

Tailoring mobile content to target travelers

It's an exciting time for tourism marketers. Spending is up, travel employment growth is outpacing the economy, and flights are full. Consumers are trading staycations for new destinations and focusing on quality over savings. Times are good and, seemingly, only getting better. The new challenge for destinations and their PR professionals is how to capitalize on this environment.

By Meredith Pratt

The key is to pay attention to behavioral trends that offer the opportunity to turn travelers into communicators on behalf of destinations.

Given the new travel enthusiasm, it's no surprise that vacationers want to show off their adventures — before, during and after their trip. They are frequently turning to social sources to find information about where to stay, what to do and how to get there. Because travelers use the Web not only for research but also to share their positive travel experiences, they function as a virtual media outlet disseminating news, information and opinion in real time.

Marketers that recognize travelers' obsession with social and mobile content already have answered the call with interactive Websites, content-rich social channels and innovative promotional efforts. In fact, 88% of smartphone users in the U.S. access travel-related information through their mobile devices, spending an average of 93 minutes per month on travel apps and websites, according to a 2012 study by Nielsen for xAd. But even as marketers do a better job of engaging travelers through social media while they are planning trips, it seems many continue to miss the sweet spot in visitation: hooking visitors once they arrive and providing mobile friendly sites and apps that focus on what to do once they get there.

Consider this: according to a recent TripAdvisor survey, 28% of travelers checked into an attraction using their mobile device and 38% posted status updates to social networking sites to keep friends updated on their travels. Prosper Mobile Insights surveyed U.S. smartphone and tablet owners and found that approximately 98% took their mobile devices with them on vacation; nearly four in five respondents in this group used them "all the time."

While travel-related apps are not as prolific as their mobile Web cousins, they score higher in terms of consumer loyalty and user retention. So, how can marketers up a destination's appeal? Below are five tips to help build that presence even further.

Leverage your high points

If a traveler logged onto your mobile app

for 15 seconds, what would you want them to know? Provide a one-stop shop — a go-to app for a city or state that wraps the visitors guide in with deals, check-ins, attractions, restaurants and more. Consumer attention online is fleeting, so when creating a mobile app around a destination, communicate the high points quickly. Marketers have the opportunity to show travelers what they want them to see. Build the story you want to tell through your mobile app. Is it the waterfront? Great restaurants? Kid friendly attractions? Having mobile-friendly brochures and tours built into the app guides visitors on a specialized tour of your destination and greatly enhances their experience.

Showcase the experience

For the most part, mobile apps for Convention and Visitors' Bureaus (CVBs) follow a similar format. While the format is useful for visitors, it doesn't make the destination stand out. Instead, maximize visitor's travel and feature the experience through photos. Cut the text and add more colorful and vibrant photos of your destination to demand attention. Take it one step further and offer travelers the opportunity to share, post and comment on the images as well as add their own pictures. Give travelers the ability to forge a virtual connection with the destination. Miami's CVB app offers Miami images available for download as wallpaper through a Flickr photo stream while the Maryland Office of Tourism's Civil War Trails app encourages users to "make a vintage photo" by taking or uploading a photo and then sharing via Facebook, Twitter and email. Each app provides an example of how to effectively engage your audience and simultaneously build your photo gallery.

Make sharing easy

Once travelers arrive, capitalize on their trips and encourage them to "check in" through your mobile app. The New York Public Library Time Traveller is an app that alerts Foursquare users whenever they check into near historical sites in New York City. The app offers users images from the 1870s to 1970s from the Photographic Views of New York City Collection. It inspires action and features

a historical story through images that otherwise would be hard to communicate.

Give them a reason to return

Business travelers tend to be most interested in traveler loyalty programs — accessible through mobile apps — while leisure travelers are more interested in discounts and promotions. Even still, nearly 80% of travelers join travel loyalty programs provided by airlines, hotel chains and rental car companies. Such discounts and promotions have been hailed as the top reason why people "like" brands on Facebook. Given the overwhelming interest in such programs, a rewards program tied to check-ins at local establishments and attractions offer multiple benefits. Visitors have a reason to return to your destination to earn and redeem points. Locals are encouraged to spend their money close to home. Hotels, restaurants and retailers gain an additional avenue for attracting and keeping customers.

Measure success

The number of hits and posts is important, but even more important is the tone and frequency of messages from travelers. The beautiful thing about a mobile app for client destinations and experiences is that marketers can track data in real time. See what visitors are downloading the most or posting from the image gallery. If an event earns a certain number of likes on the mobile app, hold it again the next year.

The wide adoption of smartphones is transforming how consumers plan, book and navigate through their vacations. The relative ease of developing mobile websites and apps is opening new avenues for destinations, travel services, attractions, properties, restaurants and retailers to connect with their customers and get them talking about their experience. Ultimately, the goal of engaging travelers is to guide them through their stay, but also to keep them coming back.

Meredith Pratt is Account Manager at Stanton Communications, Inc. ●



Meredith Pratt