

By Cindy Estis Green

Social Media

Is it the sizzle or the steak?

There are many ways a travel organization can take advantage of social media and social networks. Some will be tactical such as techniques to improve search engine rankings, or ways to get press releases and other news and information more effectively disseminated to a community. Some tools will be used to facilitate a booking process or to make it easier for consumers to find information. The most powerful initiatives will be strategic in nature building on brand equity and customer engagement.

A Short Detour about Conversion

This discussion about interacting with customers all sounds very nice, but isn't conversion what it is all about? Does social media, in fact, generate revenue for the travel industry? There is no reason to be shy about asking for the sale. Just because there is a conversation and relationship being developed, organizations are still in the business of generating revenue and consumers know and appreciate this. It's getting a message to the right consumers to resonate about the right products and offering them at the right time. Not a new idea to marketers, but social media and networks just made it a whole lot easier to accomplish.

When you hear reports of Vail Resorts SnowMate widget directly credited with several hundred thousand in revenue per season even when it was first launched as long ago as 2003 or the \$50 million reported revenue made by Southwest through their Ding widget, not to

mention the results generated by the Wanna Getaway video contest or the giveaways to encourage sign-ups on their Facebook page, there is no doubt that social media can and often does provide a direct and positive hit to the top line in large and small organizations alike. But even better than that, the capacity for social networks and social media tools to improve retention (reduce customer churn), will far outshine any results from the legacy loyalty or frequency programs. While engaging customers is the mantra of social media marketers, the focus should be on interaction, not transaction. If the interaction is done with relevance, consistency and sincerity, transactions will follow.

Making the Leap into a Web 2.0 World

A challenge when learning about this phenomenon and its associated set of tools is figuring out how to make the leap from the current marketing and sales activities that may still be largely Web 1.0 in nature, and meaningfully incorporating Web 2.0 actions. Some may say, "Its all just whether or not to use blogs or wikis, right?" but it is in fact, more about a plan to immerse your organization in the world your customers inhabit. The skills needed are to appropriately:

- >> Listen to the dialogue
- >> Learn from what you see and hear
- >> Respond to the dialogue
- >> Initiate conversation

The hardest questions will be when, how, who and where. It may include blogs or wikis, but an organization may decide to tap the existing sources of social commentary and dialogue, using other's platforms. Creating your own is a decision that needs to be well thought out relative to an organization's objectives and resources available.

Another major challenge revolves around the integration of social media

strategies with traditional communications. While there will be direct revenue as a result of some social media-based initiatives, other benefits will be the lift provided for campaigns. If you clarify a message, direct it surgically to a receptive (i.e., already engaged) target audience, your results are certain to improve. If you integrate the themes in all communication channels (e.g., print, video, online, direct sales) so the target audience is immersed in a consistent conversation with you or with others (talking about you), saying the things that reflect your desired brand message, you will enjoy that lift. In the past a marketer hoped the right messages were conveyed and relayed between consumers, now you will know for sure. Such is the nature of social media success.

Why It Matters

Learning about social media tactics is not important just because it's a topic that is popular and hot for discussion. Social media will have its greatest impact when it is deployed as a strategic tool; when the travel marketer uses it to enhance brand equity or to interact with customers at every touchpoint – when they are traveling or when they are not. When social media is used strategically it becomes a tool of relationship building and customer engagement. The effectiveness of every tactical and functional social media tool used must be evaluated as to whether or not it contributes to the organization's relationship with the constituents in its community. When this level of effectiveness has been reached, the travel industry will have fully embraced the power of its social networks. In using social media tools, brands can think of themselves as storytellers to personify themselves (painting colorful brand images) in the minds of their consumers, and then leverage the social networks to spice up the conversations out there. Whether they are joining those conversations or not, they need to let go (very hard to do for most brands) and listen to the chatter to

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12 Tips for Success in Social Media

Before

- 1| Establish clear business objectives and metrics
- 2| Accept a new set of marketing communications
- 3| Define the image you plan to project

Ramping Up

- 4| Identify the Influencers
- 5| Listen before you speak
- 6| Integrate social media with Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

Diving into Social Media

- 7| Engage your audience
- 8| Engage your employees
- 9| Engage your customers

Evaluate and Monitor Progress

- 10| Be honest and upfront with consumers
- 11| Evaluate metrics based on business objectives
- 12| Fail quickly. Fail cheaply. Keep trying.

Source: Buzzlogic, 2007

see if/how the consumers are embracing them. They will listen a lot, learn a tremendous amount about consumer attitudes and behavior, respond when a response is expected and initiate conversation when the audience is most ripe for direct dialogue (avoiding any chance of sounding like an interrogation).

Some Paradoxes of Social Media

Managing in the new world of social media will present many double-edged swords. It will certainly be easier to find out what consumers think about competitors, and more difficult to accept unfiltered commentary by travelers. It will be appealing to enter into a dialogue with consumers, but harder to listen first and know when it's appropriate to enter the conversation. It will be a great boon for brands to identify niche customer segments and enjoy much lower costs to reach them, but a tough juggling act to manage dozens of new distribution channels, products and customer segments.

And the final paradox: it will be a challenge for corporate or head offices to accept that consumers and grassroots dialogue can often impact the brand more than centralized brand-made programs, but when marketers cede control to their communities (e.g., consumers, bookers, meeting planners, employees) and the efforts are well orchestrated, the results can be tremendous and sustainable.

The goal of any travel marketer is to leverage the collective knowledge and passion of many travelers to benefit each one, and multiply it times thousands or millions of consumers. That is a win-win for both the consumer and for the travel industry.

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