

Does Loyalty Exist in the Online Travel World? Interview with Tom Russell, VP of Brand Marketing, Orbitz Worldwide  
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Suppliers are focusing on implementing tailored web strategies for their loyal members, offering a number of personalization tools and features distinctive for each member based on their membership profile. As the race for influencing and retaining consumer evolves, what does 'loyalty' stand for online travel agencies? (12/21/2007)

Says **Tom Russell, VP of Brand Marketing, Orbitz Worldwide**, "These affinity or loyalty programmes come down to two factors: how much of the traffic that came through my virtual front door today converted into a sale? And was the ROI worth it for their repeat business?"

"Loyalty is such a buzzword these days in an era when it doesn't really exist in the online travel world. Points systems can make you more likely to shop with a singular brand, but more often than not, customers need to be won at every sale," Russell told EyeforTravel.com's Ritesh Gupta in an interview. "That is why we launched the Orbitztlc customer service experience back in 2006. It is why our technologists continue to innovate and create new services and tools that improve the travel experience. We certainly are interested in testing affinity programmes, but our core will always be to add value to the trip booked through our site in a way that improves the travel experience."

**Russell, who is scheduled to speak during EyeforTravel's Social Media Strategies Travel 2008 Conference to be held in San Francisco on March 5-6**, ([www.eyefortravel.com/ugc](http://www.eyefortravel.com/ugc)) acknowledged that the industry experienced a horrific summer of severe storms, flight delays and cancellations. "We're in the midst of another winter of travel discontent. Yet, more people are traveling over the holidays than ever before. Travel is simply something Americans do - becoming ever more resilient to the challenges they encounter."

"The one thing travelers can control is their own time. And web 2.0 tools in the social media and mobile space are enabling our customers to better manage their time when they book travel with us. Our customers can alert other travelers within the community of security line wait times or traffic congestion on the way to the airport through Orbitztlc Traveler Update ( [updates.orbitz.com](http://updates.orbitz.com) ), our new social media experiment online at [Orbitz.com](http://Orbitz.com). They can "reach-in" to their cell phones and pull up in an instant their flight information and on-time status updates through our mobile access technology by cell surfing to [mobile.orbitz.com](http://mobile.orbitz.com). These tools are resources web users, travelers and online travel companies alike are evolving as demand grows for a better travel experience," he said.

Even as it is felt that consumers recommendations generate highest levels of trust, vis a vis channels such as brand websites and email signed up for, where are independent UGC sites placed in the travel industry today?

On this Russell said, "Orbitz changed the way hotels reviews were done online when we ensured that our customers actually stayed on the property before they wrote a review. And we post the good, the bad and the ugly. Customers can assign a numeric 1-5 rating to the hotel, write a longer qualitative assessment of the property and we categorize the reviews based on whether they are a family or business hotel or the type of romantic getaway couples would appreciate."

"The independent UGC sites alone will never be able to provide the complete travel experience because they don't book it, have inventory or provide the Orbitztlc customer service we do throughout the entire trip. Like we did with hotels, UGC sites focused on travel need to consider integration into an online travel company to provide the complete experience, as they can provide valuable insights and information to other consumers as they shop for and book travel," he said.

More information on **EyeforTravel's Social Media Strategies Travel 2008 Conference to be held in San Francisco on March 5-6** is available at: [www.eyefortravel.com/ugc](http://www.eyefortravel.com/ugc) or email [helen@eyefortravel.com](mailto:helen@eyefortravel.com).

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