

Five Key Social Media Trends in the Tourism Industry

The tourism industry is still scrambling to accommodate social media, which barged in like an unexpected tour group babbling in a bizarre foreign language. But while tour groups move on, social media appears to be here to stay.



What does this mean for travel and tourism operators? As the social space continues to evolve, navigating its many platforms, tools and trends is becoming increasingly challenging – a distraction from the more pressing demands of generating revenue and taking care of guests. And yet when well managed a social media program will advance these very objectives. Because social media permeates all aspects of an organization, from sales and marketing to operations to revenue management.

Social networking has changed how travelers research trips, make decisions and share experiences. Sites like Facebook, with more than 800 million active users, and TripAdvisor, with 50 million unique monthly visitors, enable travelers to seek trip information and advice from the sources they trust the most: other travelers and people they know. As a result they arrive at our doors more informed and empowered than ever before, with higher expectations and all sorts of channels for sharing likes and dislikes with large volumes of people.

To harness the powers of social media as a competitive advantage, travel and tourism operators must cut out the clutter and focus on the areas that will provide the greatest returns. To that end here are five key trends in social media to understand and embrace into 2012 and beyond.

1. Reputation, the ROI of social networking

Social networking has given rise to a critical new function in tourism: online reputation management (ORM). Rather than make things even more complex, ORM brings clarity and focus to social media. It is the process of tracking, analyzing and reacting to online reviews and feedback and actively engaging in social networking to build awareness and shape perceptions of one's brand.

Online reputation management is not about trying to pass your company as something it's not; it's about setting reasonable expectations and meeting or exceeding them. Create a virtuous cycle in your organization by using guest feedback to guide improvements; this builds loyalty and advocacy, which in turn strengthens reputation and drives revenue.

2. Social media as a customer service channel

Social networks have proven disappointing as a sales channel so far, but as a customer service channel they've become impossible to ignore. Travelers are using social networks to make inquiries and special requests, to share positive experiences and to air gripes. They're doing it before, during and after their trips, and sometimes while still on location – in our lobbies, our restaurant tables and our guestrooms. And they're expecting responses in real-time.



Even if you're not actively engaging on social networks, you need to be managing sentiment by monitoring and reacting to feedback and commentary. Alerts on Google, TripAdvisor, Twitter and Facebook will facilitate the process; for larger businesses a social media monitoring tool will help you collect, organize and react to reviews and commentary.

3. Inbound marketing reaches inbound travelers

These days marketing is less about finding customers than being found by customers. This requires shifting resources from traditional "push" media like advertising and direct mail to owned and earned media like websites, review sites and social networks. Develop a content management strategy to encourage and facilitate the sharing of reviews, stories and imagery from guests while at the same time publishing original content of your own.

When fully optimized, helpful and relevant content in the form of news, stories, blog posts, descriptions, photos and videos will increase your visibility on search engines, drive traffic to your website and social networks, and help convert visitors to guests.

4. Search, it's personal

The integration of social activities such as Facebook "likes" and Google "pluses" in search results together with instant personalization features that connect Facebook with review sites like TripAdvisor and Yelp put the activities and preferences of our social graph front and center. The wisdom of crowds combined with the trustworthiness of friends can have a powerful influence on purchase decisions. Leverage this trend by adding "like" and "plus" buttons and review widgets to your website and actively connecting with and engaging guests, prospects and influencers on social networks.

5. Mobile: decisions on the fly

Lastly, as the use of mobile devices continues to proliferate across the globe, more travelers are researching, seeking advice and making decisions on where to stay, eat, drink, shop, explore and relax while on the go. A mobile-compatible site is now essential for businesses that rely heavily on local traffic. At a minimum ensure that your rates, descriptions, reviews and other content are accurate and optimized on mobile travel sites and applications popular in your destination.

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