

Social Media Demographics Defined

Marketing to the Users Generating the Content

Written by Patricia Brusha on October 21, 2007

There is a tremendous amount of discussion lately around social media for travel websites and beyond. Social Media Discussions include what technology is available, the leaders or influencers in this space, whether social media marketing is right for every business, and how to encourage users to participate and build a community. Before addressing these topics, today's travel and tourism marketers must first acknowledge and understand the new segments of the population that define the demographics of social media and market their travel community around them.

When it comes to Social media, users are not created equal. Examining the various social media market segments along with popular social media websites, in and out of the travel vertical, will guide your current and future marketing efforts. Understanding the new demographics of social media will insure your online marketing efforts in a web 2.0 environment will be successful. I will define a cross section of the users that are generating the content that makes up the social media landscape. This is critical to understand as social media has truly taken the control away from the advertisers, and put it in the hands of the consumers...and as we all know – not all consumers were created alike!

The “Social Butterfly”: Most commonly found within the age range of 15- 25, these individuals “fly” from site to site based on popularity of the website, what's new and where their friends are. My Space, which launched in August 2003, quickly grew in popularity as the three main founders held a company contest to see who could sign up the most users. This viral initiative led them into the lead of social media websites.

MySpace currently boasts 48M users and is known for launching another successful social media site, You Tube. According to Wikipedia, “You Tube first appeared on the web in early 2005, and it quickly gained popularity on MySpace” It is now being claimed that You Tube has become one of the fastest growing sites and has begun to outgrow MySpace's current reach.

2007 is clearly the year of Facebook and a current favorite of “butterflies”. Facebook was originally developed as an elite college and university social community, requiring a valid university email address to join. Since its inception in 2004, Facebook has since allowed others without a school email address to join and latest user base figures has Facebook outpacing MySpace with 66M users (and growing rapidly!).

Butterflies are already sharing their travel experiences on these popular sites through photo sharing, videos and blog posts. They enjoy inviting friends to view their personalized online world.

Marketing to the butterfly: Butterflies are big influencers on travel buying decisions. Travels websites should include the ability to upload media, personalize space, and invite friends to join. However the best way to market to butterflies is to go where they are. Creating groups, uploading videos and integrating yourself into their community are great ways to capture their attention. Butterflies are more likely to go directly to communities bypassing search to find what they are looking for. If they like what they see, they will be sure to tell their friends and family.

The Socially Selective: Generally ranging in age from around 30- 45, “Selectives” utilize social media sites for a distinct purpose. Travel websites such as www.tripadvisor.com and www.travelpod.com are popular among the selective demographic. Travel portals like this allow them to utilize a social media platform to research trips and share their travels.

Wiki's are also preferred by selectives as a wiki is a medium which can be edited by anyone with access to it. This demographic falls into the primetime of their career's and many companies have adapted a wiki platform for internal communications, project management, mission statements and cross-company collaborations, making this group very comfortable with this space.

Health is an important social media space for selectives. Utilizing platform tools such as blogs, forums and messages boards, an array of topics are contributed to from selectives such as Breast Cancer, AIDS or Depression.

Marketing to the Selective: Having a clear purpose and staying niche focused is the way to successfully market a travel website to this demographic. Bringing together people with common interests, such as

golf, spa or adventure travel requires solid keyword research. Whether you buy the selective keywords through paid search marketing, or optimize the website to found organically in the search engines, “selectives” are notorious for searching first for the topic or experience they are looking for before adopting a site. Selectives want to feel they are part of an elite community, sharing only with others like themselves with similar passions.

The Socially Connected: A growing number of Men and Women in the workforce today are finding an array of Social Media sites that help them network, advance their career goals, connect romantically, and stay connected with the right people within their industry.

LinkedIn, one of the most popular networking sites boasts as of September 2007 that it had more than 14 million registered users, spanning over 150 industries. Plaxo led as one of the original business networking websites launching in July 2001. However numerous players have entered into this social media category, including an up and coming new site called www.FastPitch.com which claims it “is a one-stop shop for professionals to network and market their business”.

If you are in the travel industry, “Who is Who in Hospitality” or www.wiwih.com is an excellent networking site offering groups around areas of interest, conference and event information and more. Discussion topics and groups have been active within www.wiwih.com making it an innovator within the online hospitality networking space.

Marketing to the connected: “Connected’s” are willing to give up personal information if they see a clear benefit to themselves or their career. Loyalty and reward programs appeal to connector’s as they perceive that it enhances their status.

Connected’s are busy people, who want to receive information through RSS feeds or alerts. They do not have time to read nor care about e-newsletters. They want their information, easy, fast and with a clear message on how it will benefit them.

The Social Starters: There is a growing population of individuals mostly over 45 that are just beginning to become familiar with the term social media. Both men and women, once they are educated that there is more to the social media space than Facebook and MySpace, are intrigued but not quite sure how to get started.

Starters tend to find social media sites by accident or hear about them from a friend. Often they request that a friend or one of their children find some time to “explain to them” how to use these sites. It is not often clear for starters what to do or what the benefit of participating is.

Starters currently comprise the majority of the travel buying population. Having adapted using the internet to research and buy travel, they are more familiar with a web 1.0 platform.

Marketing to the starters; if you are migrating your traditional travel website to a social media platform, be sure you do not alienate the starters. Have a clear message on your home page on what your site is about. Give easy step by step instructions in how to get started. Make sure you show instructions in both text and pictures. Provide starters with a non intimidating place to ask questions or for help. Be sure to let the starters know you would love to hear from them and would be happy to help...be sure not to forget to make your phone number visible.

The New Social Norms: A new generation of consumers, ages 5-9, are being raised in a web 2.0 world. In their mind social media sites are an accepted and familiar way of navigating the internet. Popular sites such as Webkinz, Disney, Nickelodeon and Barbie are training children to expect interactive websites as the norm.

The “social norms” enjoy such interactive features as secret codes, earning cash or points to shop, daily and weekly contests, numerous activities, games and videos.

Marketing to the norms: If this is not your targeted demographic you may not be paying attention to the social media sites for children. This generation is already an active part of the buying decision for travel. Consider creating a kid friendly area on your travel website, taking the lead from other popular children’s sites. Besides having a major influence over mom and dad, you will create a loyal consumer base that is being trained to respond to online brand marketing.

Social media applications are not for everyone. Tourism and travel are adapting platforms and applications with a sense of urgency before considering the demographics of their consumer base. Marketers should utilize focus groups and test social media sites before launching - within their targeted customers. They may be surprised to find their highest revenue producers for their business are not interested at all in these applications. Perhaps just a clear message and good value is all they are looking for.

About the Author:

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