

To What Extent Can Independent UGC Sites Act as a Trojan Horse For Openness?

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"That's where we've been headed for 34 years and there's no reason to divert from that course. What that means is we'd like people to know about the online content, community and services we offer and we'd like to take that message as wide as possible. Direct communications and growing our community remain key," Tom Hall, Digital Marketing Manager EMEA, Lonely Planet said in an interview with Eyefortravel.com's Ritesh Gupta late last year.

On how a company like Lonely Planet is capitalizing on the popularity of Web 2.0 applications considering some of its initiatives in the recent past, Hall said, " Lonely Planet gained a strong community early on in the development of online and now the onus is on companies who have had early success not to rest on their laurels - the same goes for us. This means a few things:

Investing and developing cleverly to offer targeted services to travelers, not just apeing what's working elsewhere.

Integrating content and community so that travelers feel they are playing a meaningful part in the travel cycle.

Enhancing connectivity via mobile and on-the-road applications so travelers can communicate their travels faster, cleverer and better."

Hall also spoke about the role of UGC sites in detail. Excerpts from the interview:

Communities can define your identity and your brand. Consumer's recommendations generate highest levels of trust, vis-a-vis channels such as brand websites and email signed up for. Where do you think this places independent UGC sites in the travel industry?

Independent UGC sites have a key role to play in traveler's research - and indeed the burgeoning social aspect to planning, enjoying and recording travel online. But the market increasingly appears sewn up by a few big players and mainstream social networking sites.

The interesting thing to watch with independent sites is how much they can act as a Trojan Horse for openness throughout the industry. We already see TripAdvisor content popping up on traditional agency sites, and this should mean agencies won't be able to do anything other than tell it how it is. I don't know if this means independent UGC sites are front and centre of the industry - that will always be the business end (bookings and services), but it should mean UGC per se is seen as front and centre to an honest relationship with travelers.

UGC sometimes gets some bad rep, because it can be difficult to regulate it and companies are frightened that their brands will be positioned in a negative light, or next to content that is in their perspective - inappropriate. So what sort of benchmark or barometer social communities provide to suppliers?

Complaining about complaints or worrying about negative comments rather misses the point - travellers are talking to suppliers more than ever before, meaning expectations are higher than ever before. The flip side of this is that considerable loyalty is up for grabs and UGC can be a superb source of feedback which means customer-focused improvements to your business. At Lonely Planet we receive very fluctuating feedback from different travellers, often about the same title, but you have to examine the negatives and act as a result. This can give you a great opportunity to contact a customer again with a positive message.

I can see how UGC is seen as a Pandora's Box which is open to abuse from unscrupulous types, but don't forget that travellers themselves are a savvy bunch who know their way around the web. They can smell a dodgy review and make their own minds up.

Is it easy to estimate what demographic do social networking sites appeal to? How can UGC be used to perfect your marketing message?

Two different questions. First, social networking crosses demographics. Unless you're painting with a broad brush, activity such as advertising in one space cannot be considered a reliable way to reach a particular demographic. You need to be cleverer if you're to hit a very specific group. If your product is right and service levels are high UGC can really back up what you're saying about a place or service.

A recent Jupiter survey revealed that 69% of consumers don't trust social media sites. What's your viewpoint regarding the same? But then why Tripadvisor is as successful as it is today? Your viewpoint?

The media plays a part here. It's critical of social media sites because they're un-policed places, but this misses the point. Sites with critical mass police themselves or lose relevance to users. But media criticism can erode trust. I would say that questions of trust are very difficult ones to assess: to what extent do you ever trust a carefully crafted marketing message? You don't, you enter into it with your eyes open. If your product is right and service levels are high UGC can really back up what you're saying about a place or service.

boo.com research discovered that only 13% of people trust travel agents and brochures over online reviews. If this is the case, then where is the distribution headed?

It's headed towards convergence: information wants to be free, and travellers want lots of information. So hybrid information products offer the best way forward for travel companies. Online lends itself very well to this - there are numerous examples of excellent practice in this field.

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.

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