

Social Networking & Travel Management

- Social media has gained some traction throughout the managed travel industry. Are companies using it to the best advantage for their travel programs?

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According to the Deloitte State of the Media Democracy, Fifth Edition, released in February 2011, more than 61 percent of U.S. consumers age 14 to 75 now participate in social media sites. The business world got the tweet early on. As criticisms of service, products and quality standards went viral on the web, many big-name companies got out in front of the trend and began “listening” to consumers by scraping social media sites for occurrences of their brand names. In responding to disgruntled customers or building communities through promotions and feedback vehicles that live in the social media space, creative companies are finding loyalty and market share success.

Travel suppliers are included in the long list of enterprises that have been both helped and hindered by social media. JetBlue effectively harnesses the medium for promotions and loyalty schemes, while United was publicly burned in a baggage handling tussle that went viral on YouTube. That said, the effect of social media on the managed travel space has been fairly insignificant. Few companies have implemented social media as a travel management tool; the question remains

as to whether they should—and, if so, what form it should take.

Two major arguments tend to shape the debate surrounding social media and travel management.

1. Social communication is the wave of the future; if corporations don't embrace it now, including travel departments, they will be behind the curve with influencing and/or communicating with their employees/travelers.

2. Corporate security and confidentiality are primary concerns and social media tools threaten that requirement on an enterprise level—therefore, a discussion of incorporating social media into a travel management program can be a dead end.

There may ultimately be a middle ground in this debate and, indeed, technology providers have begun to deploy workable social media tools to the travel management space. In this white paper, presented by Egencia, travel management stakeholders will learn about the current demand for social networking tools from the perspective of the business

Cross Generations: Social Networking Usage

Percent of US Internet users who currently maintain a social networking site profile

	2007	2008	2009
Millennials (14-26)	71%	76%	77%
Generation X (27-43)	51%	57%	61%
Boomers (44-62)	30%	31%	46%
Matures (63-75)	10%	14%	36%

Source: 2010 Deloitte, State of the Media Democracy, Fourth Edition

“We have not really addressed [social networking tools] internally, and definitely not for travel. Over time, the travelers will demand this, and we need to get in front of that.”

– Travel Procurement Mgr.,
Technology Co.

traveler and the travel manager—and how a handful of companies are leveraging social media to enhance travel programs.

Section 2. Travelers & Travel Managers See Eye to Eye

In Fall 2010, Egencia fielded two parallel surveys to gauge interest in social networking as it relates to business travel. The first study queried 102 travel buyers and stakeholders about the benefits of incorporating public social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) into their travel programs. The second study queried nearly 5,000 business travelers about whether incorporating social networking sites into travel programs would enhance the travel experience.

Among travel buyers and stakeholders, 12 percent felt that there was a benefit to be gained from incorporating public social media tools in the travel program. Among that 12 percent, most indicated the application of the tools from a travel management perspective would be limited. Business travelers themselves were in lockstep with their travel managers, with only 13 percent voicing support for social networking enhancements to their current programs.

TRAVEL MANAGEMENT VIEW

Among the 12 percent of travel management respondents who saw potential in social networking, there were several recurring ideas about the types of communications and functionality that would be helpful in actively managing their travelers or in creating a community where travelers would share knowledge to create a better travel program. These opportunities fell into three major categories.

Personal Travel Updates – Some travel stakeholders saw the value in incorporating social media in their programs so that travelers could notify family, friends

and co-workers about their arrivals, departures and other itinerary-related information. Particularly for business, “the ability to post an itinerary (if they want) for others in group to know when their arrival time is” was a stated benefit from one respondent. Another suggested, “sharing where travelers are going for networking purposes,” alluding to the potential to optimize a single trip to see other clients, prospects or business partners in the destination market.

On the flip side, many travel managers voiced opposition to this idea on safety and security grounds. Particularly on public sites, they argued, travel status updates had the potential to leak beyond the confines of a specific group, putting the traveler at risk personally (theft at an empty house, for example) or the company at risk by telegraphing to outsiders major markets where the company is doing business.

Supplier Reviews & Travel Tips –

Traveler-to-traveler communications were identified as another potential benefit of social networks as a travel management tool. Specifically, giving travelers the ability create and share hotel and restaurant reviews was mentioned by several survey respondents and one listed the idea of travelers trading “travel tips and tricks” via a social networking platform.

These ideas are interesting in that they allow travelers to begin to influence each other with recommendations—without the mediation of the travel manager. While that approach could be attractive to some travel managers as a way to ratchet up traveler satisfaction and to help orient travelers headed to a destination for the first time, many travel managers would likely object on the grounds that such recommendations—especially in the hotel category—could easily drive travelers

away from important preferred suppliers and perhaps out of compliance entirely.

The trade-off for this approach, however, would be in granting the travel managers a window into the thoughts and experiences of travelers. By “listening” to these conversations and recommendations, travel buyers could develop a better picture of which suppliers are valuable and providing excellent service, and which ones might be fulfilling minimum contract requirements (or even falling below them). This approach is in contrast to annual surveys and other “static” methods of eliciting feedback from travelers. By tracking traveler reviews via a social media site, travel managers and travel procurement could gain insights into future sourcing opportunities or even intervene if an existing preferred supplier received legitimate negative reviews.

Alerts & Information – A small number of survey respondents also suggested the possibility of posting travel alerts and other information on a social media platform. The idea is important because it suggests an expectation that survey respondents would look to their TMC partners to create the social networking opportunity and incorporate this type of functionality on the supplier side—whether using Facebook and/or Twitter or perhaps building/buying a proprietary technology.

BUSINESS TRAVELER VIEW

Asked about whether social networking sites would enhance the traveler experience, nearly 5,000 business travelers responding to the parallel Egencia study were on the same page as their travel managers. Ideas regarding the potential for social networking sites to enhance the traveler experience or optimize time on the road fell very much in line with the ideas presented in the travel manager survey. The open response objections to the use of social networks and travel included the following general categories:

- It is unsafe from a personal perspective to telegraph travel times/places
- It is unwise from a business perspective to telegraph travel times/places
- Personal decision not to use Facebook/Twitter for business purposes
- Company does not allow/actively blocks employees from Facebook/Twitter while at work and/or via company issued mobile devices
- Respondent does not currently use any social networking sites

These types of objections are logical given that survey respondents were asked specifically to consider such applications as Facebook and Twitter when answering the question. There does, however, exist a third option that offers a middle ground between disallowing social networking technologies in the workplace and posting sensitive corporate and/or personal information in a such a public forum as Facebook or Twitter.

That alternative is to create a social networking-type forum behind a corporate firewall that allows employees to share travel experiences internally, mitigating many of the risks and objections voiced in both of the Egencia studies. A handful of survey takers thought outside of the box and suggested this alternative. While these responses represented less than 1 percent of the feedback from both surveys, it is indeed the path that many travel managers have taken—or plan to take—when introducing social networking technologies to their travelers.

Section 3. Exploring Alternatives

There is no single solution for social networking and managed travel—the approach depends upon the culture of the organization where the tools will be used. Some companies have fewer qualms about using a public site like Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn to create fan pages or groups where internal communications require light security measures.

The travel manager must consider the types of outgoing communications that will be shared from the travel management office and whether travelers will be sharing sensitive information with each other. They must also clearly consider company attitudes toward social networking sites in general.

For companies that are wary of major social networking sites, there are several workable alternatives that can accomplish many of the goals identified in the Egencia study without exposing travelers or the company to the public eye:

Internal Blogs – An old-fashioned blog site set up behind the company firewall is an interesting, stripped down approach to social networking for travel. While it will likely not feature the extensive personal profiles, photos or other bells and whistles offered by a Facebook-style application, it gets the job done for those

A Road Warrior Speaks

Type of Company:
Enterprise Technology
Location: East Coast
Trip Volume: Twice a month

In a follow-up interview to Egencia’s traveler study, one seasoned road warrior who manages other heavy travelers noted that while he is not personally connected to Facebook while on the road, his travelers are.

“I can definitely see the value of social networking for travelers,” he said. “I see other people’s phones—Facebook is up all the time. It would be great to share status updates as a fan of [name of company] travel. It would be great to get traveler alerts or tips about a destination.”

About Egencia

Egencia is the corporate travel arm of Expedia, Inc., delivering complete corporate travel management service backed by global market expertise and industry-leading, proprietary technology. Visit Egencia at www.egencia.com.

Experience Talks

Type of Company:

Beverage Technology

Industry: Manufacturing

Location: Midwest

Travel manager implemented a blog site behind the company firewall in November 2010. Despite the fact that employee age skews older (many employees have enjoyed 20- or 30-year careers with the company), the travel blog has gained excellent acceptance as a communications vehicle.

Users tend to be road warriors. According to the travel manager who implemented the program, these are the people who see the most incidents on the road, so getting their participation has been key to the blog's success.

Most successful posts to date:

- Continentals move to join United in Terminal 1 at Chicago O'Hare
- "Tips for Weathering Winter Business Travel"
- A holiday post that promoted the donation of airline miles to a children's memorial hospital

Other common posts:

- Policy changes
- Additions to the hotel program
- How to get a credit card application
- Changes to preferred suppliers

Best Practice:

"The travelers want to know 'what's in it for me.' It would be very easy to overwhelm them with information through the blog, so it's important to keep messages short and to the point, otherwise you lose your participants and your effectiveness."

companies that simply require a communications vehicle for their travel program.

According to one travel manager who launched a travel blog within her managed corporate travel program in November (see sidebar, this page, for specific details), it has become an excellent tool for getting quick messages out to travelers and building an amicable relationship with employees. Among this practitioner's best practices:

- Keep messages short and sweet; travelers want to know "what's in it for me."
- Keep frequency fairly constant, but do not overwhelm with messages (twice weekly is the right amount for her company).
- Special offers, travel alerts and traveler tips will get the most traction and responses.
- Don't assume that age or technology habits will prevent employees from using a blog "the kids are teaching older users how to use new communications tools."
- Don't discard email, texting and other communications platforms; a blog is an addition to traditional tools.
- Be aware that it is a place where travelers will lodge complaints and they will need to be addressed.

Quasi-Private Microblogs/Travel Apps

– Twitter-style microblogs like Yammer as well as itinerary managers with social networking capabilities are available on the web at low or no cost. They allow corporations to define user lists according to email domains, which should mitigate some corporate privacy issues. For example, a traveler at Acme X company would only be granted access to the blog if he or she had a valid email address that used the formula name@acmex.com. The travel manager has the power to define acceptable email domains for access and the programs send verified confirmation emails to support user identity security.

These sites offer some of the benefits of Facebook or Twitter-style social networking, including photo posting and a familiar interface for current users of the major social sites. Moreover, itinerary sharing sites such as WorldMate or TripCase are built specifically for travel. Sharing company information and personal travel updates should be less of a concern with this type tool. Companies seeking complete security, however, should opt for a more robust solution.

Enterprise Social Networking Tools

– Several technology companies have introduced enterprise-oriented social networking tools to the market. These solutions are often designed to accommodate multiple levels of access, configurable functionality and secure deployment behind the corporation's firewall. Not designed specifically for travel, but configurable to accommodate the needs of travel managers, these tools are positioned in the market as the next must-have for corporate communications overall. That message is not lost on forward thinking travel managers and travel stakeholders, who are concerned about effective communications for their travel programs.

Section 4. The Pulse of the Future

One such procurement professional with responsibility for travel bemoaned the state of social networking at his own company. "This company has a policy that prevents employees from speaking about the company or about their work on social networking sites. It's really an effort to protect the brand and to prevent private information from getting out to the public."

While the procurement pro understands the branding and image issue at hand, he has reservations about how quickly the company is reacting to the rise of social media as a communications vehicle. "Unfortunately, we have only dealt with social networking on that external level, with how we are presented to the public," he said. "We have not really addressed it internally, and definitely not for travel."

Many companies that participated in the Egencia study appeared to be on the same trajectory, placing their focus on protecting their brands from social media rather than harnessing it to their advantage. Asked to rate the importance of social media to the travel program, however, the interviewee returned a rating of three. So, why worry about it?

"I would rate it a three for now," he said, "but as more young people come into the company, it's going to reach an eight very quickly." Whether by implementing an internal social network or leveraging a technology on the outside for travel management, "we need to figure out a strategy before our communications channels become outdated and we begin to lose influence over travelers."