

MAKING ROOM

■ **Small, independent hotels are seeking more ways to stand out — and increase their customer base.**

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The family-owned Palms Hotel & Spa in Miami Beach has renovated lobbies and bars, upgraded rooms and added a spa over the last couple of decades to draw customers who might otherwise be lured by major chains or larger hotels with more marketing muscle.

“If you say Ritz-Carlton, people know immediately what to expect,” said vice president Katja Janzon, whose family owns the 251-room Palms as well as Circa39, north of South Beach. “For us to create a name for ourselves is really what we’re trying to achieve now.”

Janzon is not alone in her efforts. Small boutique hotels — a mainstay of Miami Beach — and larger independent hotels are seeking new ways to get noticed and, more importantly, booked-

.Some partner with niche online travel guides; others are seeking traffic through specialty rewards programs. Nearly all are joining

existing marketing efforts spearheaded by the local tourism bureau.

On Wednesday, the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau unveiled new versions of a website and glossy 127-page booklet dedicated to the region’s boutique and “lifestyle” hotels, which include national names such as W South Beach and Kimpton’s Epic Hotel, and independents, including Park Central Hotel and the Sagamore..

The updated materials are the latest moves in the expansion of a boutique marketing program that started 10 years ago.

The website, at <http://www.miamiboutiquehotels.com>, has separate “day” and “night” versions and features special offers as well as more space and photos for each property. Hotels also have the option to incorpo-

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rate user-generated reviews on the site.

Chief marketing officer Rolando Aedo said the bureau spends \$400,000-\$500,000 a year on the boutique program,



JANZON

promoting the hotels at trade shows and events including the Sundance Film Festival and Fashion Week in

New York. The definition of "boutique" has evolved, but the label typically refers to hotels that are not affiliated with a major brand and have fewer than 150 rooms.

"They really represent the heart and soul of the South Beach experience," Aedo said.

They also help Miami stand out when competing for major corporate meetings and sports events such as the Super Bowl, said bureau president William Talbert III.

"In destination marketing, you want to distinguish yourself from the competition," Talbert said. Miami's unique concentration of boutique properties, he said, "clearly distinguishes us from everyone."

People visiting Miami want something besides a cookie-cutter hotel they could find in any city, said



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POOLSIDE AT THE PALMS HOTEL & SPA: The property joined a loyalty program for independent properties that gives points redeemable for free nights.

SusBeltran, director of sales for South Beach Group, which owns nine hotels, including the 42-room Metro-pole, in Miami Beach.

"You don't want to stay at the Days Inn down the street," she said.

The Betsy, a restored 63-room hotel on Ocean Drive, is featured in the new brochure and was recently added to the portfolio of UK-based travel guide and booking service Mr and Mrs Smith. The company expanded into the United

States with an office in New York earlier this year and plans additional expansion. It also recently added Soho Beach House and The Villa by Barton G. as "Smith-approved" properties.

"I hope it will bring us more business," said Jeff Lehman, general manager of the Betsy. "More and better business."

For the Palms Hotel & Spa, the latest move to set itself apart was joining a loyalty program for independent properties that

gives points redeemable for free nights to people who stay at the network's nearly 150 hotels — just like a chain. Stash Hotel Rewards started a year ago with 65 properties.

Janzon said she hopes the program will give her hotel an edge with potential visitors.

"Miami is considered a very shopping-intensive destination," she said. "People look around a lot. It's very price-driven, it's very loyalty-driven."

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WEBSITE: The Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau has revamped its site to feature boutique hotels.



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IN MIAMI BEACH: The Palms Hotel & Spa, above, and other boutique hotels are trying to improve their businesses by partnering with niche online travel guides and offering specialty rewards programs.