

HSMAI Foundation, TIA Release Highly-Anticipated Guide To Social Media & Social Networks  
Report  
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Working together to focus on emerging topics of importance to travel marketers, the Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International Foundation (HSMAI), and the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA) partnered to study, analyze and produce a comprehensive educational report titled: The Travel Marketer's Guide to Social Media and Social Networks.

The complete report was released earlier this month and is now available for purchase through the HSMAI Foundation and TIA.

The cost of the full report is \$99 for HSMAI members and \$149 for non-members at [www.hsmaipublications.com](http://www.hsmaipublications.com). Volume discounts are available for orders of 50 copies or more.

Following are highlights and excerpts from the study:

'The best use of social media and the way in which a travel marketer can most effectively respond to consumer commentary on the well-known review sites is to engage customers and prospects in conversations to understand their needs, to develop relationships and to interact with them before a purchase, during the purchase process, and after a purchase is made,' according to Cindy Estis Green, author of a just-released report on social media and managing partner of The Estis Group.

'This study underscores the fact that savvy consumers are engaged with the Internet's social media tools and social network sites in ever increasing numbers. Travel marketers should be plugged into the latest ways their customers are gathering and exchanging information,' says Dr. Suzanne D. Cook, TIA's Senior Vice President of Research.

'Consumers of all ages are engaged in social media and networking online, even if they don't think they are. Providing the travel industry with a comprehensive look at how consumers are engaged in this new form of the Internet and what the industry can do to take advantage of this new media is one of the cornerstones of the HSMAI Foundation,' says Pam Streeter, Chair of the HSMAI Foundation and Vice President, Marketing & Distribution, at Interstate Hotels & Resorts. 'We are very proud to be a part of this important educational material.'

Some of the topics covered in the report include:

Explanations and definitions of social media and social networking

Highlights of the way social media and networking are used in other industries

How travel companies are using social media and social networking in 2007

How travel companies can use social media and social networking in the future

### **The Conversation Economy**

This new consumer behavior applies as much to travel as it does to industries as different as electronics, books, automobiles and financial planning. Every industry is feeling the impact of the new 'conversation economy' and is beginning to alter the way its marketing is executed.

Estis said, 'You can't be interruptive in your messages anymore. If you are on a bridal site you can't send sales messages to the brides. You need to listen long and hard to better understand the players and the context of each specific social network before you speak, and sometimes you may realize it is not appropriate to speak at all.'

Entirely driven by consumer behavior, this 'conversation-based' economy, a variation on the age-old 'word of mouth' communication, is influenced even more by the high speed, pitch and volume of these conversations affecting consumer behavior than it was during the pre-Internet days when it could take weeks or months for word of a product or purchase experience to spread.

### **Social Media Toolkit**

There are many tactical tools that can serve a travel marketer. Trip planning is an ideal application for social media since it is often interactive when several people are involved in the travel decision. The trip planning function is enhanced by rich content such as video, audio, photos and mapping, often forming 'mashups' from several sources, and is usually an essential element in the travel purchase.

### **Travel Industry Position on Social Media and Networks**

A TIA/HSMAI Foundation study of travel executives shows that although the art and science of social media is relatively new, the industry has taken note and is testing the waters. There is an opportunity for the travel industry to excel in these techniques. The very form of social media that can inspire fear in the hearts of travel suppliers can be the most potent tool a marketer can leverage in its use of social media.

The industry has the great advantage of a high degree of dialogue with its customers and the benefit of so many travel websites (including dedicated travel networks, suppliers, intermediaries, destinations and many others) - websites that incorporate commentary, advice, photos, video, trip planning and many other interactive elements. There are few other topics online that stimulate the same volume of dialogue.

### **Summary of Issues for Travel Marketers**

There are 10 key points when it comes to travel marketers' effective use of social media. These are the primary issues that need to be top-of-mind in order to manage the new Consumer 2.0 marketing environment.

1. The use of social media is high and growing steadily.
2. Conveying and harnessing the passion for travel will be necessary in marketing messages.
3. Trip planning is an ideal focal point to stimulate interaction with travelers.
4. User-generated content is high and can be threatening to travel suppliers, they need a plan to manage it.
5. Relationships with consumers need to be interactional, not transactional.
6. The 'long tail' of the Internet is very applicable to travel.
7. Social media complements search engine marketing (SEM) and search engine optimization (SEO).
8. Corporate travel, groups and meetings all use social networks.
9. Widgets are coming, widgets are here, and it is essential to learn how to use this technology.
10. The rivalry between online travel agencies (OTAs), other third party intermediaries (TPIs) and travel suppliers will continue and intensify.

The report expands on some of the strategies that are deployed through social network marketing including customer engagement, building brand equity, influence management, consumer and competitive intelligence and product development. Supported by industry statistics and demographics, and illustrated with dozens of case studies and examples, the topic is clearly mapped out for the travel industry marketer.

Publishing partners are TIG Global and Vizergy, and sponsoring supporters are Open Hospitality and Yahoo!

A copy of the executive summary can be found at [www.hsmaipublications.com](http://www.hsmaipublications.com).

Cindy Estis Green, author of the report and a 30-year industry veteran, has an MBA in Marketing from The American University and a BS from the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration. She is managing partner of The Estis Group, a travel industry consulting firm specializing in online marketing, distribution, CRM and revenue management.

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