

the conversation era

How social networking can help travel agents level the playing field

The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines a travel agent as someone who helps “travelers sort through vast amounts of information to help them make the best possible travel arrangements.” While this definition only scratches the surface, it is true that in the digital era, it is increasingly important for agents to find a way to cut through nearly infinite amounts of content to pinpoint the most relevant details for their clients.

Love it or hate it, the Internet will continue to remain both a competitive threat to agents, as well as a valued source of travel information for them. As consumer sites, online travel agencies, review sites, supplier sites, news sources and even consumer blogs struggle to attract more visitors, they will all continue to post massive amounts of new consumer-direct information.

The Digital Age

While online information grows at an exponential rate, Web users are starting to suffer from an information overload and are increasingly turning to their own personal networks for product recommendations. Although personal networks have existed since the early days of the Internet, the past decade has seen the emergence of interactive technologies that have formed the basis of the phenomenon known as social networking.

This shift in Internet behavior signals the beginnings of an important new trend that marketers are monitoring very carefully, as more and more consumers are stepping away from being passive observers of marketing information and rather are becoming active, selective participants in only the conversations they want to have.

At first blush, social networks may seem to be yet another way to diminish the importance of travel agents. Marketers across all industries are feeling the same concern. Today’s Internet user is resistant to traditional marketing messages. A recent study by JupiterResearch found that social network users are three times more likely to trust the opinions of fellow consumers over that of advertisers when making a major purchase decision.

What travel agents should realize is that social networks, when used correctly, are an area that

can help agents level the marketing playing field.

Lee Rosen, president of LR Marketing agrees.

“Today’s home-based agent is fueled by technology. Nowadays, it’s cheap to get the best technology out there. But where do home-based agents go to get information? To get water-cooler talk? That is where social networking is filling a need.”

Formerly the president of Trams, a provider of mid- and back-office solutions and unique marketing services for travel agencies, Rosen also helped establish Nexion Town, a social network designed for the home-based agent members of Sabre-owned Nexion.

“Through Nexion Town, agents are realizing their competition is not with each other. Agents chat, and they are learning that they can help one another,” Rosen said.

Agents who fear that it is “too late to join the party” should realize that although some of the technologies have been around for more than a decade, many Internet consumers are only now taking their first social networking steps. In fact, social media sites experienced a tremendous surge in usage just last year. Online Media Daily, an online newsletter available through MediaPost.com, reports that social media sites, from Facebook to Twitter, logged 2.1 trillion page views in 2008, a

number that doubled over the previous year.

Fear of technology should also not be a deterrent for agents wanting to get their feet wet. In reality, the reason that so many 12-year-olds are so adept at social networking is simply because today’s technology has become ridiculously easy to use.

Included here are some of today’s most popular social networking sites.

MySpace.com: Once the king of social networking, MySpace continues to attract millions of page views monthly. Although MySpace first gained popularity with younger users, many businesses create MySpace pages to promote their products. The site is perhaps best known for its strong relevance to pop culture and has gained a reputation as a place where unknown bands and artists can go to become discovered.

Research on the “Millennial Generation,” that frequents MySpace, suggests that this generation is playing an increasing role in their family travel buying decisions. Agents who wish to stay connected with this young buyer should consider building a MySpace profile.

Furthermore, MySpace has one of the Internet’s largest advertising networks, and marketers can very specifically target the demographics for their ads. Marketers can start a campaign with a budget as low as \$25, making promotions well within reach for even the smallest agent.

Facebook.com: This year’s social networking big gun is Facebook. In December 2008, the site drew 222 million visitors, making it the world’s top social networking site and also the world’s eighth-most visited Web site overall.

A popular Facebook feature is the “status” bar that allows users to post one-line updates on their current activities while eavesdropping on what’s happening in the lives of the people within their network. The site’s online photo albums are incredibly easy to use and share, as is the ability to post feeds from personal blogs or news Web sites. A scheduler allows users to keep track of the birthdays of members within their network. And as with MySpace, Facebook has a nearly idiot-proof interface, making it easy to sign up and get started.

Intrepid travel agents can also use Facebook





THE RISE OF MOBILE TECHNOLOGIES

As mobile-phone technologies continue to evolve, marketers are paying attention to how these applications or "apps" can shape future marketing campaigns. Although marketing by mobile phone is in its infancy, thousands of apps have already been developed to help mobile users stay informed and stay connected. The iPhone, in particular, is leading this development with more than 15,000 apps in its portfolio. Some particularly useful apps for travelers include:

FACEBOOK

Facebook junkies never need to stray farther than their Blackberry or iPhone to keep up to date with their friends. Two unique, free apps provide mobile access to the world's most popular social networking site. Both apps allow users to update their own status, view other users' status updates and make comments on user posts. The iPhone app has a slightly greater functionality than its Blackberry counterpart and is emerging as a powerful contact management software.

FLIGHTTRACK PRO

While many iPhone apps allow users to track flight information, FlightTrack Pro (\$9.99), which was just introduced in early February, is likely to become a traveler favorite. The app was developed in conjunction with Triplt.com, an online "personal assistant." Triplt.com has a unique functionality which will parse travel information directly from e-mailed itineraries, negating the need for users to manually input their details. Triplt synchronizes map information, weather and city guides in conjunction with scheduled flight plans, which can be shared with friends via several social media sites. FlightTrack Pro, which pulls its data from Triplt accounts, even provides an offline information mode, so travelers can view last-known travel information at 35,000 feet above sea level.

URBANSPOON.COM/YELP.COM

Ranked as iPhone's second- and third-most popular free travel apps, respectively, both sites offer local restaurant reviews and suggestions.

UrbanSpoon.com has gained popularity with the help of an iPhone television campaign and offers a cute slot-machine-type feature that gives local restaurant suggestions based on user-selected criteria.

Yelp.com is among the leading online review sites, and its volume of restaurant reviews means users can find detailed user recommendations on where to eat, drink and shop.

Both apps use the iPhone's built-in GPS to determine current location when making dining suggestions.

PANDORA

When traveling, sometimes good music can be hard to find. Pandora.com has been revolutionizing the way people listen to online radio since 2000 and now offers a free app for iPhones, as well as some ATT, Sprint and Windows mobile phones. The system prompts users to enter the name of a song or artist. Pandora then scans its database of more than a half-million songs and creates a radio station of music that shares unique musical similarities to the original song input. No FM receiver is necessary to use this app.

CURRENCY

The beauty of Jeffrey Grossman's free iPhone app is in its simplicity. This easy-to-use, tap-and-click interface and on-the-spot currency converter means that this app should be a must-have in any international traveler's toolbox. ❖

to create a groups page. Both generic groups dedicated to all things travel and groups specific to a destination can allow agents to bring together people with common interests. Agents can encourage their own clients to join the group, forming a mini social network. Clients can post travel videos and images, thereby expanding the relevance of the group. Further customizing these groups by integrating news feeds or posting travel deals can firmly establish a travel agent's expertise.

Facebook also has an extensive advertising network with demographic targeting and low buy-in rates. The network is not as large as MySpace, but with Facebook's recent increase in visitor traffic, it is worth paying attention to this site's ad model as well.

LinkedIn.com: While Facebook and MySpace initially targeted students, LinkedIn was designed to be a place for working professionals to network. Any agent who ever worked for TravelLeaders (formerly Carlson Wagonlit) for example, can search the company index to see if they can find past and present colleagues to link with.

LinkedIn allows users to create profiles that resemble resumes, detailing their work history. Users can also fill out "reviews" for colleagues and co-workers. A profile at LinkedIn.com is a must for professionals who want to keep up with the rapid comings and goings that are so common in the travel industry.

Chris Russo, president and chairman of ASTA, is a LinkedIn enthusiast. When he first assumed the reins at ASTA, he made sure all chapter professionals created a LinkedIn account so they could stay connected with one another.

"Although some of the agents were resistant to the change at first, now everyone uses it to

communicate and they love it," said Russo.

ASTA continues to encourage all travel agents to develop a LinkedIn profile.

In December 2008, LinkedIn introduced a unique polling feature. If a travel agent were interested in testing the waters on this summer's hot travel destination, for example, they could create a poll surveying the network for users dream destinations.

Creative Networking

While Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn continue to enjoy top rankings as social networking sites, they are by no means the only sites. There are quite possibly hundreds of other platforms that

agents can use to collect and share information.

YouTube.com: Conservative records estimate that more than 10,000 videos are uploaded to the massively popular video-sharing site every day. Today's easy-to-use digital cameras mean that most travelers have snapped their share of moving footage while on vacation, much of which has been uploaded to YouTube. Further, YouTube has an easy-to-use code that allows anyone with a Web site, blog or social network page to display YouTube video on their own site.

Although anyone can freely watch public YouTube videos, registered users are given a "channel" on which they can post an unlimited number of videos. Agents creating a channel can search YouTube for the best destination videos, categorize them into various playlists and then forward links to those playlist to clients interested in specific

destinations. Agents can also invite their clients to join their "friends" list as well as submit videos to be included in the agent's playlists.

Flickr.com: A similar concept to YouTube, Flickr.com is a universal photo-sharing site. On this site, users can upload images and then share them with registered users and other friends. Both individual images, as well as photo albums can be shared. Here too, agents can create albums by category and share those images with their clients.

Many Flickr users freely allow their images to be used by others, as long as credit is given. This means when an agent is seeking photos for a bro-

chure or Web site update, Flickr serves as an invaluable photo gallery resource.

Amazon.com: Amazon also offers several platforms that can help agents establish themselves as information specialists. Anyone with e-mail can sign into the site and create a user profile, complete with company and contact information. Registered users can then review anything from travel guidebooks to luggage and other travel-related products.

Perhaps even more useful to agents, is the ability to create lists. Agents helping a client book an Italy vacation, for example, can create an Amazon.com list of Italy guidebooks and then forward that list to their clients. The list can remain active on Amazon.com, meaning future users searching Italy books may also stumble upon the travel agent's contact information.

Social Bookmarking

Beyond the traditional media sites, social bookmarking is a growing sector of social networking. Developed as a response to the limited ability of Internet Explorer (and other platforms) to keep track of favorite site links, social bookmarking sites — such as Delicious.com, Digg.com, and StumbleUpon.com — easily allow users to add favorite URLs to their personal profile page. These sites let users sort their bookmarks by one-word, identifying tags. As with other social platforms, users can create their own communities, sharing their bookmarked lists with other registered users.

Despite the vast number of social-bookmarking sites, the technology is still in its early stages.

Delicious.com: Delicious is probably the best, and least-confusing, place to start exploring social bookmarking. Once a user has "tagged" a bookmark, they can also create tag bundles. A travel agent could create a Fiji tag bundle, for example, and further categorize their Fiji list by hotels, attractions, weather, etc. The tag bundles can be shared with any client, registered or otherwise. However, agents would do well to remember that there is no way to block clients from seeing their other public tag bundles. Caution should be exercised when agents

use the same login to promote personal and professional tag bundles.

Twitter.com: Twitter is the newest "it" technology in the social networking realm. In essence, users can post one-line updates, similar to status updates found on MySpace and Facebook, that allow subscribers to keep updated as to what their friends are doing.

The jury is still out on this technology. It has been criticized as being trivial. On the other hand, the Portland Convention & Visitors Bureau has just introduced the world's first Twistor (Twitter Visitor) Center at www.twitter.com/Travel

Portland. Anyone with a twitter account can post a Portland question to which the Twistor Center will provide answers. As social networking technologies continue to develop, so will users continue to follow the next "in" thing. Yesterday's wunderkind MySpace has already yielded the throne to Facebook. Will Twitter overtake them both? Only time will tell.

In this ever-changing landscape, only one thing is certain. Users will continue to employ technologies that allow them to interact with their trusted networks.

Or as Lee Rosen put it: "We are becoming a society that is voicing opinions and helping each other." ❖

➤➤ **ONLY ONLINE:** For a list of Online Editor Monica Poling's Fave Five ways to make more money with your travel Web site, visit TravelAgeWest.com/FaveFive