Social Monitoring

Social networks are composed of social media technologies that are used to facilitate online functionality. A recent study by Forrester Research indicates that nearly half of online adults participate in a social network. As a result, social networks are perceived by participants as an expert tool, as it offers a basis for the detection of emerging social trends and recognition of changes in consumer behavior, including member profiles, behavioral patterns and associated lists of contacts. Additionally, OSNs may be a means of aligning individual thinking with collaborative intelligence, leading to group consensus. Taken together, a user can create a virtual social identity in which the individual perceives him/herself as a strong member of an online community protected by group norms and participation protocols.

While nearly all treatments of social networking focus on customer engagement, there are two other dimensions that may be equally as important that often are ignored. The explosion of digital sites dedicated to industry detractors, as well as Web sites catering to industry employees, can be harmful to the success of a single firm or industry segment. Detractor sites tend to slam, harm or redirect business by focusing on poor operational reviews, brand defamation and inaccurate data distribution. Employee sites typically support discussions related to topics like trade secrets, corporate policies, discrimination and interpersonal relations. Recognition of these unintended consequences has led several hospitality companies to launch, manage or monitor social networks designed for industry workers.

McDonald’s Corporation recently launched a private Web site for the company’s 650,000 hourly employees dispersed across 15,000 locations in North America (www.StationM.com). The site is available in English, Spanish and French and assigns a facilitator to monitor and guide online discussions, as needed. Registered staff can use the site to post blogs, join discussion groups, submit video clips or initiate activities. The overall goal being to improve communications between management and employees as well as employees with peers. Too often messages are lost or distorted when routed, relayed or disseminated by co-workers, shift managers, franchisees or instore postings.

Sodexo USA, a contract foodservice operator, uses social media to help identify and acquire new staff members. The company reports using Web resources such as Facebook, YouTube, Monster.com, CareerBuilder.com and LinkedIn as well as a proprietary blog to form a comprehensive recruitment strategy. In addition, Sodexo also sought new employees through participation in a virtual career fair conducted at SecondLife.com.
network monitoring has become an important business function that may offer a wealth of valuable information. There are specially designed data mining software products capable of monitoring social network content. The content information is then mined to reveal customer satisfaction ratings, effectiveness of marketing tactics and sales campaign performance.

“Social media monitoring gives direct marketers an opportunity to keep their fingers on the pulse of how consumers are responding—to what extent current campaigns are successful, how they need to refine campaigns over time and, ultimately, the business outcomes,” said Jeff Zabin, research fellow at Boston-based Aberdeen Group. Zabin is the author of a report titled, “Social Media Monitoring and Analysis: Generating Consumer Insights From Online Conversation,” which was released in January 2008. The report was based on telephone and online surveys of representatives from more than 250 organizations currently using or evaluating social media monitoring and analysis technologies, such as brand monitoring, market influence analytics and online consumer intelligence.

In addition to marketing messages, social networks are also used to shape consumer purchase behavior and employee attitudes. Rapid feedback on a current promotional campaign or employee gripe, for example, can provide management a unique opportunity to refine strategy or policy while the situation remains active, thereby enhancing business outcomes. Having such a capability, in real time, can be a competitive advantage. The goal being to leverage guest digital insights, instincts, and partnerships to enhance the hospitality brand.

Aberdeen Group’s recent research findings acknowledge that toolbox technologies can be used to monitor and analyze brand equity, market influencers and consumer intelligence. In general, the study found that more than half (52 percent) of online companies currently employ a social media monitoring and analysis solution. Another 33 percent reported having funds budgeted for implementation within the fiscal year. The extent of involvement by hospitality firms was not reported.

In another report, Nielsen Online Strategic Services suggests social media monitoring and analysis are also capable of identifying sensitivities about a customer experience without necessitating market intrusion. Additionally, the technology can profile or delineate influential consumers for targeting. Customers that engage in blogging or photo or video sharing are more likely to assert influence in the marketplace. By identifying individuals who disproportionately influence markets or consumer behavior in the market, a business can determine a strategy of appeal. The hospitality industry software, ReviewAnalyst, provides many of these monitoring and analysis capabilities.

Three important functions for social media are monitoring, analyzing and evaluating online content to help protect brand equity by enhancing the current conditions to obtain better business outcomes. A few hospitality specific products are on the market today including SearchVIEW™ and ReviewAnalyst.

ReviewAnalyst is an innovative social media tool that enables hotels to initiate a proactive approach to consumer-generated hotel blogs, reviews and postings. Management is able to track, analyze and react to what is being contributed by participants about a property or chain operation. Designed to aggregate and generate reviews and ratings from a number of travel-related Web sites, ReviewAnalyst tracks property reviews, chats, blogs, photos and videos and reports activities via a unique dashboard application.

ReviewAnalyst can also be configured to do a comparative analysis of a particular property against three of its competitors. Perhaps the most important feature is that it enables management to react promptly to uncomplimentary reviews and thereby mitigate potentially harmful effects of an unfair or overly negative categorization. As the company’s Web site states, “ReviewAnalyst provides hotel managers with tips and guides to make responding quick, and effective. A few well-placed words from management go a long way in developing a positive relationship between your hotel and the online community.”

TravelCLICK’s SearchVIEW™ provides hotels with a comprehensive view of their Web presence that is not limited to consumer review ratings and user-generated content, but expands Web presence monitoring to the hotel’s ranking on search engines and third-party travel Web sites. As consumers shop at least three Web sites before making a purchase, SearchVIEW enables hotels to manage these key consumer touch points that influence the majority of travel buying decisions. SearchVIEW also compares the hotel’s position to its top competitors and graphs trends overtime, storing up to 12 months of historical data.

Activity

“Consumers look to the Internet not just for information and a convenient place to transact business, but increasingly to interact with members of their business or personal networks,” wrote Cindy Estis Green, author of The Travel Marketer’s Guide to Social Media and Social Networks (2008). Although considered early in its evolution, social media and social networks have accumulated
some unequaled success, including:

- 66 percent of online adults review video and audio clips regularly
- two of five online adults read blogs, share photos and take virtual tours
- 25 percent of online adults post blog responses and participate in social networks

In addition, eMarketer.com also estimates that more than 69 million adults and 15 million teenagers currently use social networks.

**Cybersmear**

Social media have become the newest method by which to communicate with employees, especially for multiunit operators whose staffers may be geographically dispersed throughout a district, state, region or nation. Unlike non-interactive formats like e-mail, intranet posts and e-newsletters, social media are capable of engaging users to act and react to current content, issues and related discussion items, and do it less expensively.

Michael Rudnick, a global Internet consultant for Watson Wyatt said, “Employers that avoid social media altogether are missing an important opportunity and running the risk of alienating Gen Xers and millennials. Embracing the technology with proper planning and guidelines for its use are effective approaches to ensuring success.”

However, social networks make it easy for folks to share confidential information, post inappropriate comments, and defame businesses and people. Web sites that predominantly promote negativity or harassment are termed cybersmear sites. For example, such restaurant-related sites as bitterwaitress.com and stainedapron.com encourage foodservice workers to post rants, frustrations and anger. As a result, employers are often forced to monitor employee blogs in anticipation of decline in morale and acts of retaliation.

Social networks are formed when connections among users are based on shared interests or a dedicated purpose. Despite the overwhelming popularity of sites like MySpace, many hospitality companies are delving into social networking, believing employees and customers are more comfortable with a less public, more private online environment.

**OSN**

Online social networks (OSNs) have gained unprecedented popularity in recent years and are comprised of millions of members from all continents and age groups. OSNs facilitate the interaction among members by providing a multimodal platform which enables discussion, content sharing, event organization, editorial opinions and reaction to business conditions and experiences. OSNs can be of value to the hospitality industry as a means to help detect business trends, develop sales and marketing strategies, and provide immediate feedback on current activities.

Hospitality and travel business-related OSN membership can be completed on an open or closed basis depending on whether or not members of the online community are required to formally register. Many observers believe that registration results in more responsible participation and data entry. The Web site, description and number of members (Summer 2008) are contained in table one on the previous page.

**Hospitality OSNs**

Based on data found at the Wikipedia Web site, there are at least two OSNs with a major focus on the hospitality and/or travel industry. The Hospitality Club is an international, Internet-based hospitality service of 386,550 members in 219 countries. Its members use the Web site HospitalityClub.org to coordinate accommodation and other services, such as guiding or regaling travelers. Hospitality Club is currently one of the largest such hospitality networks. Membership in the organization is free and is obtained simply by registering on...
In the hospitality industry there are many examples of social media applications.

**FohBoh.com** — a social networking site for foodservice employees and food devotees launched in January 2008. Foh is an abbreviation for front of the house while boh represents back of the house.

**Bitterwaitress.com** — a blogging site created for foodservice servers to share insider information, data, secrets and private conversations in a somewhat anonymous context. Commentary normally focuses on co-workers, management or company culture, and provides a platform for broad-scale distribution of information. While most bloggers falsely believe their content is protected, this simply is not usually the case as employers feel obligated to monitor postings to protect staffers as well as brand equity.

**Stainedapron.com** — similar to bitterwaitress.com above, the ready availability of laptops, multifunction cell phones and PDAs has made it easy for someone to immediately post emotions, displeasure or dissatisfaction with any facet of employment, service or corporate policy.

It is for this reason that potential cybersmear Web site policies are starting to be addressed in employee handbooks. Since most states provide employers wide latitude to monitor e-mail, phone calls and on-premises video, the transition to social network sites is a logical next step.

Best Western’s bestwestern.com/knockknock is a downloadable desktop widget that enables a shortcut to Web site functionality without necessitating a Web site visit. In other words, the desktop graphical icon enables rapid access to reservations, special packages, property information, alerts and travel tips. As the Web site urges users to get great hotel discounts and special package offers delivered right to the application. The chain’s corporate Web site also features a Pizza Playlist that allows online customers to store up to four favorite orders for rapid order entry. Pizza Hut’s Director of Digital Marketing Bernard Acoca said, “It’s not unrealistic to anticipate that half of our business will come from online (transactions) in five years time.”

Like Pizza Hut, Papa John’s has also developed an effective widget (labeled myPapa) for more efficient ordering and settlement. Customers using the widgets benefit by receiving daily custom discounts and special product offers. In addition, Papa John’s recently launched a mobile Web ordering system that enables customers to set-up an account or place an order directly from a cell phone (or other web-enabled device). Web content includes the menu, special offers, and store locator functionality. Although a pioneer in online and text message ordering applications, mobile Web ordering represents an added dimension to its e-marketing campaign (mobile.papajohns.com). Registered customers receive special offers via e-mail and cell phone.

In an effort to get marketing messages to targeted customers much more quickly, Pizza Hut has implemented widgets designed to simplify and accelerate online purchasing. The widget allows customers one-click ordering as well as instant notification of local discounts or specials. The company’s widget is labeled the Pizza Hut Shortcut. Consumers register online and view a widget demonstration prior to downloading the application. The chain’s corporate Web site also features a Pizza Playlist that allows online customers to store up to four favorite orders for rapid order entry. Pizza Hut’s Director of Digital Marketing Bernard Acoca said, “It’s not unrealistic to anticipate that half of our business will come from online (transactions) in five years time.”

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the Web site. The core activity of the organization is exchange of accommodation. Acting as a host, a member offers the possibility of accommodation at his leisure. As a guest, a traveler may find possible hosts and contact them through the Web site. No money is involved — guests and hosts do not pay each other. Hospitality Club was founded to help friends and family as a general-purpose hospitality exchange organization.

It is important to note that several former Hospitality Club volunteers started BeWelcome.org, a hospitality exchange network intended to bring travelers together to form a global community. At BeWelcome visitors can share information, plan trips, create custom maps, and talk open and fairly.

The CouchSurfing Project (www.opencouchsurfing.org) is a free international Internet-based hospitality service, and the largest hospitality exchange network. As of April 2008, it had more than 500,000 members in 226 countries and territories. From various indicators it can be estimated that many members were actively using the Web site, with 40 percent offering their couches to host travelers. Members use the Web site to coordinate accommodations. According to the site, “CouchSurfing seeks to internationally network people and places, create educational exchanges, raise collective consciousness, spread tolerance and facilitate cultural understanding. CouchSurfing is not about the furniture, not just about finding free accommodations around the world; it’s about making connections worldwide.”

**External Practices**

Kimpton Hotels and Restaurants launched a recruiting Web site (www.imkimpton.com) with content supplied by its current employees base built from its workforce in 42 hotel and restaurants in the U.S. and Canada. Workers were asked to create and post video clips about their workdays keeping in mind the theme, “Why I Love Kimpton”. Some of the videos were selected for simultaneous posting on YouTube. The intent was to educate prospective employees about the Kimpton culture. As the firm’s spokesperson, Carey Brock, states, “Generation Y is going to be a large part of the workforce in the next 10 to 20 years, so it’s wise to target that audience now.”

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Content Policies

As a result of the evolution of cybersmear Web sites, some hospitality service employers have begun weaving online discussion, blogging and shared content policies into employee handbooks. The goal being to inform staffers that the firm will be actively monitoring social networking sites at which employees are likely to post opinions, complaints, fabrications or information the company might deem proprietary, embarrassing, unfounded or inaccurate. Dean Sockeye, vice president of Keg Restaurants, described his company’s strict e-communications policies in this way, “The policy is written clearly enough to inform workers that posting recipes as well as gripes about co-workers, customers, vendors or other labor complaints that divulge proprietary information or information that is untrue could be grounds for dismissal.” He also noted, “Fortunately, we hire a responsible staff and have never had anyone not comply at this point in time.” Perhaps the best caution comes from Lewis Maltby, president of the National Workrights Institute, who warned “There is no such thing as privacy and little legal defense available when employees misuse their employers’ confidential data or sexually harass colleagues through the Internet.” Furthermore, he said, “There is no anonymity on the Internet. If someone wants to find you, they can.”

Summary

Social media and social networking are long-term communication channels that need to be part of the hospitality industry landscape. While online environments can be helpful to encourage employees to actively participate in information sharing, it is important that companies craft digital media policies to avoid embarrassing and inaccurate information being disseminated. As many industry practitioners have learned, embracing the technology with proper planning and strict use guidelines are essential for success.

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