

## **Bay Gardens Resorts achieves Saint Lucian Social Media First – 1000 Facebook fans and counting in just 3 Months**

What started out as an experiment in on-line marketing has now become a full-fledged new marketing and PR channel for a locally owned St. Lucian hotel chain. Bay Gardens Resorts' recently created Facebook fan page crossed the 1000 fan mark this past weekend, thus providing Bay Gardens with by far the largest Facebook following of any St. Lucian based hospitality organization.

For those who are new to the concept, Facebook is a social networking website that was created in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, a Harvard University student who is now a billionaire (that's billion with a "b") as a result of his creation. Facebook started out as a way for Ivy League university students to keep in touch but has grown and currently has over 250 million users worldwide. Facebook along with other social networking sites such as Twitter and MySpace have also been used as a marketing tool by several businesses such as CNN, and by celebrities such as Oprah.

Always looking to stay in the forefront of new marketing trends, Bay Gardens Resorts endeavoured to create a presence for themselves on Facebook in May 2009. "It started out with a small group of Bay Gardens staff, their friends, friends of friends and a handful of guests," explains Sanovnik Destang, Assistant Managing Director. "But in June when our fan base was approaching 100 we decided to take it up a notch and experiment with paid advertising on Facebook".

With a budget of US\$ 40.00 the Bay Gardens marketing team sent out an advertisement targeted at Trinidadians on Facebook encouraging them to "*Stay at the Home of the West Indies Cricket Team in St. Lucia*".

"We hyped up the fact that we were the hotel of choice of the West Indies team for the ODI's against India in July", noted Sanovnik. To encourage more fans to join, the site was updated frequently with a countdown to the arrival of the team at Bay Gardens Beach Resort as well as photos and video of the team's welcome reception at the Beach Resort. Something about the prospect of seeing video of Dwayne Bravo dancing and playing steel pan at the Beach Resort seemed to pique the attention of our fans, especially the Trinidadians.

Apart from generating interest in the Facebook page, the ad also led to several enquiries about the special promotional rates at Bay Gardens Resorts' Central Reservations Centre and drove traffic to their website [www.baygardensresorts.com](http://www.baygardensresorts.com).

"The day after this ad was launched, we got more visits to our umbrella website than we had ever seen before and we were able use various website analysis tools to determine that the bulk of it came from Trinidadians via Facebook" noted Sanovnik. The fans who visited the Bay Gardens website via Facebook spent an average of about 13 minutes on the website which is three times as long the average amount of time spent by other visitors to the Bay Gardens Resorts website. "No other online ad campaign has been that successful in driving traffic to our website before or since."

Currently the Bay Gardens Resorts Facebook page has over 1,000 members, over half of whom are from Trinidad but there are also quite a few fans from the US, UK, Canada, Barbados, Martinique, St. Vincent and of course St. Lucia. The concentration of fans from one country is not necessarily seen as a bad thing by the Bay Gardens management team. "Trinidad has always been a good market for us and given the relative strength of their economy and the fact that there is additional airlift out of Trinidad with the BA flight, means that we now have a cost effective way of advertising to this potentially lucrative market. In fact, several of our Trinidadian fans have stayed at one of our Bay Gardens Resorts properties before, and we generally have a high rate of repeat business from this market," Sanovnik noted

As luck would have it, Bay Gardens Resorts' 1000<sup>th</sup> fan was also from the Twin Island Republic. The lucky fan, Patrick Thomas, won a US\$ 250.00 Bay Gardens Resorts gift voucher and became the first Platinum member of Bay Gardens Resorts' soon to be launched, Guest Loyalty Program. Interestingly, both Mr. Thomas and his fiancé (also a Bay Gardens Resorts Facebook fan) stayed at the Bay Gardens Inn last year and are looking to return.

Apart from pictures and video of the West Indies cricket team's recent visits to Bay Gardens Beach Resort (they also visited in March for their ODI against England), visitors to the site will also find over 600 photos and video of all three Bay Gardens Resorts properties, a Bay Gardens wedding album, video endorsements of the resort chain by West Indies cricket legend Lance Gibbs and the latest information on specials and upcoming events.

What are the plans for the future? "Like most other companies, we are still figuring out how best to leverage this as a marketing tool that actually generates sales," notes Sanovnik. "What I do know is that we now have over 1000 persons worldwide who have expressed an interest in our properties and it cost us next to nothing to obtain that

contact list. We are going to continue to build on that and look to increase our social media presence in some of our other markets such as US, UK and Canada.”

Bay Gardens Resorts also has a growing presence on Twitter, another popular social media tool (@baygardenshotel) and has several videos and advertisements posted on Youtube.com. You can find their Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/baygardensresorts>