

## Social networks target business travelers

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Researching a business trip once involved guidebooks and the advice of a handful of friends. But if corporate travel companies have their way, executives will soon be consulting social networking sites and an endless stream of strangers for the secrets of the road.

Word of mouse is the latest trend in online travel planning, and a variety of corporate travel companies are setting up networking sites in hopes of becoming the dominant player - the Facebook of corporate travel.

Expedia and American Express Business Travel are announcing their new offerings this month. The Internet travel site Orbitz had one of the first networking sites, but it, too, is trying to increase participation by sending out e-mail messages to members to promote its Traveler Update.

Cindy Estis Green, author of "Travel Marketers' Guide to Social Media and Social Networks," said she thought the surge of interest in social networking was mainly due to the time savings it represents.

"Some people ask me, 'Who has time for this? Aren't we busy?'" she said. "But when you need information about a job or a trip to China, it opens up tools that weren't available to put a message out. Somebody will come back to you. It's a utility and it saves you time."

Social networking tools aimed at business travelers are, "in the very, very early stages" of development, said Jean-Pierre Remy, president of Egencia, the new name of Expedia Corporate Travel. He said that while the lines between leisure travelers and first-time business travelers were blurring, frequent business travelers heading to the same places on each trip had very different needs. For such folks, "it's about how to repeat the trip and be more efficient in planning and booking," Remy said.

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