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XEBIDY

Strategic Design

Creatively applying the Internet to travel to create an emotive network: authentic content, connecting technology and an engaged customer.



The Social Internet
can be a real
adventure

CREATING A RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR CUSTOMERS...

Travel should use the Internet to create an ethos of an emotive network that employs feedback loops to filter out marketing spin by letting users remove it manually from a wiki, shout it down in their own travel blogs, or simply let it create dust because they don't tag it as cool. A personal, emotive and trusted network remains.

XSD has coined the phrase "creating an Emotive Travel Internetwork: authentic content, connecting technology and an engaged customer". Technologies like email, instant messaging, blogs and RSS feeds assist travellers to form these emotive networks where they engage in mutual communication and support. These travellers are having conversations about the companies they travel with through these connecting technologies.

A leading edge web strategy should aim to connect with these travellers at an emotional, personal level. No sane customer wants to be messaged to - what they want is engagement with companies on a personal level.

In this paper we explore some of the online opportunities that exist to create a relationship with your potential customers and

thereafter provide a more engaging experience via your website, blogs and booking processes. We introduce some of the newer technologies on the Internet such as community sites like MySpace or Yahoo! Answers, RSS feeds for syndicating content, and interactive online media such as review site forums and blogs.

Once you have turned these lookers to customers the relationship is only just starting. Sure you know about delivering a product but we look at some of the other contact points that travel companies neglect to provide which may lead to happier customers, better word of mouth and even increased revenue from further sales. Remember it costs less to get more money from an existing customer than to attract a new customer.



Engaged Customers

No sane customer wants to be messaged to, they want a personal relationship with the companies they travel with.

TRAVEL 2.0



Social is not just youth

While so-called youth brands like MTV, VH1 and Cosmopolitan are seeing their audience turn to social media, brands like the New York Times and Wall Street Journal are also seeing over a third of their older more mainstream audience consuming social media.

The Internet 2.0

Many of the concepts here are parts of what is referred to as the Web 2.0 phenomenon. One of the features of Web 2.0 is the increasingly social network of the Internet. Social networking changes the way people research and buy travel, from ratings and reviews sites like Trip Advisor, to blogs and inspirational sites like SoGoNow, to the evolving social search functionality of Yahoo! Trip Planner.

The social Internet provides a rich source of positive customer feedback and endorsements for your products.

Social networking basically means Internet users searching and receiving information on your products (tours, accommodation and otherwise) from their peers. Tools such as forums, reviews and ratings, and blogs facilitate this flow of information; while other tools such as RSS feeds make the information flow faster and easier to the everyday customer. Social networking is more than a passing fad - it marks the next evolutionary step in how customers will use the web. The nature of New Zealand and Australian travel companies is such that they are ideally suited to bring the

real world into this Internet phenomenon.

Equally, many non-emotive functional elements are tied in; including intuitive and appealing comparisons of products such as showing the value of extra nights or add-on day trips etc., a more visual and less abstract decision-making process, more emphasis on bringing the experience of the product to the website, the use of rollovers and DHTML to draw in more content (especially from the customers) into the standard site content, and strong user interface innovation - particularly in the checkout process.

Nearly one-third of US leisure travellers who research travel online say they do so using user-written reviews. What's more those travellers say they trust user-written reviews more than professional reviews. However, only 9% of those same travellers identify themselves as having used "community review sites like IGoUgo or Trip Advisor". This gap indicates that travellers are listening to each other online, but most don't associate that experience with a particular kind of site. This is great news for your own sites - there is no monopoly on social networking for travel!



Web 2.0 has
broad market
appeal

Get involved in social media starting with the key influences.

Customers are talking about your company online and you are not participating in these conversations. At the very least, a formal process around monitoring what's being said about you in the blogosphere, in user reviews, forums and social networks is imperative. The risk faced from the social Internet is a potential PR backlash blowing up outside your website without you having any knowledge of it. Bad news should be managed quickly and truthfully.

A good Internet Marketing strategy however, goes beyond being just a bystander to actually getting involved. Perhaps the most interesting anecdote is the experience of Starwood Hotels in the US. They have people actively involved in forums and blogs sites discussing travel including air-points discussions sites where they clarify questions about the Starwood Loyalty programme. The Starwood bloggers don't hide behind anonymity either, their username is Starwood Lurker - the programme has been received very well indeed by their customers.

There are a plethora of leading sites that you can to get involved with discussions. For backpacking companies the obvious choices

are Lonely Planets' Thorn Tree, The BUG websites, the excellent Backpackers.com, The Backpackers Board in New Zealand and The GumTree for companies attracting Kiwis and Aussies in the UK.

Review sites, forums and blogs

But look beyond these comfort zones and into sites such as Yahoo! Groups, Yahoo! Answers, Google Groups and Yahoo! Travel. At Google and Yahoo! Groups, individuals form groups based on their interests. Have you ever thought of creating your own group based around your travel offering? At Yahoo! Answers people answer questions on just about anything - and earn ratings for doing so. At the beginning of March there were 83 unanswered questions relating to budget travel, backpacking and hostels in Australia alone. Why not have someone in your industry answer these questions? At Yahoo! Travel you can construct your own itinerary for anywhere, share it and book it. Other travellers can see this itinerary and base their own trips on it. An interesting exercise is to create trips around your own products.

Now officially the worlds largest website MySpace provides a massive opportunity to create a community around your product. Hopefully, there are literally thousands of ex-customers on MySpace who would love to join you and your Friends' list and brag about their trip, share images and help you attract new customers. If you are targeting Europeans also look to MSN Spaces for a similar approach.

Social networking sites such as MySpace, MSN Spaces, and Bebo allow a user to basically create their own web page profiling themselves. These pages can include music, videos, images and general information. Other users then ask the page owner to "add" them to their list of friends which entitles them to communicate with one other. Bands are using these communities successfully to promote themselves and their music; and there is no reason why a travel company cannot do the same.

Travel promotes a sense of community and your past customers would love the opportunity to communicate with one another and with your company in an informal third party environment. Stories, videos and photos can be shared, as well as candid comments, which gives you the opportunity to create a personal relationship with the customer outside of the your formal sales environment.



IMMERSE YOURSELF IN SOCIAL MEDIA

YOU - are welcome!

The most important rule is to be yourself in forum sites. Do not pretend to be impartial, announce that you are the company and tackle all information honestly and head on. You will find other participants will be welcoming of your integrity.



Make it easy for your customers to get content

RSS Feeds

RSS Feeds are all the rage, and for good reason.

They allow the reader to control the flow of information to themselves, they speed up that flow, and they increase the relevancy of the

information one receives. A reader selects the RSS feeds they want to receive and brings them into an aggregator to read. Aggregators are free, as are RSS feeds.

Search engine marketers love RSS feeds as they effectively provide returning traffic back to the websites. However, for your RSS feed to be of any worth the information being fed has to be newsworthy enough that a customer or potential customer will subscribe to the feed. If the feed content does not change regularly enough and is not relevant to the reader they will remove the feed with a single click.

Providing the content is fun and is updated regularly travellers and the industry alike will subscribe to these feeds. Special deals are a potential feed as are forums. If regular web specials, added values or similar are regularly posted on your site then prospective travellers may sign up for these feeds looking out for a deal. Forum users prefer RSS feeds as their way of monitoring new posts rather than trawling through endless forum gossip. Regular newsletters are perfect for RSS feeds.

Get your customers involved in your site.

The Participation Age

With your involvement in the social Internet encourage your customers to get involved in generating content for your site.

Some options are having them involved in FAQs, get-

ting them to write reviews and ratings on your product, post their own photos, videos or travel experiences, or even allowing themselves to be contacted by potential customers

for personal feedback!

It is unlikely you remember your first email, it was probably Hotmail, and they probably just happened and next thing you know you changed the way you go about your everyday life. That's right you changed your life! Technology is both an end and a means. Consumers will adopt a technology that yields immediate benefits, but over time, some, or all, consumers will reshape their lives to take advantage of that technology.

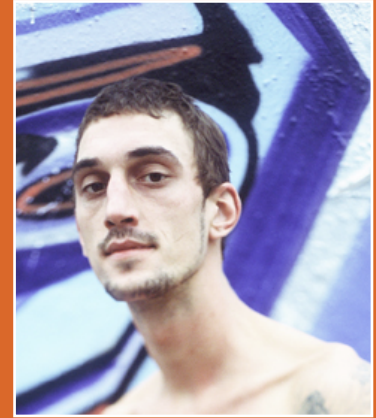
This is exactly the state of the Internet now. Users are not only looking to their peers online for advice, they are actively seeking to give their advice also. Whether it is an altruistic desire to help their fellow travellers or simply a self promotion as a perceived expert your customers are more than happy to review products for you or help new potential customers answer questions they have. Your website must evolve to facilitate these emotive networks by providing such products as FAQ wikis and online surveys.

Owning the customer

Publishing this third party content will provide the independent "authentic content" your customers are looking for to assist the decision making process and retain them in your site rather than going and finding it elsewhere.


Consumers are already changing their travel research and purchase patterns to seek better additional information from everywhere including their peers. The opportunity for marketers is to recognise the potential "to own a customer" - that proverbial tourism buzz-phrase. That is, being able to contact customers and re-market to them or better still have your customers promote your company in the social Internet. Yet surprisingly, tourism companies are missing glaringly obvious opportunities to own their customer through capitalising on everyday "contact points". Some suggested contact points follow:

SOCIAL FUN



Managing resources

Ongoing maintenance of forums, questions and answer sites, and other interactive social sites can be very time consuming. One suggestion is to encourage your staff to get involved and have fun while they are doing so. Encourage them to build their MySpace profiles etc.

CHARTING AN EMOTIVE NETWORK	WEB 2.0	CONTRIBUTE	CONTENT	OWNERSHIP
	Social Internet Facilitate your customers to work for you to talk about your product (both the good and bad).	Get involved Go out and find your customers on the Internet in review sites, forums and blogs.	RSS Feeds Create up to date newsworthy content and make it easy for your customers to receive to their desktops.	Contact points Recognise contact points with your customers and convert them to sales opportunities.

Recognising contact points as marketing opportunities.

Confirmation page and email

The key goal of Internet marketing is to raise bookings through your website and the first place to start should be with the current online customers.

When a customer makes a booking online they see firstly a confirmation page and then they receive a confirmation email. Both of these points of contact are ideal marketing opportunities; the customer has agreed to be "touched again" - and nearly all travel companies fail to recognise this marketing opportunity. Both of these should contain destination specific marketing information with links directly to the relevant pages within your website and the ability to purchase any add-on products, say pre tour accommodation or merchandise. Student Universe, a student flights specialist in the US, actually includes a booking engine in all their emails. If a customer goes to say G-mail and answers their emails while travelling then thinks 'I must book accommodation before my tour while I am here, what shall I use? Oh, never mind the functionality to book is right here in my inbox'.

Likewise, send a reminder email to the customer say 3 or 4 days before their expected arrival which also contains information on things to do and relevant links, up to date tours information or accommodation associated with your products, promotion of merchandise or even travel insurance and if practical a booking engine. An email marketing application such as Got Marketing, Goldmine, GroupMail and MailLoop can handle all of this automatically. Even if a customer does not book online, collect their email addresses and bring them into the loop with follow up emails and notification of any special deals prior to their departure etc.

Making your message viral

The concept of viral marketing is that information is spread with the minimum amount of resistance across a large group of people. At its most basic level there is the opportunity to introduce simple viral components into all tourism websites. Firstly, in the booking process there should be fields where the booker can enter the email addresses of friends and family to also receive the email confirmation. The confirmation page should then have this option again - "send this confirmation to others".

Due to Internet restrictions, mail server problems etc it is often very difficult to forward email newsletters - especially those that might contain images and booking engines etc. Rather the newsletters must have the ability for readers to enter email addresses of those that they want the particular newsletter sent to and your mail server should handle this task. Likewise travel itineraries should be easily shared and even have the functionality to invite others to join the itinerary, thereby creating a group.

Ask your customer

An online survey provides an opportunity to gauge relevant customer feedback, to generate customer content for the websites, to create customer profiles and most importantly to re-market to the customer again. Like confirmation emails, surveys should contain relevant after sales marketing such as merchandising or selling your strategic partners accommodation further along the route, or things to do in their next destination with links to these within your site. If practical the surveys could also contain booking engines.

Xebidy Strategic Design

XSD provides leading edge eCommerce strategy, design and implementation for New Zealand and Australia travel companies.

Products

- Competitor analysis, derivation of strategy canvas, "space" identification
- Design and specification of functionality
- return on investment modeling

- Web design and development
- Ongoing support, maintenance and mentoring
- Search engine optimisation and Internet marketing strategies - design and implementation.

Leading edge

is Web 2.0 applications and strategies and development of Rich Internet Applications

(RIAs) for booking processes, mapping, travel planners and shopping carts..

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