

WHO USES SOCIAL NETWORKS?

Some real-world examples of what really works for online travel marketing

BY KATE KOZIOL

Social networking is one of the latest buzz terms in technology, but how are businesses using it to market and grow their sales? The answer is that companies both large and small are using social networking to reach new customers, gain new insights and tailor their offerings to the market. Here are a few examples of companies that are ahead of the game, and of some who are not.

Finding new markets. A large cruise line started tracking a particular cruise blog and realized there was a need for balcony-equipped ships in a certain market at a certain time, one that it had never served before. The cruise line was able to reposition its ships to tap into this previously hidden market by being an active part of the social networking community. The same online research and product offering adjustment can apply to any size business, even your home-based travel agency.

Interacting with customers. Southwest Airlines, which already has about 46,000 fans on its Facebook page, is using social networking tools to connect with its customers. The airline has customer-created video and photos. It also accepts suggestions on what city to fly to next and uses fun applications that keep the conversation flowing. The complete opposite is a large ice-cream company that started sending cease-and-desist letters to anyone who said anything bad about the company on blogs. That is a sure-fire way to get even more bad press!

Creating a following. Optical Edge Adventures, an adventure sport travel company, used Facebook and MySpace to create a following that began with friends and grew from there. The company has hundreds of followers now and spends about one hour a day on social networking sites, updating photos and videos, and posting new information.

When a recent three-day \$700 Catalina trip came up, the company posted information about it on the site about a month before departure and created an online ad for it, and the trip sold out.

“Facebook is like a snowball. Getting it started and pushing it up the hill takes an inordinate amount of time, but now that it’s rolling downhill, it’s much easier,” says Chris Ashford, Optical Edge’s founder. “The reach has been incredible. Those who are not buying yet know that we’re leaders in adventure sports and they’ll trust us when they are ready to buy.”



Ashford also has just started featuring Meetups, where people who meet initially online can now meet offline to enjoy their collective interests, such as scuba diving, enjoying fine wine or talking about politics. There are already 50,000 Meetup groups worldwide.

Correcting misconceptions. Cruise Line A noticed that Cruise Line B was getting rave reviews on its cuisine, even though Cruise line A was spending more on food per passenger. So Cruise Line A got its chefs and other company foodies to get into the cruise and cuisine blog conversations to talk about food. While not overtly promoting Cruise Line A specifically, they were able to correct the misconception that their food was not on par with the best.

Addressing the situation—or not.

A large international airline that was just getting started in social media discovered that its customers had bad experiences with customer service and baggage handling. On one particular flight there were complaints of stale biscuits. Instead of addressing the issue up front, however, the airline ignored it and it festered and circulated within the blogging community. The biscuit complaint alone became a much larger issue when it should have been resolved quickly, so that the airline could improve service and customer relations. The moral of this story is that you need to address and resolve all issues as soon as possible, so you can turn even stale biscuits into a customer service win.

Monitor without whitewashing. Participation in social networking sites is the first step, while creating a networking site is for more advanced and committed networkers. Travel Portland, for example, was ready to take that next step and created GoSeePortland.com as a social networking site. It’s expected to get a rich mix of user-generated content on Portland-area elements, such as reviews on restaurants, bars and hotels. Travel Portland got that, plus bridge reviews, listings of social services available and grocery store reviews. It monitors user-generated content, but it doesn’t edit out topics that are within reasonable guidelines. It populates the site with a wide range of photos geo-tagged for Portland, Ore., that come from Flickr, one of the more popular photo-sharing sites. The site has 850 users who have generated 1,100 tips.

No entity is too small to get started—even a home-based travel agency. First be a follower and then develop your own groups and sites. You don’t have to be a millionaire to come up with the next million-dollar idea in the social networking world. @

Kate Koziol is president of K Squared Communications, which helps companies develop social networking programs that drive business results. You can reach her at kkoziol@ksqrd.com.

