



**The Power of Social Media -
And Significance to Adventure Travel Operators**

TrekTraka LLC

Level 1, 80 Jephson St
Toowong, Qld, Australia
e info@trektraka.com
p +61 (0)7 3103 2660
w www.trektraka.com

Purpose of this paper

This paper provides a high level outline of social media as a means of communication, information sharing and marketing tools. It briefly explains the main categories of social media, identifies the most important social media platforms and talks about their implications for adventure travel operators. This paper provides the first step in the social media marketing journey for adventure travel operators.

Key Takeaways

- Over 1 billion users of social media
- As a marketing tool, social media cannot be ignored
- Peer-to-peer information sharing and discussion on social media is a major forum for travel decision-making
- Facebook is the social media “800 pound gorilla”
- Few adventure operators utilize social media efficiently

What do they mean by “social”

The world is in the midst of a communications revolution. The Internet now allows individuals to communicate directly, easily and instantly with their three, three hundred or three thousand friends, or potentially every Internet-connected person on Earth. Now that really is ‘social’!

Social media allow users to publish their thoughts, views, wants or rants and allow others to comment, contribute, engage and disseminate their message through an every widening circle of friends or strangers they may never meet. Like a stone thrown into a pond, social media ripple-out a compounding wave of communications. But the profound social aspect of this revolution is it allows millions, and soon perhaps billions, of people and organizations to simultaneously and frequently throw their own stones into the social communication pond. Some of these metaphoric stones raise barely a communication ripple, while others raise crashing waves.



The implication of this revolution in personal communication is that marketing is no longer controlled by corporations with monopolies created through investment of capital in newspaper brands, printing presses or television and radio stations. Social media has delivered an even playing field to the marketing game allowing organizations of all sizes to communicate and engage with their target market like never before.

What are social media? Do they have a role in adventure travel?

Industry researchers suggest there are six distinct categories of social media, and most categories have a dozen or more individual services vying for market share. Each category and service provides a different avenue for communication. The six categories and their implications for adventure travel operators are:

1. Blogs and microblogs:

In essence a form of diary or commentary by an individual or organization on any topic or theme. They can be in text, video or audio format and published online for anyone or selected followers to read.



The big players in this space are *Twitter*, a microblog service limiting messages to 140 character “tweets”, and a multitude of blog hosting sites and blog creation tools by players such as *Blogger* and *Wordpress*.

Implications for adventure travel operators – Provided operators can attract and retain an audience for their blog stories and news they are a key and integral part of an effective social media communications strategy. But they can consume considerable time and resources to maintain. Just as operators struggle to write material for traditional newsletter e-mail campaigns, blogs can suffer from neglect and infrequency. Quick dissipation of audience interest and numbers usually result.



2. Social networking sites:

The traditional flow of communication information was “one-to-many”. A newspaper printed a story written by a journalist and thousands of buyers of the paper read the story. But social media have changed communications flow to “many-to-many”. Social networking websites now allow communications to radiate through a multi-dimensional mesh or web of message initiators, readers and forwarders. Social networking sites facilitate groups of people coming together for an instant or an extended period to converse in many forms. Social networking is slashing multiple layers off the concept of six degrees of separation. Perhaps we now live in a world with just three degrees of separation.

The 800 pound gorilla in this category is *Facebook* – the epicenter for social networking. Plus there are dozens of other sites, some such as *LinkedIn*, *Plaxo* and *Yammer* focused on the business community, and many others are chasing the Facebook market – *Bebo* and the new entrant *Google+*. The common aspect to all of these sites is they allow individuals, and organizations, to easily publish information on the Internet and have it read, discussed and forwarded on to the direct friends and followers of the initial author and potentially reach any of the hundreds of millions of other users of these services.

Implications for adventure travel operators – Discussion and information sharing on social media platforms is becoming the dominant means for a large segment of the travel marketplace to evaluate travel destinations, operators and products. For networking and engaging with the global population across essentially all age groups and demographics, Facebook is it. With over 800 million members and millions more joining every month, adventure travel operators must focus a substantial proportion of their social media marketing efforts on Facebook. Operators must post

company pages and attract friends and followers through a vibrant stream of attention-grabbing and referral-worthy information across all communications formats – text, photo, video and audio. But there are real challenges to achieving business-benefiting outcomes.

As with blogs, production of content takes considerable time and effort. And a lot of time and effort might go in to securing a modest circle of “friends” that engage to some extent with the company’s communications. For many travel operators, the marketing effectiveness and efficiency of this approach to social media marketing is poorly quantified and questionable. But with a potential audience of over a billion people across the leading social networking platforms, the channel cannot be ignored.



3. Content communities:

These are platforms where users can post multimedia content, usually video or still images, and allow any Internet user to search for, view and comment upon their submission. This content can also function as simple “landing pages”, drawing viewers back to a company’s website and its more overt marketing materials. The major platforms are video sharing sites such as *YouTube* and *Vimeo* and photo and art sharing sites such as *Flickr* and *Picasa*.

Implications for adventure travel operators – YouTube is commonly used to post and share videos of travel products, testimonials by past clients and sales-supporting background information on the company and its operation. Photo sharing sites are also sometimes utilized to encourage past clients to post their travel photos and generate small web communities.

Video, in particular, is a powerful communications medium and sales tool for operators. These content community sites should be an essential part of operator’s communications strategy but must be designed to draw visitors back to the company’s own website.

4. 5. and 6. The other three categories:

These are less significant for adventure travel operators. Collaborative project sites such as *Wikipedia* could be used by operators to post general information on destinations or aspects of adventure travel and incorporate links back to the company. The other two categories, virtual game worlds (eg. *WorldofWarcraft*), and virtual social worlds (eg. *Second Life*) certainly entertains millions of people online, but provide limited opportunity for adventure travel promotion.

Big numbers and getting bigger

Social media are transforming individual and corporate communications. Some of the numbers and trends behind this change are astounding and cannot be ignored by corporate marketers. A wide range of researchers and sources have reported the following:

- 38,000,000 people in the US aged 13 – 80 said their purchasing decisions are influenced by social media, a 14% increase in the six months to early 2011
- 1,000,000 people view customer service related tweets every week, with 80% of them being critical or negative in nature
- 132.5 million people in the US will use Facebook in 2011; by 2013 the number will increase to 152.1 million
 - Daily readership of the top 5 US newspapers is now running at just 5 million readers
- 750,000,000 monthly active users for social networking giant Facebook, up from 500 million active monthly users in 2010
- The average Facebook user has 130 friends
- People spend over 700 billion minutes per month on Facebook
- Average Facebook user is connected to 80 community pages, groups and events
- Average Facebook user creates 90 pieces of content each month
- More than 30 billion pieces of content (web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photo albums, etc.) shared each month on Facebook
- Every month, more than 250 million people engage with Facebook on external websites
- Since social plugins launched in April 2010, an average of 10,000 new websites integrate with Facebook every day
- More than 2.5 million websites have integrated with Facebook, including over 80 of comScore's U.S. Top 100 websites and over half of comScore's Global Top 100 websites.

Current approaches

Some very thorough and insightful 2010 research by RESMARK Systems and the Adventure Travel Trade Association, "Travel, Tweets & Trends Social Media Usage Patterns Among Travel Tour Operators" highlighted the growing role social media communications is playing in adventure travel marketing. However, it is clear there is a significant learning curve for operators and not all approaches deliver the results expected.

Facebook is being widely used by operators, usually through the creation of a company page and periodic posting of interesting content on treks, events and people encountered as part of treks. However it is evident that it takes considerable effort and commitment by operators to attract and retain "friends" to consume the company's content. Additionally the approach tends to mostly reach people who are past customers rather than opening communications with new sales prospects. While repeat sales to past customers are a vital source of business it is only a partial

solution. Overall, it seems operators are experimenting with Facebook but are yet to find a profoundly productive strategy by which it can contribute to business growth.

Only a minority of operators are maintaining a company blog. One of the problems with blogs is their production is not too dissimilar to a newsletter. While a blog post may be just a few lines of text, it still requires someone in the company to conceive a topic worthy of a post and to write the necessary text. Company newsletters commonly start with enthusiasm but wither over time due to the time and effort they require. Company blogs also suffer from some of these weaknesses. An infrequently updated blog and disengaging content will not build a following and generate the volume of new inquiries operators might hope for.

Many operators have discovered that marketing via social media requires a substantial commitment of staff time and company resources. Content creation takes time. Maintaining reader engagement requires post frequency. Building an online community takes commitment and perseverance. The immediacy of social media means their users expect an immediacy of response and reply from travel operators. Marketing results can be slow to achieve and difficult to see.

The power of social media

The power of social media as a marketing tool all boils down to:

- There are around 1 billion people already subscribed to various social media platforms. This means a massive pool of potential travel consumers is already available to innovative adventure travel marketers. Operators do not need to wait for technology adoption numbers to scale up. The numbers are there, right now.
- The communications revolution is real. Users of Facebook, and other platforms, are generating and sharing information, comments and recommendations in a torrent of communications. Provided operators can inject interesting and engaging communications and information into this torrent there is very good potential that they will be swept into the communication flow and be accepted as part of online communities.

Implications for adventure travel operators

Social media is not to be ignored. Technology is always changing and communications technology changes faster than most. Newspapers are declining. Free-to-air television is not what it once was. And the consumer public is increasingly difficult to reach and influence via mass communications media.

The rise and rise of web-based methods for people to connect with each other and share information cannot be ignored by business. It might now be safe to ignore newspapers, but not so the mega-brand social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

Adventure travel operators must engage with their traveller market via social media. But just as not all traditional mass media advertising was effective in building company and product awareness and

traveller inquiries, marketing via social media requires a carefully crafted strategy if it is to utilize company resources efficiently and deliver business-improving results. There is a better way...

TrekTraka

TrekTraka is the first social media marketing system developed specifically for adventure travel operators. TrekTraka taps into the existing extensive social media networks of adventure travellers.

It distributes engaging content streams across multiple social media platforms and brings the friends and followers of adventurous travellers back to the travel operator saying, *“Hey, I want to do that too”*.

For more information, contact TrekTraka at:

www.trektraka.com

E-mail: info@trektraka.com

Phone: +61 (0)7 3103 2660