Inside the mind of a travel consumer

How digital insight is shaping brand strategy in the travel and hospitality sectors

In partnership with
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Introduction

It’s no exaggeration to say that the travel industry is booming. Passenger numbers are set to double by 2037,[1] and the leisure and hospitality sectors have been quick to embrace digital technology and big data into their marketing and operations. Travel leaders are not just teaching, but also listening to and learning from consumers as they experience travel. At the same time, we’re seeing a new generation of digital-native travellers bringing their perspectives and priorities to the market as it transforms, develops and improves.

Here at the tree, we’re not just enthusiastic about the travel industry – we’re right in the thick of it. Through partnerships like our collaboration with the world’s largest travel media company, Ink, we’re bringing in extra digital knowledge to make travel marketing work better - both for the brands leading change and the customers looking for that next big adventure.

In this ebook, you’ll find tips and insights on the world of travel marketing, organised around three big concepts -

Insight: the understanding which drives successful brands and their campaigns.

Content: the collateral that inspires consumers and brings brands to life.

Social: the conduit that takes insight-driven content to its target audience and brings back all-important data to build on.

These three ideas underpin the very best examples of travel marketing – ones that build loyalty, drive positive sentiment and ultimately deliver increased sales. Recognising and understanding the complex interplay between the three is critical when developing a marketing strategy for your business. Without insight, content is lost, and without content, social is hollow. We hope you’ll find ways to optimise all three in your future work.

Insight
Travel is now a 12-month-a-year enterprise, and whether you’re offering ski adventures or spa retreats, high quality insight is pivotal to staying ahead of the competition. While data collection and analysis are now commonplace, travel marketers at the leading edge are pushing insights even further, using tools and techniques like social listening and user journey analysis to gain a deep understanding of their customers. These marketers can zero in on a message and strategy that hits home and makes meaningful connections.

The travel sector embraces data

Right now, travel marketers are in an unprecedented position when it comes to discovering insights. Between granular, real-time data on bookings and travel patterns, qualitative information from reviews and social activity, and the broader trends that sway consumer opinion, there’s almost too much data to process.

Fortunately, there’s also no shortage of expert analysis and tools to support the travel marketing industry, and travel leaders are among the most forward-thinking in any sector. Even in 2015, more than half of travel leaders were using data-driven insights to secure competitive advantage across customer satisfaction, sales growth and customer loyalty, according to a study by Forbes.[2]

What kind of data holds the best insights for travel marketers?

To excel, travel leaders recognise the need to focus not just on research and data-based insight, but on more immediate, first-hand feedback. We live in an age where the public’s opinion is constantly available via social media.

being able to effectively pay attention to the voices of consumers can go a long way in informing your marketing approach

There is massive insight to be gleaned here – usually in the moment – and being able to effectively pay attention to the voices of consumers can go a long way in informing your marketing approach – particularly when it comes to reactive content.

Collecting data and listening to feedback is of limited use if it doesn’t result in worthwhile action. But that doesn’t mean marketers should turn a blind eye to anything that doesn’t translate directly to sales. Taking a precise view across a traveller’s entire customer journey can yield insights that drive loyalty, brand awareness and new directions for business, to name just a few benefits.

One travel giant turned its whole business around using the power of customer experience insights. After years of being infamously indifferent to customer experience and purely profit-driven, Ryanair finally bowed to the wisdom of a customer journey approach in 2014. In the face of declining passenger numbers, a 13% drop in share value and damning media coverage, the airline acknowledged that low prices were no longer enough. After hiring their first ever CMO, the brand launched ‘Always Getting Better’, a transparent campaign that offered an olive branch to its angry and disappointed customers with a commitment to better service and fairer policies. The results spoke for themselves – within a year, profits went up 32%.

Three Mobile broadened its insights beyond the traveller to the friends and family stuck at home, resulting in its #holidayspam campaign of 2014. “Sorry for all the plane wings” they told the public, taking responsibility for their part in the improved coverage and cheap data roaming that spawned a million sunset selfies and hotdog legs. The campaign resonated because its underlying insight was so astutely observed. Posting pictures is now a key part of the holiday experience, and Three cleverly made themselves synonymous with the trend. They’ve since capitalised on this positioning with a ‘Go Roam’ package which includes discounted fares with EasyJet, further consolidating the brand’s association with the travel sector.

The insights that are most relevant to you will depend on your specific marketplace, but there are a few trends happening right now that apply to almost all travel marketers.

What we know about travel right now – the experience economy

The idea of an experience economy – where experiences, rather than just goods or services, are marketed and sold – has been around since the 90s. But it’s an idea that’s still yielding fresh discoveries for the travel industry. Who hasn’t had FOMO as we enviously watch someone we know on their holiday pushing the boundaries of experience and adventure? Customers are aware of the value of experiences and are willing to pay for the best ones, and what’s more, they know the difference between an experience and a service. The millennial demographic is generally pegged as driving this trend, and the figures bear that out. 78% of millennials said they’d rather spend money on a desirable experience than a desirable purchase, according to research by Eventbrite.

4) https://adage.com/creativity/work/holiday-spam/41474

3% of millennials said they'd rather spend money on a desirable experience than a desirable purchase
Another emerging theme is ‘transformative travel’, a kind of tourism[7] that involves personal growth and meaningful, even life-changing moments during a holiday. Tourists in this mode – who’d never describe themselves as tourists – look for authentic connections with the culture of their destination and opportunities to ‘travel like a local’. The appetite for this type of experiential travel is large.[8] According to research by travel industry trade writers Skift, 54% of travellers ranked the importance of transformative travel as 7 out of 10 or higher, and 52% said they place increasing value on this type of travel.

Squaring this aim, which requires personal, unscripted and unique experiences, with the mass business model of a hotel, tour operator or airline is a tricky task. But it’s likely to involve plenty of traveller autonomy and a focus on people and relationships rather than services and monetary value. 2018[9] research by Skift found that the people on a trip were the most important factor in creating transformative travel experiences, with nearly 40% of travellers citing this as important.

‘Harnessing the expertise of Lonely Planet staff and our writers out on the road, as well as data from the wider Lonely Planet community across all of our platforms, we work hard to keep up with emerging travel trends and changing consumer behaviours and desires. We use this knowledge to continue evolving our products, to meet the changing needs of travelers.

This has resulted in a number of key shifts in strategy based on trends called out in this report. Last year, for example, we published our first range of books focused on cruises, catering for the 27.2 million passengers who now embark on cruises annually. Combining travel and food has been increasingly popular in recent years, and we responded to this trend by creating the dedicated Lonely Planet Food imprint.

Sometimes listening to insights can mean taking hard decisions. After being a core part of the Lonely Planet brand for many years, we have now retired our “on a Shoestring” series. Although a lot of us had a real fondness for this series, as it’s such a key part of Lonely Planet’s history, we recognise that today, there is shift towards travellers seeking out a range of experiences – even budget-conscious backpackers, who these guides traditionally served may for example want to spend a few nights in a hostel to meet people and save money, followed by a splurge in a fancy restaurant or a night in a luxury eco resort.

One key trend we’re really pleased to see emerging is for sustainable travel experiences. We’ve always called for our audience to travel consciously and responsibly, making sure the impact they have on destinations when visiting is a positive one. It’s become clear that this focus has become more important than ever to the audience we serve and it’s one which will be reflected across our products and campaigns in 2020 and beyond.

Katharine Nelson, Head of Marketing EMEA - Lonely Planet.

Getting from A to B isn’t a valued part of the experience

When it comes to consumer behaviour and goals, there’s a world of difference between transport (i.e. flights) and destination purchasing. McKinsey data from 2018[10] shows that branded searches for flights (e.g. ‘cheap flights British Airways’) fell 11 percentage points year on year. With hotels, branded search went up by 8 percentage points.

People, it seems, are rather less interested in which airline they fly with as long as the destination and price is right. But with hotels, there’s a higher level of brand awareness and more engagement with the different experience’s hotels can offer. Flights are a means to an end – hotels and accommodation are where the bigger experiences happen.

Mintel’s UK data[11] from 2018 tells a similar story. Travel costs are where people look for bargains, whether they’re on a premium or a budget trip. Regardless of their travel spending power, most people looked for the cheapest forms of holiday transport. But when it came to food, drink and accommodation, the majority of both groups went for expensive or mid-priced options.

Routehappy, which was recently acquired by travel industry heavyweight ATPCO, started out as a consumer-facing startup. It aimed to differentiate and de-commoditise flight shopping by showing consumers what amenities, products and services and fare benefits were available on the flight they were shopping for, along with any restrictions. The company now works exclusively on a B2B basis, and offers airlines and sales channels data that takes much of the legwork out of choosing a flight for their consumers. It collates standard information about flights and tickets, and showcases granular details like seat pitch, aircraft layout and the presence or absence of USB charging points, along with information on whether a ticket is refundable, or how many checked and carry-on bags are allowed. Routehappy’s data means customers can quickly and easily get the best value flights for their trip and conserve their time and energy for what really matters to them – the holiday itself.

The role of insight when things go wrong

As well as providing business-critical visibility on consumer preferences and behaviours, insights can help steer things in the right direction when unexpected events disrupt the travel experience.

Know your audiences – even the minor ones

In 2016, Turkish tourism took a huge blow, with terrorist attacks and political instability wreaking havoc on its leisure and hospitality sector. From around 36 million visitors in 2015, the numbers plunged to 25 million within a year. But despite speculation that the country’s tourism industry would be scarred forever, it instead performed an incredible bounce-back during 2017 and 2018, with visitor numbers up to a healthy 39 million.

What made this possible? In response to the lack of travellers from the US, northern Europe and the UK, the Turkish tourism industry responded by diversifying rapidly into other markets, including Russia and Asia, and extending a warmer-than-usual welcome to neighbouring Greece, where perceptions of Turkey remained positive. Turkish gastronomy was promoted, and ancient cultural attractions like the city of Troy. The tourism ministry also put an emphasis on different types of travel, such as faith-based tourism, winter holidays and health tourism. Executing this kind of pivot required having a few elements in place beforehand. Great relationships and cross-border alliances were crucial, but more fundamentally, they needed an awareness of the different audiences who would be interested in Turkey as a destination, and the things it had to offer beyond the mainstream package beach holiday. That kind of insight meant that in response to a loss from one audience, the Turkish tourism ministry could quickly dial up its appeal to others. With the numbers climbing, it became easier to bootstrap the recovery on its own success and broadcast the positive trajectory, helping it grow further.


Turkish tourism bounces back
Social listening for risk management and mitigation

Having an ear to the ground on social media can equip businesses with the insights they need to take action when crises unfold by responding and commenting in real time. Using social listening tools like Sysomos – one of our preferred solutions – it’s possible to stay up to date with what anyone, anywhere, is saying about a particular brand or product, and to issue a timely, direct response.

Not only does social listening allow fast-reactive social participation, it maintains trust between brand and consumer, and can help mitigate the risk of negative events ballooning into PR disasters. Brands who are visibly present and engaged with their customers telegraph a trustworthiness and competency that can build brand loyalty, even when events aren’t going to plan.

United Airlines’ ‘Flight 3411’ PR debacle is an example of just this kind of incident. After its staff forcibly removed and injured a passenger on a flight, video footage of the assault quickly went viral on social channels including Twitter and Weibo. Rather than staying present with their critics and forming a timely, transparent response, United Airlines defaulted to an official statement that attempted to blame the passenger for the incident. As outrage escalated and the mass media got involved, the company eventually had to climb down and issue an apology, but not before losing a huge amount of business and brand value.

It may not have made the event any less disgraceful, but a quick response to commentary as the events unfolded might have mitigated some of the damage.

Social listening may be an investment, but it’s one that’s critical within the travel industry where trust is paramount and customer anxieties run high. Longer-term, this practice helps travel leaders to gain a deep understanding of customer pain points and potential improvements, whether they’re expressed during a drone-related delay at the airport or when a frustrated customer is grappling with a glitchy website booking engine.
Practical tips for social listening

Check geolocation capabilities carefully

- When you’re choosing a social listening tool, make sure you have the full picture on its geolocation capabilities, both in terms of tracking the origination point and managing different languages and character sets. Some are better than others and you may need multiple providers to get full global coverage and make sure you’re getting a representative picture from your customers and followers, wherever they are in the world.

Listen beyond your own channels

- Your brand may not be active on every social channel, but you can bet lots of your customers and potential customers are. Although there’s additional value in using social listening for channels where you’re active and can send replies direct to users, you can also gain valuable insights with very little effort by listening to a wide range of channels.

Uncertainty and purchase decisions

An unsettled world creates its own travel trends. The UK’s position, hovering on the brink of Brexit, led according to Mintel data, to an upsurge in bookings for all-inclusive holidays. With exchange rates in chaos, this type of travel means travellers won’t end up paying more than they expected for meals and drinks as the GBP rate continues on its rollercoaster.

The trend for predictable expenses also favoured cruises, where the all-inclusive aspect covers the mode of transport as well as dining and accommodation. Cruises are catching the interest of millennial travellers as well as the over 55s (the traditional core audience). When surveyed by Mintel, 64% of UK 16–34 year olds said they would be interested in going on a cruise in the next 5 years. Virgin Holidays has put its money behind this expectation, and will launch a cruise liner targeted at millennials in 2020. It will have on-board tattooists and a range of eateries rather than the more traditional buffet dinners.

Another indication of the cruise industry’s rising fortunes is the Royal Caribbean line’s acquisition of a private island, Coco Cay, in the Bahamas. The location, which incorporates family-friendly attractions and flexible leisure options like a beach club and swim-up bar, will be for the exclusive use of the company’s cruise passengers when it opens in late 2019.

Staying close to home

Mintel’s research found that blazing sunshine and the UK’s uncertain position within the EU led to more UK travellers taking breaks close to home. Mintel noted slow growth in overseas holidays in 2018, with domestic travel growth remaining relatively strong.

Airbnb and similar ‘lodging services’, where holidaymakers stay with gig economy hosts rather than traditional hotels, are seen as a flexible, unique and affordable option. Mintel reports suggest that the market is yet to hit saturation point. In uncertain times, these kinds of holidays hold significant appeal for travellers thanks to their perceived value and ease. Despite those plus points, hotels are still seen as more reliable than Airbnb, and around half of travellers said the extra facilities hotels offer make them a better option.
Content
Content

High-quality insight paves the way for high-quality content. And that content can deliver substantial business benefits for travel businesses. Data-driven capabilities like personalisation and customer experience optimisation help match traveller expectations, and data-backed insights can help marketers allocate their budget to the channels where their most profitable audiences are. Done well, travel content can inspire, reassure, support, entertain and educate customers, and even shape their attitudes to travel. Here’s how leading brands are taking full advantage.

Multiple touchpoint decision-making and the role of content

Whatever the budget, choosing and booking a travel experience is a significant undertaking, as anyone who has organised a group holiday will tell you. In fact, data from McKinsey in 2018 shows that booking holiday accommodation – that’s just a room, no flights – involves on average 45 different touchpoints across 36 days. Those touchpoints include search engines, comparison sites, review aggregators, and they’re accessed across multiple devices.

To gain a deeper understanding of the customer’s journey, a robust attribution strategy is crucial. Not only will this deepen insights and help with future content planning, it can also help measure success over time as the number of touchpoints – hopefully – reduces in response to content implementation. Tools like Google Attribution 360 or LeadsRX can help you track the most common paths to purchase.

Effective content can play a crucial role in supporting and inspiring parts of the customer journey, and even reducing the potential for any stress, by bringing together ideas and information in a coherent, human way. Good travel content can remind the traveller why they’re going through the decision-making process in the first place and what their personal goals for travel really are, spurring them past their pain points towards the point of purchase.

Simplexity: feel-good content that cuts down conversion time

In our work with luxury travel brand Simplexity, we used a content-led approach to support traveller decision-making. Rather than overtly promoting our client’s products and services, the strategy was to add value for the customer and to educate and entertain an already-savvy audience. At the heart of the project were audience-targeted destination guides for over 300 holiday locations. These unique pieces of content, which eventually numbered in the 1000s, were supported and amplified by corporate partnerships, social ads and influencer campaigns.

As a result, the number of touchpoints Simplexity customers used before converting went from 10-14 down to 6-8 on average.

Content beyond 2D devices

Not all travel content experiences use conventional media. VR is a promising avenue for travel agents looking to bring younger holidaymakers into stores. Mintel’s 2018 research[17] showed that nearly half of 16-34-year-old holidaymakers said they would be more likely to visit a bricks-and-mortar travel agent if they could use VR technology to preview and experience a destination or accommodation.

However, 44% of the same group said they’d prefer to contact a travel agent via web chat than face-to-face or over the phone, suggesting that there’s still a strong preference for online interactions.

Practical tips for attribution

Move away from last click attribution

Last click is the default attribution model for most marketers out there, but in today’s fragmented user journey it has become increasingly important to determine how much each channel is contributing towards your growth strategy. Google Analytics offers three (four if you use Google Analytics 360) multi-touch models based on growth strategy and channel mix; these are Time Decay, which allocates more credit to touchpoints closer to the time of conversion, Linear, which distributes credit equally across all touchpoints and Position-Based, which assigns 40% of the credit to the first touchpoint, 40% to the last touchpoint and the remaining 20% distributed equally across other touchpoints. Each of these has its own benefits. Understanding the pros and cons of each – and which is most appropriate for your brand and business – will go a long way in improving the efficacy of your marketing.

Use data-drive attribution whenever possible

10 years ago the first iPhone was released and it revolutionised what we considered normal buying patterns and behaviours. Data driven attribution (DDA) is an algorithmic model that uses statistically significant data from multiple data sources to assign conversion credit to the four most influential touchpoints in a conversion path over the 90 days prior to a conversion. If you use Google Analytics, it is only available via the 360 family of enterprise level solutions that the Google Marketing Platform offers. DDA is incredibly useful when trying to understand what aspects of your marketing approach are most effective. Bear in mind that for DDA to work for you, you need to meet some requirements:

• Access to GA360
• High volumes of high-quality data
• Alignment of goals and KPIs across channels
• Conversion tracking setup
• Over 400 conversions per goal with a conversion path length of 2+ and at least 10,000 conversions paths in that reporting view in the last 4 weeks

[17] Mintel report provided (Holiday Review 2019 Executive Summary)
Authority, authenticity and owning local knowledge

For challenger travel brands in a saturated market, being able to get customers where they want to go is just the beginning. Ensuring they have the most unique, memorable experience once they arrive, on the other hand, is a powerful differentiator – which often means playing to the transformative travel trend. Brands that embrace their destinations and have authentic, local knowledge can offer their customers the kind of experience they will treasure, one that feels truly unique and personal.

User generated content fits perfectly here. Handing over content decisions to travellers echoes the transformative idea of co-creation and travel autonomy, where travellers create their own experiences. It also means travellers can boost their own social capital by sharing tips and pictures on a brand’s platform and creating a personal travelogue that captures their experience.

A great example is Visit Scotland[18] and their Instagram-based UCG project, which offers two hashtags and a call to travellers to ‘share your Scotland’ in photographs. Selected photos are reposted on the VisitScotland Instagram channel, and are also reproduced on the website where they form the basis of a trip planner[19] feature. Site visitors choose their own mix of photos and the locations in them are added to a digital itinerary.

Another outstanding example of user-generated local knowledge is the Swedish Number.[20] This 2016 campaign by the Swedish Tourist Association put human beings in direct contact with one another to create a powerful – and inarguably authentic – connection between nations.

A single mobile number routed the caller to a randomly allocated Swedish person who had signed up to take part in the campaign. Without training, the Swedish participants were encouraged to chat about anything and everything with members of the international public, creating a unique personal connection to Swedish culture. The campaign was launched to mark the 250th anniversary of Sweden’s censorship ban and involved over 30,000 Swedes taking nearly 200,000 calls.

[18] https://www.instagram.com/visitscotland/
The power of ‘micro moments’

Google coined the term ‘micro moments’ to describe the quick, intent-rich interactions users make with their digital devices. In layman’s terms, they’re those times when you take out your phone and look something up. When it comes to travel, micro moments are everywhere, from checking directions in an unfamiliar city to looking up a translation in another language. They also play an important role in the decision-making journey during holiday planning, as customers seek to answer questions like ‘what’s the weather like in Andalusia?’ or ‘how much does a helicopter ride cost in Scotland?’. For example, Google saw an increase of over 70% in search queries for ‘do you tip in_’ between 2015 and 2017.

Understanding the micro moments phenomenon is essential for a travel content marketing strategy, as it will help you create content that provides prompt, helpful answers to search queries of this type. Google’s research[21] shows that travellers increasingly want to ‘know before they go’ when planning dining, days out or hotel stays, and are looking for precise details like menu items (55% increase) or typical wait-times (120% increase) at a destination. Not only do people expect this level of detailed information to be available online, they expect to find it instantly and in an accessible, user-friendly format. By catering to these expectations, brands can help travellers feel more prepared, confident and excited about their leisure travel.

Delivering ease with branded apps

Spontaneity and autonomy are seen as desirable by many travellers in the millennial demographic,²² who are looking for meaningful experiences that are fresh and serendipitous rather than packaged and predictable. For these travellers, in-trip discoveries, like a hidden gem of a restaurant or a tiny park overlooked by the tourist trails, are often mediated by digital devices and apps like Google Maps, OpenTable and EasyTaxi.

Travel brands can equip holidaymakers with the means to explore and create their own unique experiences by providing apps that serve a practical purpose, rather than sell or promote.

Travel brands can equip holidaymakers with the means to explore and create their own unique experiences by providing apps that serve a practical purpose, rather than sell or promote. There’s also a strong case for travel apps that do one thing well. As McKinsey²³ noted in 2015, there’s a move towards ‘unbundling’ during travel experiences. For example, where once a hotel could expect to gain revenue from convenient ‘extras’ like pay-per-view cable TV, room service and in-room phones, today’s traveller is much more likely to settle in for an evening with Netflix on their own tablet, order a Deliveroo meal and chat on Whatsapp or Skype. Travel apps need to be specialised and purposeful, rather than general and promotional.

A great example of a travel app that embraces these ideas is One:Night,²⁴ run by Standard Hotels. The app allows travellers to find and book last-minute vacancies in boutique hotels in major cities, meaning not only can they travel on a whim and find accommodation spontaneously, but they’ll also save on the average nightly rate. The hotel partners meanwhile get to maximise the revenue on rooms that might otherwise go unsold for the night. It’s a little like Lastminute.com, but with geolocation.

²² https://skift.com/sgf-magazine/
²⁴ https://onenight.com/
https://techcrunch.com/2017/10/06/one-night-the-boutique-last-minute-hotel-app-is-expanding-internationally-to-london/
In the last few years, we have seen the continued rise of budget airlines, growth of TripAdvisor, SkyScanner and booking.com, plus the amazing innovations in more fuel-efficient aircraft. But what’s next for the passenger journey and what challenges are airlines facing?

One concern for airlines is how they connect with their customers in this digital world and whether they are keeping up with the needs of their travellers. This formidable challenge is twofold. With the huge growth of the travel market, airlines now have to grab the attention of both their current customers and build a new and direct dialogue with future travellers. They need channel stickiness, loyal customers and a conversation with the future passenger to succeed and survive. But are they currently connecting? And if so, how? In a recent conversation with a seasoned marketing executive at a major flag carrier, she told me that the competition to “own that conversation” between travel company and customer has never been tougher. She said that travellers today (or specifically their loyalty) is being “stolen away” by the Online Travel Agents (OTAs), accommodation review sites and booking engines. She felt that they had stolen away by “better content and mathematicians”. Those new platforms had blind-sided legacy carriers with a better understanding of the new channels. She added that price promiscuity amongst customers and onboard WiFi is exacerbating this problem. Her summary was illuminating. The demand for storytelling was only on the increase – but so too had the supply of that type of information from other organisations across multiple channels. The internet had indeed democratised information, but it has also dissipated the message of airlines who were very used to talking to their own captive audience on their own terms.

Now published by Ink, American Way was the first inflight magazine, created by American Airlines in 1966 to build a direct bridge, touchpoint and bond with its customers. As a branding exercise it immediately worked and all the other airlines followed suit. In May 2019, Harris Poll conducted an independent survey in North America and concluded that despite all the digital distractions, 86% of passengers still interact with the inflight magazine.

However, today it’s the OTAs who have made the biggest investment in content marketing and have somewhat usurped the airlines. They now send you beautiful travel videos, hot travel tips, and retarget potential travellers with digital advertising. Have airlines done the same? Some, but not nearly enough. Of course, each airline has its own digital footprint, but many of them are just getting lost in the noise. And what’s worse is that they are about to dilute their efforts yet further by offering free WiFi without any restrictions. In a bid to enhance the passenger experience and keep flyers happy, this good deed will not go unpunished. It will further damage that airline’s business by giving away their passengers and losing that very valuable sense of captivity.

Michael Keating,
CEO, Ink
www.ink-global.com
Ink – the world’s leading travel media company – works with 25+ airlines globally.
Social
Social

Social media is the third part of the travel marketing trifecta, and it links with insight and content in multiple, integral ways. Firstly, social distribution delivers content to its audiences, adding a level of precision targeting, contextual relevance and interactivity that content alone cannot achieve. Secondly, it helps brands deliver customer service, interacting with customers directly at key touchpoints and intervening effectively to enhance their experiences. Thirdly, social channels and the data they produce help travel marketers drive fresh insights and new directions for content.

The drip factor

We know that decision-making can be a drawn-out process for holidaymakers, even those who can afford to spare no expense. There’s a bewildering amount of choice, and consumers must navigate a crowded landscape of competing brands, intermediaries, review sites and channels. Social media is perfectly suited to maintaining brand awareness during this decision-making timeline.

A drip-feed style approach, where members of the target audience are offered a steady but varied and engaging programme of social updates, embeds your brand with them and helps build trust, recognition and curiosity.

The more impressions you make, the more chance there is that the customer will connect with one of your ads or updates

The more impressions you make, the more chance there is that the customer will connect with one of your ads or updates, whether it’s a walking tour of Rome or a guided exploration of the Parisian catacombs.

Drip campaigns are well-established as a form of email marketing, where they are successfully applied in lead-nurturing and re-engagement over the course of a customer lifecycle. In that context, the drip approach boosted sales by 20% when used to nurture leads. And thanks to automation and targeting technology, it’s an idea that translates well into social too.

Social media drip-feeding goes hand-in-hand with your content production, and amplifies its reach across your chosen channels and demographics. As well as setting up automated social posts for your main feeds when you publish new content, you can use custom ads to match your content with the people most likely to find it relevant. That can include remarketing, targeting visitors with related content after they leave your site and use other platforms.

20% the drip approach boosted sales by 20% when used to nurture leads

[25] https://www.pinpointe.com/blog/do-drip-campaigns-really-work
Interacting before and during travel

Like apps, branded social accounts can help travellers to explore autonomously and make the most out of their experiences. Using popular platforms like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, brands can combine their own destination knowledge and in-house expertise with more typical customer service to provide a kind of virtual travel buddy for their customers.

@HiltonSuggests,[26] on Twitter, is a concierge-like service that answers traveller questions and recommends local dining and sightseeing ideas, wherever they happen to be. It’s part of a wider ecosystem of Twitter activity that employs precise social listening and provides speedy replies to guests on a 24-hour basis. The hotel chain sees social as a way to proactively engage with guests wherever they are, provide great service and at the same time gather insights that are fed back into the strategic planning levels of the business.

Social media interaction doesn’t have to be manually conducted, of course – these days brands have the option of using AI tools like chatbots to field customer enquiries and handle common queries like pricing and travel scheduling. The Facebook Messenger bots for flight comparison sites Skyscanner and Kayak are among the most popular. They take the click-work out of choosing the cheapest possible flight by allowing users to ask questions in natural language rather than plough through drop-downs and filters. Kayak’s bot[27] can even answer questions like ‘where can I go for £500?”.

Practical tips for social media

Embrace honesty

- Social media is more informal than most business communication channels, and brands who stick to a more traditional approach risk appearing stuffy or out of touch. Empower staff to be natural and friendly as well as polite with customers, and let them know it’s fine to say ‘I don’t know – but I’ll find out for you’.

Set objectives

- Like Hilton Hotels, you can add clarity and authenticity to your social media by having a defined goal and purpose for your channels, such as always being available to customers. Make sure your customer service agents, marketing teams and anyone else involved in your social channels – including the developers of chatbots, if you use them – are briefed and on board with your specific objectives, even if they seem self-evident to you.

[27] https://www.vertical-leap.uk/blog/here-are-the-best-travel-chatbots-so-far/
Leveraging influence

We can’t cover social media without mentioning the role of influencers. With its mix of aspiration, emotion, style and colour, the travel sector has huge resonance and compatibility with the influencer sphere, and potential for impact that’s nothing short of enormous.

Practical tips for influencer engagement

Be clear on who is in control

- Influencers own their channels, and entering into a business relationship with them doesn’t change this. Rather than being prescriptive about what an influencer posts and when, work with them to find an approach that meets your goals while remaining authentic and true-to-type for them. The results will be better for it.

Diversify your partnerships

- Influencers are individuals, and as such they’re unique. There’s no guarantee you’ll be able to predict the success of a partnership or if the chemistry will be right. It’s a good idea to spread your budget across several people rather than choosing a single one, particularly if influencer marketing is new to you.

However, with power comes responsibility, and the world of influencer marketing can be tricky to navigate for brands who don’t have a deep understanding of the market available to them. One of the most infamous influencer marketing fails of the decade was the Fyre Festival, which set impossible expectations with an influencer campaign that careened out of control, only to end in disaster when organisers couldn’t deliver on the campaign’s promises.

Given the wide range of influencer styles, subjects and business approaches, choosing the right people to work with can be tricky. Follower numbers are a commonly-used marker of influencer value, but these mean nothing if an influencer’s personal brand doesn’t resonate with your own, or if their audience demographics aren’t aligned with yours. It’s also important to structure campaigns with influencers in a way that supports your user journeys, so that the content they publish really speaks to your customers.
Finding and evaluating potential partners can be made easier through social listening. A period of time spent monitoring the social space can help you discover not only influencers, but potential brand advocates. These are the people who, rather than being paid to promote your brand, already have a passion and loyalty that you can nurture and reward.

An example of influencer marketing done well is the Caribbean island of Curacao and its Tourist Board. Recognising that the majority of its visitors arrived from New York's JFK airport, the Board used the reach of 11 handpicked influencers who were based in, and had a strong influence on, the New York area. Rather than simply choosing travel-themed blogs and accounts, they opted for figures who were influential across a range of sectors including beauty and fashion, helping extend their reach beyond travel enthusiasts to those who may not have otherwise considered Curacao as a destination. Over 10 months, the campaign reached around 10 million New Yorkers and the Tourist Board reported a staggering 82% in ROI. [28]


New Yorkers reached via innovative influencer marketing
Reviews still pack a punch – and replies matter

Reviews play a huge role in decision-making for travellers. In Mintel’s 2018 research, 6 in 10 holidaymakers said reviews were important for choosing a destination for their main annual holiday. For comparison, only 37% said they were influenced by advice from a travel expert, and 35% were influenced by brochures.

Although review authenticity can’t be taken for granted, it’s still seen as a more desirable resource among travellers than the traditional information sources. Why? There’s a perception of impartiality, with many voices creating a verdict that’s seen as rounded and fair. Individual reviews hold value too – there’s a huge quantity of detail in some which can be uncovered by searching on sites like TripAdvisor or Trustpilot. The presence of negative reviews can point towards flaws that ‘official’ information won’t cover.

Information quality aside, reviews are also lower-effort than making an appointment to see a travel agent or send off for a brochure, which may be helping to embed their role as a go-to research tool. It’s much easier to whip out a phone and scroll through reviews than to seek out independently-hosted content or to contact individual brands.

As a business, then, it’s crucial to not only keep track of reviews but to have the resources available to close the loop on unsatisfactory experiences. TripAdvisor’s own data[29] bears this out. Their 2015 traveller survey found that 65% of travellers would be more likely to book a hotel where a manager responded to negative reviews, and 85% said a thoughtful management response would improve their perception of the business. 4 out of 5 believed that businesses who responded to reviews cared more about their guests.

[29] https://www.tripadvisor.com/TripAdvisorInsights/w661
Practical tips for social and review engagement

Pick a proxy question and pin it

- When social mentions or reviews are coming in at a high volume, it can be tricky to answer every single one. One option is to answer a single question that’s representative of lots of others, and then highlight it or pin it at the top of your feed. This is your “proxy” question and answering it thoroughly and prominently will save time for both you and your customers. To help make its role clearer, write a response that begins something like ‘A lot of people have asked this, and here’s the answer...’

Respond in a consistent way

- Adopt a policy and stick to it. For example, you might decide that your accounts will only reply to comments or reviews that are respectfully written and refer to a specific problem, and ignore those that are abusive or use general criticisms like ‘poor’ or ‘I didn’t like it’. Remember that by responding to certain kinds of reviews, you’re sending the message that these are the ones you care about, and that you don’t waste time getting into circular discussions or arguments.

Develop a brand tone of voice

- Social accounts need to be scalable, even for the smallest startups, and that means keeping the tone of voice recognisable and consistent. Doing so will build trust and recognition among users and make life easier for people composing replies and updates too. With multiple staff manning your social handles, you need a few guidelines in place to make sure @yourtravelbrand always sounds like itself. This needn’t be an exhaustive manual, and even a quick top 10 of tonal rules such as ‘max 3 emojis per tweet’ or ‘US English’ can make a big difference.
Conclusion
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In these pages we’ve explored how travel marketing is driven by insight, expressed in content, and reaches its audience through social. The relationship between these three practices isn’t simply linear though. They’re closely interwoven, each one influencing and supporting the others in multiple ways, from social media’s role in sourcing user-generated images to the way monitoring web content use through attribution delivers valuable insight. Mastering these three pillars is the core of a solid, sustainable travel marketing operation that will see your business through changes in scale, evolutions of the travel market, and the many unexpected events that make the travel industry such a varied and exhilarating one to work in.

Can we join your journey?

We hope you’ve found some helpful tips and talking points in this eBook. We have plenty more to say – it’s a subject very close to our hearts – so if you’re embarking on a travel marketing project, or you have one underway, we’d love to have a chat with you to see how we can help.

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