REALTOR® and Vacation Cabin Expert, specializing in both West Valley Real Estate and second homes (cabins) in the White Mountain towns of Heber-Overgaard, Show Low, Pinetop-Lakeside, and their surrounding areas. He is active in his church and community of NW Glendale, AZ, has been married to his wife Teesha for 15 years, and is the father of five children ages 12 to 6 months. You can find him on Facebook and Twitter @ListWithBlaine or via his website, www.ListWithBlaine.com.

