

The Wire...from AirPlus

May 2009: Harnessing social media

AIRPLUS. WHAT TRAVEL PAYMENT IS ALL ABOUT.



Twitter. Facebook. LinkedIn. We all know the names, but have we figured out the game to using social media tools for the business of corporate travel?

An online survey of travel management professionals conducted last month by AirPlus International revealed a connection between personal and professional use of social media sites. While more than 71 percent of respondents indicated that they personally participate in a social media platform and/or blog community, it's encouraging to report that slightly more than 65 percent said that these sites could or already have added value to their business.

The possibilities for corporate travel applications are well worth exploring, as engagement in online communities continues to grow at breakneck speed—outpacing use of personal email accounts as the preferred communication channel. Twitter, a more recent online phenomenon, grew its membership by 1,382% year over year. Facebook had more than 20 million users in February 2008 and counted more than 65 million just one year later. According to Nielsen's "Global Faces and Networked Places" study from March, 67 percent of Web users worldwide are plugged into at least one social networking or blog site and one out of every eleven minutes spent online is dedicated to use of new media.

In which of the following social media platforms do you participate?

LinkedIn	58.0%
Facebook	44.8%
None	28.2%
Twitter	15.5%
Blogs such as theBeat.travel	12.6%
Other	7.5%
ACTE Connect	6.3%
MySpace	5.2%

Perhaps surprisingly, the fastest growing user group for new media sites is the 35 to 49 year olds, with business travelers among them. Indeed, business travelers are likely to be avid users—expanding their networking circles or providing family and colleagues with itinerary updates. Useful online services like Triplt and Dopplr can assist in making face-to-face connections, especially when used in concert with networking sites like Linked-in or Twitter. Users can instantly find out where their travel plans overlap with those of industry contacts in a given destination—organizing an ancillary meeting and increasing productivity. Travel managers might tap these types of free online resources to connect employees traveling to the same destination and organize car sharing or other cost-reduction programs around such capabilities.

In which of the following ways do you believe these types of sites can enhance the business travel community?

They can increase customer/market satisfaction and supplier knowledge	35.5%
They can encourage travel industry camaraderie	39.0%
They can help to showcase what is most important to travelers	38.4%
They make me more aware of what my preferred partners are doing	41.3%
I don't know	20.9%
Social media is a distraction for business	17.4%
Other (please specify)	6.4%

Most corporate travel professionals, however, have not taken the possibilities of social media that far. Rather, they concentrate on gathering information for later actions, such as refining their list of preferred suppliers or tailoring programs to traveler preferences. In the AirPlus survey, respondents cited increased awareness of preferred supplier activities as the most effective business use of new media channels, with more than 41 percent following their suppliers online. On the heels of supplier intel were two traveler-oriented purposes: 39 percent noted the ability of social media to create camaraderie among travelers and more than 38 percent called out its ability to showcase what is most important to travelers.

Interestingly, the top new media site for the business travel community according to the AirPlus survey was the consumer site Linked-in, which beat out industry-specific blogs and information sharing sites. Whether that was due to a lack of awareness or another reason, the survey did not determine. What it does indicate is that there is room to grow when it comes to engagement in and active use of new media in the corporate travel space. Travel buyers and suppliers should raise their awareness and look for ways to reach the expanding group of avid new media users with their programs and messages.

Which of the following social media sites could/does add value to your business?

Twitter	14.0%
Linkedin	44.8%
Facebook	11.6%
MySpace	4.1%
ACTE Connect	15.1%
Blogs such as theBeat.travel	20.9%
None	34.3%
Other	8.7%

Additional Resources

Social Networking's New Global Footprint – Nielsen Wire <http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/nielsen-news/social-networking-new-global-footprint/>

10 Social Media Travel Tools – Harvard Business Publishing http://blogs.harvardbusiness.org/cs/2009/03/10_social_media_travel_tools.html

Business Travel Hooks Onto Web – gulfnews.com <http://archive.gulfnews.com/articles/09/04/29/10308554.html>

Survey Methodology—For this issue of The Wire, AirPlus International in cooperation with ProMedia.travel surveyed 174 travel management professionals in North American and Europe from April 9-23, 2009.

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