

TWITTER or Not to TWITTER

Time waster or lead generator?

There are many travel organizations that still block access for its management to Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and MySpace. Some claim it's a colossal waste of time. Not so, say the marketing teams who have first-hand knowledge of how to harness the power of the consumer. Travel organizations have found meaningful ways to manage social media to drive Web site traffic and deliver customer service. Some wrestle with metrics to prove that the ROI is worthwhile, but others forge ahead and enjoy spikes in Web site traffic they later convert to happy customers. While some admit to leaping with blind faith, those who have found the formula that works, have hit the jackpot with social media. And it doesn't even cost much to try.

You may wonder why on earth you would want to keep the world posted about a recent latte purchase or that you got tickets to a great concert. Twitter users can send their followers (those who sign up to get these updates) mini messages of up to 140 characters via PDA, PC or cell phone. How could this possibly support a travel marketing effort?

At HITEC 2008, Tim Peter from Leading Hotels reported receiving a Tweet (a message originating from a Twitter user) from someone he was following (meaning he subscribed to a stream of messages) looking for a hotel room in New York City. In seconds, they were booked at a Leading hotel. Then there is the traveler to a remote part of Oregon, Twittering to find a source for gluten-free baked goods. In minutes, Travel Oregon's webmaster provided a couple of choices within a few miles of his hotel.

Loudoun County Virginia (self-named Washington, D.C.'s Wine Country about 20 miles from the capital) counts Twitter as one

of the top lead generators to its Web site. The appeal is as strong with the meeting planner market (looking for nearby outings for Washington, D.C., meetings) as it is to the leisure market locally. Loudoun's YouTube channel (visitLoudounHD) is the first destination marketing organization to have high definition videos and you can watch more than 40; it has links to/from Facebook pages, blogs and Twitter to spread the news from the area vineyards. The videos have been syndicated to almost 20 different Web sites from Google Video, to the Travel Channel to iTunes, as well as some little known niche sites like EatDrinkOrDie.com. Check out Mom's Apple Pie (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXseyQVq8F4>) which is a local favorite and as authentic as they come for destination videos; they even captured unscripted out-of-towners sampling Mom's finest. The Loudoun County annual culinary festival received so much traction with the "Twitizens" of the region, with so many re-Tweets (passing along of Twitter messages to others) generating so much traffic to area restaurants, vineyards and hotels Web sites, the seasonal festival is evolving into a year round focal point.

It is all about buzz; getting consumers to engage with a travel supplier and with each other in a way that gets them to ask questions or provide answers about a hotel,

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an airline service or a destination. Destination Hotels & Resort's Wild Dunes property in Charleston, S.C., saved its peak season in 2008 with a social media campaign. They had serious problems with beach erosion that also threatened a couple of holes on a favorite golf course. Optimized press releases supplemented with a YouTube video by the golf pro embedded in a series of e-mails, photos posted to Flickr, a Web page optimized for Isle of Palms beach erosion and an active role in the dialogue about Isle of Palms on TripAdvisor delivered the goods. This campaign certainly reinforced relationships with customers but it put many more heads in beds than expected given an otherwise dismal forecast—and it did all of this while solving a serious image problem.

Every travel provider faces a dual challenge when developing an online marketing strategy. Part of the resources are directed to image or brand messages building long-term awareness and reinforcing the existing customer base; part of the work has to deliver needed high-quality traffic that can be converted to paying customers in the near term. Many like to focus on the traffic building techniques such as search engine optimization and have shied away from the newer tools that may not lead immediately to a click on the reservation button.

Besides having travelers Tweet to each other for travel tips, those travel organizations who maintain their own Twitter feeds send out offers, respond to customer service issues and broadcast new products and services to a highly qualified group of followers. It's not the messages themselves, but the viral nature of twittering that can send its highly qualified audience to microsites and other landing pages to actually buy something.

Take the case of Southwest Airlines. The company definitely addresses customer service issues as they happen, but it also gets quick deals out there that sell airline tickets. SWA posted this Twitter message to promote its new codeshare arrangement with Canadian WestJet. See Figure 1.

Our friends @westjet have a great offer this week: EWR to Calgary \$84 o/w! (*Additional taxes, fees, exclusions apply) <http://bit.ly/xwX57>
12:45 PM Apr 22nd from TweetDeck

Figure 1: Southwest Twitter Posting

And what about blogs you ask? Recall the Marriott Islamabad bombing tragedy from September 2008. If you missed Bill Marriott's blogs, you missed an impressive application of a tool that is often mistaken for light reading. His authentic account of what happened combined with the full disclosure about the ongoing plans for the employees, the victims and the hotel renovation was shared with both sensitivity and a high level of transparency. Does this put heads in beds? Ultimately, it does. Brand images are no longer burnished by slick TV commercials and four-color magazine ads pushed out to millions of consumers en masse. The public is much more receptive to the way Mr. Marriott conveys the story of the company in his own words. Or the handling of its Twitter feed when someone reports a problem. Consumers, whether they are meeting planners or leisure travelers, are highly responsive to authentic feedback from people like them and sincere follow up from companies who seem

to hear their concerns or interests. A recent *Adweek* survey reported four in 10 consumers avoid advertising as much as possible and only two in 10 have any confidence in advertising content (mediaVillage, 2007); this skepticism will push all marketers into the new social media channels eventually.

And the dreaded consumer review sites? They have taken off like wildfire and many travelers won't book until they have checked out three or four of these sites. They are a central part of any hospitality strategy: feed the sites with accurate images, respond when factual information is needed and follow up when things go wrong; we can hate them or we can leverage them to connect with customers. And everyone loves the traffic they deliver to hotel Web sites from travel shoppers.

Affinia Hotels opened a hotel in Washington, D.C., in 2008. Threads of discussion on TripAdvisor were headed in the wrong direction with misinformation. The general manager stepped in with a short account of the opening plan—not a sales pitch. This single entry diffused the negative tenor of the discussion and turned the reviewers into consumers with more productive questions

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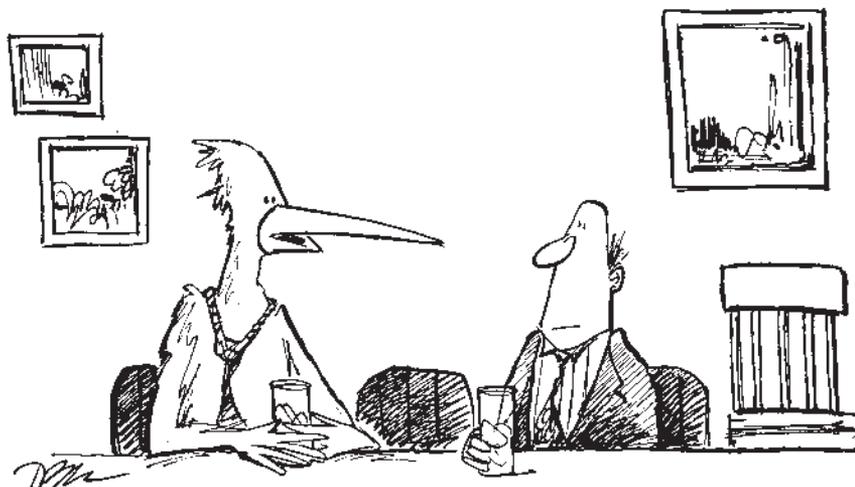
Figure 2: Affinia Hotels Manager's TripAdvisor posting.

about making reservations and the services available. One consumer responded (offline) to the general manager's e-mail address (included in his TripAdvisor post) and indicated a planned booking.

Social media is the new CRM; its online marketing, customer service and loyalty programs all rolled into one package. It may take some effort, but a colossal waste of time it is not. Given the opportunities to engage customers in a robust dialogue. When consumers feel more connected to your brand and to those who use you, they will want to try you out, return for another visit or tell all their friends about you. That would be something to Twitter about!

CINDY ESTIS GREEN is the managing partner of *The Estis Group*, a marketing consultancy and recently launched a new Web site showcasing innovation and best practices in sales & marketing www.drivingrevenue.travel.

Check out Mom's Apple Pie:
<http://tinyurl.com/MomsApplePie2>



"I used to Twitter. Even tweet once in a while. 'Course that was back in the days when it actually meant something."