

Advanced Social Networking: Delivering Results



HSMIAI University recently kicked off its three-part webinar series on advanced social networking strategies by Gordon Liametz, founder and CEO of Revenue Performance.

As social networking continues to gather steam, Liametz told participants, it is important to create a strategy that fits your hotel or CVB, noting that every company and its social networking objectives will be different.

He offered a list of questions to consider when evaluating your social networking program—from strategy, to target audience, to responsibilities, etc.—suggesting that answering those questions successfully will help you implement a fine-tuned, well-executed plan.

Who's on board?

Social media is built around engaging people, and that starts with those in your business who will be directly impacted by the creation and implementation of the strategy, Liametz explained, cautioning that successful clients will take a hands-on role (even if outsourcing the implementation).

“You can't be totally hands off, or the investment won't do you justice,” he says. “You have to have someone at the property who can provide data to ensure the goals and expectations are being met.”

In setting strategy and implementing the social networking platform, it is critically important that your company's guest services, public relations, marketing, HR/legal departments and ownership be involved to provide the appropriate guidance, insight and support for the plan.

Narrowing your focus

Companies preparing to implement a social networking program may find themselves overwhelmed by the choices and channels available. It is very important, Liametz explained, that you pinpoint what you hope to achieve and choose the appropriate channels to help meet your expectations. Social networking success isn't as simple as accruing a lot of followers or “likes”. You need to engage the audiences with relevant content that matters to them and encourage them to take action. Promoting your property just isn't enough, Liametz said.

There are six primary tactics that deliver social networking results—social sharing, pitch bloggers, contests, discounts, reviews and generating links—and the key is to blend them into a cohesive plan that will maximize your investment and the results.

What do you want to achieve?

Building your brand, revenue and more loyal customers are among the benefits of a strong social marketing strategy. Depending on the goals you set, you may find you need to filter out channels that can't help you achieve them or that don't work or measure up to your expectations.

So, what are your goals and how do you get there?

Goal: Increase conversion rate for property

Strategy: Offer discounts and drive targeted engaged traffic

Goal: Generate word of mouth

Strategy: Use social sharing sites like Facebook and Twitter that enable you to send to a friend and create offers based on site conversations

Goal: Increase target traffic to the site

Strategy: Generate new links/leads and encourage social sharing of discounts

Goal: Generate reviews/feedback

Strategy: Pitch bloggers and influencers and develop a guest review program

It's important to remember, Liamez said, that social networking doesn't have great specific ROI in terms of hard dollars. Rather, your ROI will come from hotel development, reputation management, customer feedback and support, and community building.

"How do you put ROI on customer service, on friendly staff at your property? You can't, but you know it helps drive bottom line—and that is what social networking does," he said.

Build a strategy

You've established your goals and chosen the tactics you think will work best. Now it's time to bring all the stakeholders together (marketing, sales, management, F&B, etc.) to create a plan to develop and manage your digital content. A free content planner is available at www.revenueperformance.com.

Content must be relevant, reflect your brand and give the viewer a reason to stay engaged. If you don't have the right content, you won't be successful. But you also must have a great "personality" on social networking sites. Make sure whoever is writing blogs and updating the Facebook page, for example, is applying the voice and personality of the message.

To build a successful strategy, you must:

- Know your audience
- Provide relevant content
- Create a editorial calendar
- Track and improve your results
- Grab the consumer's attention
- Spread your message over several posts
- Understand the content needs of your audience
- Be a valuable source of information about your destination

“Without that framework of what you are going to say, and a plan for how and when you say it, you run the risk of the audience becoming uninterested,” Liametz explained.

Bringing it all together

Integrating your offline and online advertising is critical, and Liametz finds a lot of hotels are falling short. Whether it’s the look and feel of the website or the slogan and message, everything should be cohesive—and consistent. While the message may be the same, the style in which it is presented will change, depending on the channel. What works on Twitter won’t necessarily work on LinkedIn. The key is to match the writing style to the audience you’re trying to sell to. Know your audience and how they want to be engaged.

New crazes

Online video viewing has significant growth potential and is a tactic that Liametz is very excited about, but cautions that the focus should not be on expensively produced professional videos but rather on “homegrown, user-generated videos.”

Webisodes would be a perfect avenue for CVBs or destination hotel to engage potential customers. Each webisode could focus on a different aspect of the hotel (e.g., wedding planning – F&B, honeymoon suite, beach ceremonies, etc.)

“Webisodes are a great way to create viral marketing about property and can be a lot of fun,” he says.

Local social networks, such as Facebook Places and Foursquare, allow users to post current geographic locations to connect with other people and locations and businesses nearby. Some businesses will offer freebies or coupons to frequent posters. Savvy hotels are learning to optimize their presence on these local sites to help maximize the reach of their message.

Success with contests

Contests and discounts can help build content organically (a video contest with user-generated videos, for example) but must be relevant to the audience and be something they want to participate in. Know the “hook” to entice participation, and make it fun!

According to the Exact Target Facebook X Factors August 2010 survey, 40% of respondents were motivated to “like” a brand because of discounts or promotions and 36% wanted a freebie. Only 25% “liked” a company to get exclusive, relevant content. Liametz contends it is in the best interest of the company to try to flip those numbers so that more people are engaging with you for content and not discounts.

Tracking revenue

Liametz mentioned earlier in the program that it is difficult to measure ROI and track revenue from social media strategies, but there are opportunities that companies should take advantage of, including:

Fan offers. Exclusive offers for friends and followers. You must make sure there is a link and a specific landing page. These promotional campaigns are a great opportunity to expand sales and marketing reach to help drive revenue to the bottom line

QR codes. QR codes are very effective and great for integration. They are free to download, and the only cost is the sticker. Someone with a smartphone can take a picture of the code, which launches the appropriate response—whether a coupon, a video, etc. It’s a great way to engage people, Liametz says, provided it’s the right target audience (senior citizens, for example, might not buy into this type of technology). An example is available at www.qrstuff.com.

Online resources. It is very important to measure your efforts and to do it effectively and efficiently. There are many free and paid tools to help monitor your brand across the social media landscape. A list is available at www.revenueperformanc.com/resources.htm. Evaluate them and decide which will work best for you.

Tracking the impact of your campaigns must be an ongoing process, and it is important that you re-evaluate your programs about every three months to make sure they’re working, and if they are not, to fix what’s broken.

Some attendee questions

Q: Growing our fan page is a part of our business strategy but it’s not working. Why not?

A: Maybe you’re not updating the page often enough. Or perhaps the message is too promotional. Maybe the followers don’t perceive the value of “following” you. Maybe you’re not interacting enough. Create a specific plan to drive fans. Be very strategic. Become a fan of your competitors and see what they’re doing. It’s not how big your fan base is, it’s the quality of the engagement.

Q: If you want to get into blogging, what’s the best way?

A: A good first start is Google Blog or WordPress. But, keep in mind that for search engine optimization success, you must have the blog attached to your website and on your servers. If you create a blog on a third-party site, the search engines are crawling those and not your website, so you’re not going to drive traffic to your site. Have your web designer create the blog within your own website.

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