

EyeforTravel's Social Media Strategies for Travel Conference San Francisco, CA March 5-6, 2008

Eye-for-Travel Interview with Max Starkov, President + CEO, Hospitality eBusiness Strategies, New York

1. Recently, you mentioned: There is an ideological clash between official web content and user-generated content that creates a lot of uncertainty and confusion among travel suppliers and travel consumers alike. How do you think travel suppliers need to approach this dilemma?

Max Starkov:

Many travel suppliers forget that Social Media a/k/a Consumer-Generated Media (CGM) is online content created by Internet users and made available to other Internet users via Web 2.0 interactive technology applications. A travel supplier cannot create social media content. It can create the framework for the creation of consumer-generated content via various Web 2.0 applications and features (e.g. photo-sharing feature on the supplier site). It can instigate and encourage it. But ultimately the online travel consumers are the ones that create the social content.

In this new Web 2.0 environment, travel consumers like to see ‘both sides of the medal’ –the “official” content, descriptions and presentation of the travel product on the supplier’s website/brochure/marketing piece, and in the same time review the “unofficial” content on peer review sites, blogs, etc. If the official content differs vastly from the unofficial content, guess which is the more credible content in eyes of today’s sophisticated online traveler? All surveys and our own research point that the consumer generated content on social media sites and networks is perceived as more credible by the online travelers. The bigger the disparity between official and unofficial content, the bigger the gap in credibility.

What can and should travel suppliers do? They should review the content on their websites, brochures and promotional pieces and align it with the content on the social media sites about their services/product (i.e. align the official content with the unofficial content). For example if you describe your hotel as luxurious, while all customer reviews describe your hotel as clean and nice but an economy category hotel, then you should drop the “luxurious” description, because clearly your customers do not perceive your hotel as such.

2. What do you recommend when it comes to tapping the potential of the symbiotic relationship between search and social media? Where do you think travel companies are currently lagging in achieving the same?

Max Starkov:

Web 2.0 and Social Media represent a new dynamic in communication by allowing consumers to drive the content. No one can question the important role, relevancy, and impact of such social network sites as YouTube, MySpace, and in the travel space sites like TripAdvisor, Yahoo Travel Planner, Igoyougo, HotelChatter, and many more.

So what about Web 2.0 and the search engines? Are these new and old Internet media formats in synergy, or are they at war with each other? Are search engines slowly becoming obsolete, especially as consumer-generated media appears to increasingly dominate online behavior?

In our view, search engines thrive on new content. Web 2.0 is a huge generator of new content and search engines index Web 2.0 sites with great fervor. Google, Yahoo, Windows Live all include Web 2.0 content (text, video, consumer reviews, blog entries, etc.) in their search results. In other words, Web 2.0 and the search engines are in a symbiotic relationship.

Furthermore, we call this symbiotic relationship between search and social media “Web 2.0 Search” as in most of the cases search engines and social media content are intertwined in a symbiotic, inseparable way.

We believe that for most travel companies, the lack of fresh online content about their products and services is their main weakness. As mentioned, search engines love fresh content. Travel suppliers have to become “producers of fresh online content” –both “official” content (supplier websites, online brochures, marketing pieces), as well as “unofficial” content via supplier-sponsored Web 2.0 applications and social media initiatives.

Travel suppliers can take full advantage of the symbiotic relationship between search and social media in several ways:

- Create the framework to generate social media content (on the supplier website and in social networks), which will then be picked up by the traditional search engines and delivered to relevant searchers
- Generate “fresh” content (textual and visual) on the supplier website using Web 2.0 applications:
 - Share your vacation photo experience
 - User voting system
 - Top ten lists generated by website users
 - Expert blogs
 - Etc
- Use of traditional search engines to target specific blogs or sites (e.g. YouTube via Google)
- Use RSS as a new content dissemination tool
- Use of Web 2.0 search engines (e.g. technorati.com)
- Use content-tagging services (digg.com, <http://del.icio.us/> etc)

- Create your corporate profile on the leading social media sites: MySpace.com, Facebook.com, Wikipedia.com, etc
 - Upload rich media (photos and videos) on social media sites
 - Generate buzz about your product/services via contests and sweepstakes on social media networks and supplier sites
 - Launch paid search marketing on travel-related social media sites: TripAdvisor, VirtualTourist, HotelChatter, etc
3. The travel industry is using social media monitoring solutions, which track and analyze all forms of social media, including blog sites, top video-sharing sites and opinion review forums. How quickly do you think travel suppliers need to update official web content so that when consumers re-check the suppliers sites they get authentic information? Do you think suppliers are doing this?

Max Starkov:

The main question here is not only to monitor, but to react decisively and timely to any negative customer review, or to any discrepancy between the official and unofficial content about your products/services. The Internet has changed forever how travel consumers perceive credibility of information. Any discrepancy between “official” and “unofficial” content should be dealt with immediately as it would hurt the travel supplier. A travel supplier has to stand by its product/service, but cannot ignore the “popular vote” for its product’s quality. If your hotel has AAA 4 diamond rating, but your customers consistently rate you at 3 stars on TripAdvisor, Expedia, Yahoo Travel Planner, etc, your 4 diamond rating means nothing to the traveling public.

Executives at any responsible travel supplier have to start their work day by “listening” to what their customers have to say by reviewing customer review sites relevant to their industry or sector. For example in the hospitality space, a GM of a hotel should start his/her workday by checking the latest postings about the hotel on TripAdvisor, and reacting to them right away.

4. In your opinion, what sort of progress have you witnessed when it comes to social search engine marketing effort of suppliers?

Max Starkov:

Many suppliers have embarked on one or another form of Web 2.0/Social Media initiatives and implementations. The main problem is that most travel suppliers do not review Web 2.0/Social Media as part of a comprehensive Internet marketing and distribution strategy, together with website re-designs and optimizations, search marketing, email marketing, strategic linking, online sponsorships and display advertising.

On the other hand, there is not even a single travel supplier today that has implemented a robust Web 2.0/Social Media strategy addressing all 4 key elements: defensive strategy, Social Media and Employee Behavior policies, brand/corporate Web 2.0 initiatives, utilizing Social Media as an advertising medium.

5. Which is the best way to approach social search marketing on the part of suppliers? Should they develop in-house expertise or work with vendors? What benchmarks should be set to assess the success of social search marketing initiatives?

Max Starkov:

As mentioned, travel suppliers need to develop a Corporate Web 2.0/Social Media Strategy, as part of a Comprehensive Internet Marketing and Distribution Strategy. Very few travel suppliers have the internal bandwidth and resources to do this in-house. The most logical choice for any travel supplier is to hire an outside consultancy to develop the overall Web 2.0/Social Media strategy, and based on it to delegate the implementation of the various action steps to in-house teams and outside vendors based on expertise and bandwidth.

6. What trends do you foresee in the time to come as far as suppliers go about cashing in on the relationship between search and social media?

Max Starkov:

As reported in the recent results of the 2nd Benchmark Survey on Hotel Internet Marketing Budget Planning and Best Practices in Hospitality, conducted by our company Hospitality eBusiness Strategies, in 2008 almost half of hoteliers surveyed are planning a blog on the hotel’s website. Other Web 2.0 formats planned for ’08 include photo sharing, surveys and comment cards on the website, and creating profiles on social networks such as Facebook and MySpace.

The 2nd Benchmark Survey showed that for a third year in a row there was an increase in marketing spend on new media formats such as Web 2.0 and Social Media. These marketing formats gained much attention in the industry last year and continue to be a hot topic. We asked hoteliers what type of web 2.0 initiatives they were planning for 2008:

What type of Web 2.0 marketing initiatives are you planning for 2008?	
A blog on the hotel website	47.06%
Photo sharing functionality on the hotel website	41.18%
Sweepstakes and contests on the hotel website	29.41%
Survey and comment card on the hotel website	59.8%
Subscribe to a reputation monitoring service	27.45%
Create profiles for my hotels on social networks (Facebook, MySpace, etc.)	43.14
Actively participate in blogs that concern my hotel	26.47%
Advertise on social media sites	9.8%

Survey respondents also had their own responses to this question:

- “Create private community space for loyal customers.”
- “Loyalty with instant reward redemption”
- “Video uploading on the hotel website.”

About Max Starkov

Max Starkov is President & CEO of Hospitality eBusiness Strategies, Inc., the industry’s leading Internet marketing and distribution strategy consulting firm for the hospitality and travel verticals. Based in New York City, HeBS has pioneered many of the "best practices" in hotel Internet marketing and direct online distribution. HeBS specializes in helping hoteliers build and enhance their direct Internet marketing and distribution strategy, boost the hotel Internet marketing presence, establish interactive relationships with their customers, and significantly increase direct online bookings and ROIs. The firm brings a unique perspective to the industry, gained through working with over 450 hospitality companies including major brands, independent hotels, casinos, convention bureaus and hotel management companies worldwide.

Max Starkov has an extensive Internet marketing experience. He co-founded and served as CEO of three eBusiness companies: Travelbreak.com (#3 after Priceline), WhaleMedia.com (Winner of the coveted Microsoft RAD Award), and HeBS (since 2001). Max Starkov is a recognized "thought leader" in Internet marketing strategies and is a frequent guest speaker and presenter at industry events and conferences. He has written numerous reports, industry research, and published articles in major travel and hospitality publications. For years now, he has been teaching, as an adjunct professor, graduate courses on eCRM and Internet Marketing at New York University's prestigious Tisch Center for Hospitality and Tourism Studies.

Max Starkov has an MBA degree, Beta Gamma Sigma Honors, from Fordham University in New York.

Find out more about HeBS at www.hospitalityebusiness.com or by email at info@hospitalityebusiness.com.

About EyeforTravel's Social Media Strategies for Travel Conference

EyeforTravel's new Social Media Strategies for Travel conference, the premier travel event to be focused 100% on social media, will take place this March 5-6 in San Francisco. The conference will offer 2 full days of practical, real-world advice from the world’s most innovative travel brands. Find out more at www.eyefortravel.com/ugc/.