



Social media - With a little help from your friends

Word of mouth has rivals for its communication crown. Social media could have a huge role to play in airline customer services

Canadian musician Dave Carroll's song United Breaks Guitars has had well over 5 million hits on YouTube. Carroll wrote, recorded and posted the song to describe his battle with United Airlines over compensation for a guitar broken in transit. As a result, the airline industry learned a valuable lesson about the power of social media.

Some airlines have been reasonably quick off the mark in using social media to enhance their business. Southwest has already managed to amass over 750,000 followers on Twitter; Oman Air has a Facebook page; while AirAsia's blog, Just Plane Thoughts, makes it a leading social networker in Asia-Pacific.

There are many more examples but, equally, many carriers are mired in inactivity. "Airline involvement in social media covers the full range," agrees Shashank Nigam, CEO of branding consultancy Simplifying. "Some airlines have no presence on social media sites at all, while others have been active for some time across the board."

The pros of social networking

Nigam argues there are many advantages for those airlines embracing the social-media phenomenon, including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and blogs. For instance, it is a very powerful response tool in a crisis, being both personal and pervasive. "But the main point is that an airline is using the same platforms as their customers," he says. "So the airline is essentially going out to meet its customers and talking to them in their language. It's fresh, innovative and very powerful."

Suddenly, an airline becomes more than just another faceless organization. Cathay Pacific has a micro-site introducing some of its employees, so customers can see not only names but also a photo and some personal and professional information. It creates a relationship beyond that achievable by frequent flyer programs and data mining.

There are more quantifiable benefits too. JetBlue, for example, is using Twitter to sell last-minute seats through its "Cheeps" concept. However, Morgan Johnston, Manager of Corporate Communications for JetBlue (and their lead Twitterer), notes the greatest value is in the lessons learned from social media. "Our goal has always been to bring humanity back to air travel and we're excited with any opportunity to engage with our customers—whether that be on our planes or online," he says. "To the degree we can help inform or direct our customers to the best resources, we think social media is a great place to hold those discussions."

The carrier is also using the site to deal with a number of customer queries and now has 30-plus staff dealing with uploads. Not only does this enable it to respond to customers faster and in a more direct manner, but it could also reduce call loads and costs in call centers.

"Social Media tends to be a collaborative and evolving environment," says Johnston. "We'll continue to observe the landscape and take our cues from the communities we engage with."

Engaging Malaysia Airlines

Malaysia Airlines has a similar philosophy. Since its initial forays into the digital sphere in early 2008, its online presence—and following—has grown enormously. Facebook and Twitter accounts are backed up by an employee blog and an active blogger engagement program.

Senior General Manager of Communications Indira Nair says the aim is primarily to reach out to audiences aged between 25 and 35, who are digitally savvy. "We use social media as a platform for communicating and interacting, and integrate these with a relevant mix of offline activities and events," she says. "This encourages consumers to consider the 'value' proposition, rather than impulse purchasing based solely on price."

For the 2009 IATA AGM in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia Airlines was asked to recommend some worthwhile restaurants. It put a request out through its MASTravel Twitter account and received a number of suggestions, including one from a local celebrity.

More recently, the airline organized a plane-spotting session for its bloggers and Facebook fans. "By engaging them in activities and

connecting with them on a regular basis, we are continuously building relationships and affinity with the brand," believes Nair.

However, she also issues a note of warning, suggesting social media must be constantly checked and real-time responses should be made against the backdrop of a clear communications strategy: why is the airline in that space, who is it reaching out to, and what outcomes has it set out to achieve.

"It is important to monitor social-media networks as they have enormous power to influence others and, as such, power to damage the brand," says Nair.

Losing control

As with any new channel, there are a number of unknowns about social media with which airlines must contend. Perhaps the most crucial is the potential loss of control. Social media gives a platform to everybody.

"Branding is traditionally about a well-defined message, deliberately disseminated by the airline," says Nigam. "But it's now swinging towards the consumers. They are defining an airline's image by talking on blogs, tweets and Facebook. The most influential can become more than just customers. They are arguably more important than the 100,000-miles-a-year man."

Nigam accepts that correct responses and management by an airline can turn this negative into a positive, but there are other areas beyond a carrier's remit. For example, the public could lose their love affair with tweets and blogs.

Because social media is new and challenging, it represents a risk to airline strategy. Getting stuck on a fad seems unlikely at the moment but is entirely possible. The ability to determine a worthwhile new channel from the latest craze is vital, but at least airlines have become far more experienced in the world of the wide web.

Singapore Airlines is one of those carriers being extremely cautious in its approach. Yet it does have fan sites on Facebook and Twitter and even a Twitter account set up by an unidentified person who tweets the airline's fare specials to more than 4,000 followers.

"Social media as a concept is developing rapidly, with many new emerging platforms, and we continually review the opportunities that are available to us," declares Nicholas Ionides, Vice President for Public Affairs at Singapore Airlines. "Our view is that the social-media space and online communities should be user-driven and user-generated. Where we can and are able to, we help facilitate discussion or sharing of information, while taking care to let these communities direct their own activities as much as possible."

"Whether Singapore Airlines chooses to leverage social media in the future will depend on the sort of opportunities available and how we can use it to complement our own existing communication channels," he adds.

Addison Schonland, founder of Innovation Analysis Group, argues social media is simply an extension of the web. "If we can define social media as the ability of people to interact with suppliers; providing feedback, rating services, offering guidance to other consumers and so on, we don't see this going away," he says.

"There may be new ideas that come along to replace Twitter or Facebook—but people are really enjoying the ability to use the web to communicate," he continues. "We think that as the web increasingly goes mobile, social media will grow even more. In the end, all social media means to business is that it enables a vendor and customer to grow closer. That, by itself, is a great outcome."

Internal changes

If airlines do embrace the web's networking sites, they will need to make internal adjustments. Often departments function as silos and this makes the social-media phenomenon difficult to control.

There are also marketing aspects and customer services to consider—not to mention the selling of distressed inventory.

For example, customers are asking questions on Twitter that range from type of aircraft to seat layout to destination queries, and often simply need a solution to a problem. Nobody in marketing or communications can answer all of these questions. But those responsible for handling the Twitter account need to be able to draw on any department to get the information quickly.

This clearly involves labor costs, at the very least. Twitter, Facebook and the rest may be free to set up, but they need to be active 24/7 because customers interact with airlines on that basis. And the staff who man these systems must be compassionate, patient and brand champions. Support from senior management is also vital to make any social-media project sustainable. Nevertheless, most proponents suggest any carrier can start off with a few amateur practitioners, maybe still doing their day job before becoming a steering committee as the project takes off.

"In our view, the cost is rather low considering the value created," says Schonland. "Where airlines have put their brands in the hands of PR firms on Twitter, nothing wonderful happens. Put airline people on the job—they know where to get information fast, and provide customers with good information."

Front runners

As with many innovations, it will be the front runners and the fast followers that garner the biggest rewards. Those carriers still at the drawing-board stage will need to take swift action. “If you consider what airlines do, you would think they are naturally disposed to social media,” says Schonland. “After all, travel is something one associates with pictures, video and shared memories. Airlines should be embracing social media but we notice something of a fear.”

However, before any serious work starts, airlines must be absolutely clear on what they are trying to achieve. Increasing revenue requires a different set-up to enhancing customer relationships. “I suggest they think in terms of a return on engagement, rather than a return on investment,” concludes Simplifying’s Nigam. “All that takes is devising some metrics to gauge their success. There are endless ways of exploiting social media and so endless ways of using it to good effect.”

Delivering the airline message on environment

The Air Transport Action Group (ATAG) runs the industry-wide environmental resource site www.enviro.aero, but it has also been exploring social media for around two years. Its Twitter feed www.twitter.com/enviroaero has more than 1,700 followers (including NGOs such as Greenpeace), some 400 people have joined its Facebook group and thousands read the blog on the website every month.

“These tools have worked very well to spread the message about what aviation is doing to reduce its environmental footprint, while opening up a dialogue with the flying public,” says Haldane Dodd, ATAG Head of Communications. “Our YouTube channel www.youtube.com/enviroaero provides a free platform for us to host videos of key industry conferences like October’s Greener Skies meeting in Hong Kong.”

One of the first comments Dodd received when starting down the social-media road was “it’s great that the industry is talking directly to us now”. He suggests the old style of communication has gone out the window as a stiff corporate response simply won’t work on Facebook or YouTube. According to Dodd, companies that respond honestly, with a “human” touch and a bit of humor, will survive the world of social-media interaction better than those who try to stick to the old ways of doing things.

Celebrity flying

Aviation organizations have turned to social media to give voice to industry positions. Flying Matters ran a “spot the celebrity” online campaign to identify celebrities who denounce aviation but are spotted taking flights. Such an initiative is an early sign of how aviation can engage the public online and manage issues of industry importance.

Director of Flying Matters Michelle Di Leo says: “The great thing about tools like Twitter and Facebook is their immediacy and the lack of filtering through a traditional media prism—you can tell your story the way you want. However, you have to understand, respect and work within the unofficial and popularly accepted etiquette of Twitter and Facebook to ensure these tools really work for you. If you phrase your message in industry terms then you tend to stay within an industry ‘silo’ within Twitter and Facebook, but if you can phrase your message in popular terms that’s when things really take off and you reach a whole different audience.”