

Cornell Roundtable Focuses on Marketing Challenge of Social Media

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Hospitality marketers must rise to the challenge of determining how to use web-based social media to support marketing objectives, according to participants in the fourth annual Marketing Roundtable. Chaired by Lisa Klein Pearo, a faculty member at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration, the roundtable explored the relatively uncharted marketing terrain created by social media.

'The overarching objective of the day was to generate new frameworks that could help marketing practitioners and academics evaluate the role of social media in marketing plans,' explained Pearo.

Professor Pearo started the day by briefly exploring how marketing academics teach social media. She noted that existing textbooks provide no guidance beyond trying to fit social media into rigid frameworks which divide communications by medium rather than by more embracing definitions which encompass communication methodology and objectives. Cindy Estis Green of The Estis Group then kicked off the thematic discussion of practitioner models by examining users and uses of social media. She offered essential definitions of social media and social networking, as well as examples of best practices from hospitality and non-hospitality organizations.

Participants agreed that the critical challenge for marketers is to find ways to encourage consumer involvement in and excitement for collaboration with the organization and with other customers. This is particularly difficult, because the customers define the nature of the interaction. As Tim Peter of Leading Interactive Reservations explained, 'Social' must be defined by 'people' and engagement with customers is the key.

Hotel chains are still seeking the way to make the 'big hit.' As Susan Thronson of Marriott International pointed out, Marriott has delved into social media, but this remains a relatively small investment at the moment, until the firm identifies the best way to engage this new tool. Marriott International is a partner of the Cornell Center for Research, which hosts the roundtable. Partners' representatives have a seat at all of the center's roundtables.

Looking at ways to use social media, Julie Cottineau of Virgin USA, Inc. explained her firm's use of social media, including consumer photo sharing opportunities on aircraft prior to the launch of Virgin Atlantic and MySpace collaboration for Virgin comics.

The roundtable concluded with a spirited debate on the question of consumer control. Participants discussed whether consumers have more control individually than formerly, or whether the impact of social media is based on the magnitude of consumers' interactions. With that issue unresolved, the participants did agree that a systematic process is needed to facilitate media selection and evaluation decisions for social media, as well as ROI calculations for campaigns in social media.

For more information about future roundtables at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration, please visit

<http://hotelschool.cornell.edu/research/chr/events/roundtables/>.

Meet and interact with Professor Lisa Klein Pearo, an active member of the executive education faculty at the School of Hotel Administration, when she presents sessions in Marketing Management and Direct Marketing in the Professional Development Program at the School of Hotel Administration in Ithaca in June and July:

<http://www.hotelschool.cornell.edu/industry/executive/pdp/>.

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