

This brave new world of travel writing

Fri, Mar 5, 2010 | Posted by [Jeremy Head](#)

We're seeing a definite shift from travel companies just talking about social media to actively looking to spend money doing it. And [when you consider the numbers](#) it's hardly surprising. That's presenting some really interesting opportunities and challenges.

The challenges for brands

1) Social media spaces are not brand-friendly

Travel brands might want to really engage with customers through social media, but by its very nature this stuff is highly personal. A faceless brand just feels totally out of place here. People unsurprisingly relate best to [real] people. What we are seeing is the smarter companies starting to let the real people that work for them step out from behind their corporate brand-speak. To talk with their own voices. [Jetblue](#) in the USA and [easyJet](#) in the UK both use Twitter really effectively to help customers in a really personal and helpful manner.

2) Customers want unbiased information

Worse for brands, people want to deal with other people that they feel they can **trust**. In a direct customer services environment – like the twitter examples above – then contact with a real person who works for the company works well. But how about finding holiday ideas, getting inspiration for trips? Any information that has a brand associated with it will feel like a hardcore sales message. People will smell an ulterior motive. They won't trust what they read.

3) Brands don't really know how to be online publishers

Back in the old off-line days, travel companies published customer magazines, produced brochures, mailed out literature – but all of it by nature was promotional. Often marketers don't really get unbiased content – they have what's the sales message? built into their DNA. Their job is to sell more product. Nowadays on the social web – people are looking for unbiased, credible information to help them decide what to do for their holidays. That's a completely different environment and a completely different mindset.

An opportunity?

I'm finding the idea of using a credible, experienced travel writer to create content for a brand in a more appealing – in particular content that sits in a more social environment where people are in the planning phase of booking their holiday. Using an expert travel writer offers several advantages:

1) Credibility

If I'm reading content on a blog hosted by a travel brand about say, great ideas for romantic breaks in Prague I really won't value recommendations that seem to come directly from the company. It will feel too much like someone is trying to sell me something. If it's written by an unbiased travel expert offering ideas and advice – with a profile that I can read and links to other pieces they have written about romantic breaks elsewhere – then the content immediately feels more genuine. By association the company wins as well.

2) Personality

As I said above, people relate to people. I'm much more likely to engage with content (and potentially go on and purchase) if I feel a connection with a real person writing it ? someone a bit like me, someone who understands my needs, someone whose opinion I feel I can trust.

3) Great ideas

This socially-enabled online publishing world can be bit of a scary space for marketers. For web-journalists who know their stuff (and not all do!) it's home. A genuinely web-savvy travel writer can work with a marketer to come up with great ideas that will really work for their customers. Great ideas that are developed primarily with a user in mind rather than a sales target. Ideas that will foster engagement and conversation.

Here are a few different examples of this idea in practice:

- VisitFlorida's use of [expert writers with specific interests](#)
- Fiona Hilliard writing the [Glove Box blog](#) for Argus Car Hire
- Lara Dunston and Terence Carter, writing the [Gran Turismo blog](#) for HomeAway Holiday-Rentals

Some I think work better than others. What do you think?