

The Importance of Social media in today's airline business

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“A brand is no longer what we tell the consumer it is – it is what consumers tell each other it is.” - Scott Cook, co-founder Intuit

The concept

Kaplan and Haenlein define social media as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.’ Web 2.0 is described ‘as a platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion’. So Web 2.0 might be seen as the ideological and technological foundation of social media. The mere publishing of content is less interactive and belongs to the earlier Web 1.0 era; collaborative projects, starting with blogs, belong to Web 2.0 (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010).

The ABC Technology Explained website comments that: ‘Social media encapsulates digital tools and activities that enable communication and sharing across the Internet ... Social media is used prolifically by all areas of society; business, politics, media, advertising, police and emergency services. It has also become a key tool for provoking thought, dialogue and action around particular social issues.’

How can social media enhance customer experience?

According to Hollis Thomases, author of *Twitter Marketing: An Hour a Day* (Social Media Marketing Magazine issue 6), social media enhances the customers’ experience of a company’s brand with feedback and impressions which the business can't provide on its own. The feedback comes from the customer and the conversations between them and their friends, family, and colleagues. Social media is woven throughout the customer experience—from research to purchasing decision and on through to the customer support phase post-sale. Customers harness the reach of their own networks to share their experience with brands. This presents businesses with tremendous opportunity. Through monitoring social media and with the help of online reputation management tools, the business can know:

- WHAT is being said about it (reviews, testimonials, brand sentiments)
- WHO is saying it (male/female, location)
- WHEN they're talking (researching purchases, point of purchase, post-sale)
- WHERE they're talking (social networks, blogs, forums, review sites)
- HOW they're saying it (on your website or theirs, by device, on-the-go versus mobile)
- WHY people publicly interact with our brand (share with friends, get answers, get better service, brag, complain)

Airlines and Social Media

Companies and organisations are becoming more and more in tune with the digital, social customer and airlines have not been left behind. The use of social media in the airline industry has become a rapidly increasing trend. Airlines are using the social media as a platform for brand

development and product marketing, improving customer service and improving passenger experience e.g. through updating and responding to customers' feedback. Data from Mindshift Interactive, a digital outreach firm, suggests that 40 per cent of airlines are actively growing their social media team to incorporate representatives from marketing, customer service, e-commerce, corporate communications and other departments.

SimpliFlying, a leading airline branding consultancy, which works with airlines, airports and hotels worldwide to build a brand strategy that drives engagement, loyalty and revenues through social media, carried out case studies on six airlines (Alaska Air, AirBaltic, JetBlue, Southwest Airlines, Volaris and Qantas). The airlines' executives shared best practices from the ever-changing landscape of social media branding. From these case studies, the main social media business objectives for airlines are outlined below:

1. To build relationships and create greater interaction with customers

An airline may choose to participate in social media to build better relationships with their customers. Social media allows an airline to respond to many customer requests and complaints speedily. Most of the time, customers simply want someone to listen to them. Social media provides the perfect platform towards that end since it not only reduces the cost of operating other communication platforms, but it also allows customers to take advantage of special promotions offered only on these channels.

2. To listen and respond in real-time

Through social media, airlines can listen to what their customers are saying and to respond in real-time. This is clearly an important skill that most airlines would want to adopt since even a slight inkling of dissent could prove costly for the company if left un-tackled.

3. To drive traffic, facilitate engagement with its customers, and to increase awareness about the brand

With the rapid growth of social media, staying offline would be a huge competitive disadvantage for an airline. In an industry where there is a race to get more customers, online engagement is seen as an important way to create value for more customers.

4. To achieve customer engagement

The use of social media allows a close conversation between the airline and its passengers who can conveniently receive information about events on time and increases the airline's ability to build a high level of trust with its people.

5. To achieve transparency in operations

An airline may use social media to give its customers backstage access to see how the airline is operated.

Many airlines use social media as a complaints management tool to interact directly with worried customers. According to Terrapin, some airlines, like Kulula, direct their social media followers to a far more valuable task: as brand ambassadors. The idea is to build a social following of

people who will in turn use social media themselves to promote the airline as a great travel choice or even just a fun and interesting brand to keep an eye on.

Key Drivers of Airline Media Campaign

Whilst dealing with social media, airlines have to remember the key factors when designing and implementing an airline social media campaign. They have to engage the audience, maintain good customer service and quality and make an emotional connection with customers. Some of the mistakes big brands make when designing their campaigns and tips on how airlines can avoid the pitfall are highlighted below:

1. Believing that crowd-sourcing will only create positive responses

Such campaigns mean that the company loses control over the message, something that can potentially range from embarrassing to devastating.

How to avoid the pitfall

- Research your hash-tags using an online resource, make it relevant to your industry and be aware of your brands weaknesses.
- Choose your hash-tags carefully and plan an outcome.

2. Failing to take action on social media complaints

Just as customer focused businesses wouldn't ignore letters of complaint from customers, they shouldn't ignore customer complaints via social media platforms. In fact, because complaints via on social media are visible to the wider public, as is the response by the business in question, there should be even more emphasis on a timely and helpful response. This requires two things in particular: a combined approach to social across the business and a constant monitoring of all channels.

How to avoid the pitfall

- Interact with your customers, turn a negative experience into a positive one and make them your brand champion.
- Train your customer services team on social media channels, they are the best equipped to deal with customer complaints.
- Don't engage with internet trolls, remember that some people just like to complain and a faceless forum on social media allows them to do so.

3. A complete failure of crisis management

A good business should have a plan in place to deal with any crisis that occurs. On social media platforms, everything you do can be scrutinized and mistakes can be blown way out of proportion.

How to avoid the pitfall

- Have a real-time social media expert in your team, don't leave comments to escalate.

- Don't latch on to trending topics unless you can bring something valuable to the party. Using trending topics to increase your follows won't increase 'quality' follows that are actually interested in your product or content.

4. Rushing in without a coherent, organisation-wide strategy

Social media is applicable right across the business and should not just be siloed in the marketing Department. If it is, then businesses can find themselves in the situation where there are a number of 'official' accounts giving conflicting messages to the public. In this day and age every business should have a senior director tasked with creating a unified social strategy, and they should have the authority to run this across the business and not just from the marketing department.

How to avoid the pitfall

- Define your online personality, and get your entire team involved. The more human the better. If it's applicable, create a brand mascot and make them funny and personable. You'll end up with more follows and retweets and engagement levels will go through the roof.
- Give it time. Dedicate hours and expertise to building your online brand.
- Give people content they want and are likely to share. Customers are more likely to listen to their friends or colleagues for recommendations rather than the brand itself. Utilize what you already have and offer incentive to customers already engaged with your brand.

5. Assuming that social media is just a numbers game

Even though it is possible to bulk buy followers on to the social media platform of choice for a price, time and money of busy businesses is better spent creating communities through interaction rather than just through trying to amass followers. Good social media strategies will result in building followers who will be a committed community of brand champions.

How to avoid the pitfall

- Nurture brand champions already engaged and get them to spread the word, each person who is engaged has 160 friends on average on Facebook, utilize these statistics and engage your champions.
- Invest in technology that gauges interaction, clout and reach. These numbers will be more valuable to your CEO as these are the people talking about your product and engaging others to do so.
- Review your progress every week. If a hash-tag isn't working then review your strategy. This is a real time game so be prepared to be flexible and creative.

6. Not quality checking each and every bit of content that is posted

Spelling, punctuation and grammatical mistakes can be avoided. The 140 character or fewer rule means that you need to get inventive with your content.

How to avoid the pitfall

- Check everything. Then check it again.
- Don't publish poor quality content. It will make your brand look amateur in an industry which is already saturated with top quality e-books, infographics and videos.
- For twitter, get creative with your 140 words, don't abbreviate to try and cram stuff in! Play around with your message, try different formulas, try and pitch your product in 140 characters.

7. Leaving official accounts inactive

It is simply not enough to have a page sitting there unused. If you are going to get into social media, do so whole-heartedly. If not then there is simply no point in making a token effort.

How to avoid the pitfall

- Make sure that only capable social media savvy employees are allowed access to company accounts and are tweeting on your hash-tag. Enthusiasm is great but once that message is out there it's part of your online brand image
- Integrate your campaign. Have the same person responsible, or overseeing, all your social media activity to make sure you're not neglecting a channel and the tone is consistent across all online social media platforms.

In conclusion, it is vital for airlines to have an active presence on social media, like it is for other industries. Airlines should keep learning and developing social media strategies to drive engagement and loyalty with customers who will identify better with the airline and become brand ambassadors. As Erik Qualman, author of *Socialnomics*, *Digital Leader* and *Crisis*, puts it, "We don't have a choice on whether we do social media, the question is how well we do it" put differently by Bill Marriott, CEO of Marriott Hotels, "Social Media is not going away, it's not a passing fad. If you don't start playing now then you are going to be playing catch up and falling further behind as it moves more mainstream."

References

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