

# Travel 2.0

## Harnessing the Power of User-Generated Content and Tagging

By John Bray and Cathy Schetzina

One of the key themes of Travel 2.0 is providing consumers with the tools they need to collaborate and share information online.

Gone are the days when brand is crafted and controlled by marketing departments alone. For traditional travel companies like hotels, the resulting challenge is to find ways to harness the buzz-generating power of Travel 2.0 while keeping marketing and brand development goals in sight.

Social networks and user-generated content represent robust areas of opportunity that some hoteliers are beginning to capitalize on. Initially, many summarily dismissed user-generated content, seemingly more worried about the occasional 'bad review' than any potential upside. Some even attempted to commandeer the review process, posting phony positive reviews and removing negative ones. This approach, however, is not only dishonest, but jeopardizes the potential benefits of social networks for consumers and marketers alike. Perhaps sensing that finger-in-the-dike approaches are no longer satisfactory, savvy marketers at several providers are beginning to leverage user-generated content to actually stimulate travel demand, as well as to tear down their walled gardens in order to simplify the laborious, painstaking task of content management.

User-generated content and community are certainly hot topics and cornerstones of Travel 2.0. So popular in fact, that Yahoo! Trip Planner is overhauling the search engine con-

cept by asking users to answer each other's travel questions in addition to looking for answers online. TripAdvisor, the patriarch of the user-generated content movement, second-most visited Web domain in the travel category and member of the Expedia family, boasts 23,000 featured destinations (each with several thousand reviews).

At the same time, with property descriptions such as "recently renovated," "at the beach," "with its innovative enhancements and stylish new décor," "minutes away from all of the city's major attractions," and "located in the heart of the city," and picturesque thumbnail images of bed linens, jubilant lobby floral arrangements and glass-shiny pools, it's clear something is missing in the merchandising process. Let's face it, hotel marketers have struggled to promote their products and escape commoditization by expanding beyond the room.

On the heels of a major re-branding campaign that has also resulted in the search engine-inspired home page for FourPoints.com, and expert travel blogger site TheLobby.com with the moniker of "Belong," the recently redesigned Sheraton.com breaks from the traditional mega-chain ranks by putting user travel stories, not tucked away, but at the center of the home page. And so far, posted reviews seem biased to those that go way beyond just the room. For instance, one guest story for a property well to the east of Chicago tells of a nearly missed dinner cruise. By allowing guests to post their own travel stories instead of merely reviews, Sheraton has truly embraced oft-ignored facets of the

content is king moniker to cover the complete travel experience within the context of a guest's desire (whether to achieve their mission or escape the ordinary).

Swiss premium hotel chain, Mövenpick Hotels & Resorts, undaunted by potential negative feedback, has included a link to TripAdvisor for reviews about its property. A query to its Central Park Roma location yielded 16 English reviews, not all of them were positive, and a popularity index of 210 out of 988 hotels in Rome. InterContinental hotels is also considering adding its own peer review section to the IHG Web site.

It's not only suppliers that are getting in on the act. Expedia asks customers to rate their purchased rooms in four categories including service, condition, cleanliness and comfort, along with their reviews. Perhaps the infamous black-clad review guys of sister company Hotels.com can finally get new jobs. We just wonder how Expedia's choice to use their own review site, rather than TripAdvisor, will impact use.

In the initial race to grow online travel distribution, most Web sites were looking to become self-contained publishers and providers. Unfortunately, for too many in the travel industry, maintaining this walled garden has turned into a never-ending task. Now, a wave of dynamic travel sites have emerged that take full advantage of new models of collaboration for trip planning. Undaunted by the startups, these providers have embraced, without wielding control over user-generated content, a sense of belonging at the same time they attempt to diminish their own content-management challenge. Already, user-generated images like those posted on the photo-sharing site Flickr are supplementing hotel image content. And with 100 million downloads a day on YouTube.com demonstrating the popularity of rich media, the user-generated video should be making its way into the travel realm soon.

Building on these early victories, hoteliers should begin to branch out beyond reviews to exploit more robust social networking capabilities. One promising area of development is tagging. Whether for purely time-starved, or simply voyeuristic reasons, consumers are increasingly turning to tagging, a mashup of both social networking and consumer-generated content, to sift, sort and share information about travel planning and buying.

Suppose you are considering going on a trip to Venice. Naturally, you start your online travel planning journey by searching online for “travel to Venice Italy,” where no less than 19 million page links are returned. Perhaps you refine your search, and begin to visit some of the referenced pages. As you visit these pages, you mark or “tag” them in a process similar to identifying browser favorites. Here’s where tagging gets interesting. When you tag a page (e.g., with a service like Del.icio.us), you can annotate the tag with a note or reference, helping to remind yourself why you tagged the page when you return later. Perhaps you tag a hotel with “15th century castle,” or “modern design, great location.” As you go along creating tags, a ‘tag cloud’ is created, highlighting the areas of interest that your tagging is generating, which can be used as the anchor point for future searching and tagging.

Many of these same tools allow you to organize your tags into specific folders and categories (e.g., possible hotels, wine, food, museums and scooter rentals for your Venice adventure), so that you can refer to them later (perhaps to decide on which hotels to actually stay in). Del.icio.us calls this collection of tags “bundles,” and they form the basis for sharing with others.

The network effect kicks in when you post your tags. The next person who comes along planning a trip to Venice can search for other people’s tags of Venice instead of

just entering search terms. They discover your tags and reviews and sift through information on an order of magnitude faster than starting from scratch. If you are planning a trip in conjunction with a friend or family member, you can invite that person to be a “buddy” or “friend” and see your tag collections and cloud to help the buddy find that ideal place. In order to make linking more powerful, the number of times others include your tags are tallied as a sort of popularity index.

Another site, Rojo, takes a slightly different approach to tagging. Instead of merely tagging pages, Rojo provides a search feature across RSS-enabled news, syndicated articles (e.g., Trips), and individual blogging sites (including Flickr images, and video or mobile blogs), to give you access to unfettered reviews and stories about local places at a given travel destination. Again, as you identify relevant travel planning information (e.g., hotel reviews) you can tag it with descriptions, but you can also rank the content so that others can see not just the quantity of tags, but the perceived value of the tag as well (Rojo calls this feature adding Mojo to your tag). Along the way, as you accumulate tags, Rojo attempts to assist your travel planning by recommending additional feeds and tags to collect.

These sites make money using the



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same pay-per-click ad sense model as Google, but the difference here is that site visitors are more qualified, as they are already part of a folksonomy, which can prove beneficial to travel marketers. Folksonomy users often discover the tag sets of another user who tends to interpret and tag content in a way that makes sense to them. The result, often, is an immediate and rewarding gain in the user’s capacity to find related content. Hoteliers can leverage these sites to increase revenues by matching their services and offerings, via tags, to travel planners through promotional advertising, as well as insuring that their sites can be easily tagged.

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“All I know is Alfie Grumbacher of 3461 Chestnut Lane in Kissimmee, FL gave this place 3 stars last Thursday and said the grubs were absolutely breathtaking.”