

By Cindy Estis Green

# Social Media and Networking

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VIDEOS, BLOGS, WIKIS AND PODCASTS are but a few of the media forms used to support consumer communities. The phenomenon of user-generated content and social networking has been recognized as a new generation of Internet activity. Some call it the major part of Web 2.0 and many industries are gearing up to take advantage of the trend. It is natural for the travel industry to participate in this wave of activity.

Travel has long depended on social interaction for most of its word-of-mouth messaging. The difference today is the multitude of media forms that are being used in this burgeoning form of communications. Travel suppliers are testing the waters to see how they can incorporate these tools into their marketing strategies.

The truth is that consumers are well down the road in their use of these media but travel companies have not yet widely embraced the use of these tools. Many are experimenting with solicitation of traveler stories, some have run photo contests, others offer podcasts and show user-generated videos. Of course, there is TripAdvisor™, IgoUgo and others that are dedicated to user-generated content related to travel. There are some creative applications such as Travelocity's traveling gnome and Starwood's construction of a virtual aloft hotel in Second City, a virtual community. The majority of travel companies are discussing the phenomenon, responding to the first impact, usually delivered in the form of user-generated commentary, and deciding how to tackle it.

## Travel Company Options

With such an upsurge in activity, there are dozens of questions each travel company has to consider. Some of the more frequently asked questions are fielded below.



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## All of this feedback is great, but what happens when it is not so positive?

The virtual wave of user-generated content is real and growing. The industry's first reaction has been generally defensive. It is hard to accept comments from travelers who are less than fully informed or those who might have written in an emotional state and may appear to exaggerate their claims. And with so many moving parts in a travel experience, things do go wrong. If explained, the glitch is more understandable. Many times, it is not possible to connect a comment with a specific guest, and the travel community would usually like to respond directly to the traveler regarding the actual situation.

All of these factors lead to collective frustration on the part of the travel organization that has to withstand a negative barrage of comments. The point though is that it is often a barrage. It can't be thought of as a single comment. Consumers have to trudge through dozens or sometimes hundreds of comments. Some question whether the writer is similar to

them or not. Some merely skim the content looking for patterns such as generally positive or generally negative feedback.

It is best if the travel organizations try to review the comments like a consumer, rather than from a management perspective. When the volume increases as it has on traveler feedback, there are bound to be some negative comments. If they are consistently negative, it is likely the travel provider has a service problem and can use this feedback constructively. If there is an opportunity to respond, rather than attempting to address specific comments, it is best to respond to categories of comments. For instance, if there are repeated comments about restaurant prices in a hotel, the hotel can reply that they have heard the voice of the consumer and now have a light menu alternative for quick meals. If the wait times for check-in lines are too long, management can offer a new peak service queue to expedite the process, and then can thank the writers of this feedback for their great ideas.

Travel suppliers cannot react to every

comment as they might to a personal letter written by a past disgruntled traveler. It has to be viewed as what it is—a pattern of comments. The numbers are growing so large, they have to operate on the assumption that these comments will ultimately be balanced in the eye of the consumer with some positive and some negative. They should be read and taken as serious feedback just as personal letters are.

Although the negative comments may be read carefully by a prospective guest who is considering a particular supplier, it is also likely the positive comments are being read just as carefully. If the skew is negative, it is management who should take a hard look at their travel offering.

### How do you measure and monitor this activity?

Due to the high volume of user-generated content typically found on social media and networking sites, it is difficult for each travel supplier to absorb it all. One could spend days reading all that is written on the dozens of sites. There are firms offering the equivalent of the traditional public relations clipping services that will consolidate all that is posted about a particular supplier. While there are now quite a few, particularly those tracking major brands, some of the more well-known vendors are: Market Sentinel, Nielsen BuzzMetrics, InfluenceMonitor, BrandWatch and Brand Noise.

There are also specialized search engines in addition to Google and Yahoo!, that help search through the millions of online blogs to identify keywords or other themes. Examples of these are Technorati and IceRocket. If a hotel wants to find direct references to its property on a blog, it is possible to find all the times they appear in the blogosphere. Again, an individual hotel may not have the same visibility as a large chain, but these search engines will find what is out there.

There will be more services emerging to track and measure this type of content. As travel suppliers become more active in this space, there will be a greater interest in these services and they will become more refined to handle the informational needs of the industry.

### How do you screen content so you still are objective and balanced but keep out poor taste and downright false comments?

Some travel suppliers offer their customers the opportunity to comment or share past travel experiences on their Web sites. They encourage ideas and suggestions that will benefit those considering particular destinations or travel plans. Some run games or interactive contests to gather photos or videos, and others just ask for commentary. Most suppliers doing this have implemented some form of filtering to ensure that content is in good taste. Many have wrestled with the balance of making it realistic versus making it support the brand's goals of attracting more travelers. While outside Web sites cannot be filtered, for the most part, there is some accepted degree of censorship on a brand's own site.

As for responding to commentary on another site that may be inaccurate or deceptive or just plain unflattering, these sites may offer a place for a management response, but for many sites, there is a restriction that keeps the Web site limited to traveler feedback. Many of the comments may be inconsistent and there is often limited information to profile the reviewer. That is, you may hear a hotel was a poor value from a college

student on a tight budget and this may not be relevant for the traveling family with dual executive incomes and two small children. The details about the traveler are rarely noted unless the traveler mentions his or her own profile in the feedback. Some of the sites are addressing this shortcoming to improve the quality and relevance of traveler commentary. Most sites will have guidelines. They will eliminate contributions if they are not viewed as family friendly, relevant to a prospective traveler, and will not allow any messages with commercial content.

AS SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKING continue to take the online communities by storm, the travel industry is beginning to experiment. They are employing proactive and reactive strategies and many are assessing those tactics that most improve interaction with their customer groups and extend their reach online. While some travel entities are fully engaged in exploring marketing applications within social media, many are not yet even at the point of trial with these methods. This is the dawn of a phenomenon that will likely continue for a long time. Given the unique nature of the travel industry with its deep personal involvement with customers, these techniques will become sharply honed and will play a central role in online marketing for many years to come.

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