SOCIAL MEDIA 2.0: RETHINKING STRATEGIES
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ask hoteliers about their companies’ social media strategies, and chances are each will have a different approach. According to several social media experts, that’s normal.

New social media channels are popping up every day. Several popular channels, such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr, are evolving to include additional features.

Hoteliers must keep pace with these changes and constantly rethink their approaches—especially when it comes to consumer engagement, experts said.

In “Social media 2.0: Rethinking strategies,” Hotel News Now examines creative ways to best engage with guests on social media. To kick things off, we polled experts and asked them to tackle the top three challenges on social media, as identified by PhoCusWright’s “Social media in travel: Mayhem, myths, mobile & money.”

This report examines other topics as well, including how booking via social media has evolved (hint: Conversion rates are low, but the platforms still are a driver of direct and indirect bookings) and how photos and videos can impact consumer interaction with a hotel or brand company. Additionally, readers will find tips on reaching travelers amid China’s fragmented social landscape. Experts from destination marketing organizations—which score highest on measures of guest engagement, according to PhoCusWright—also weigh in with best practices designed to connect hoteliers with their target audiences.

Readers are unlikely to walk away with the same strategies after reading this report, but they’ll be walking away with new and improved strategies all the same.

Happy reading,
The HNN editorial staff
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Managing social media is more challenging than ever, especially if hotel marketers want to make waves, according to social-savvy experts.

From measuring return on investment to staying abreast of new digital platforms, countless hurdles exist in the space.

In this Hotel News Now roundtable, sources tackled hotel companies’ top three social media challenges, as identified in PhoCusWright’s “Social media in travel: Mayhem, myths, mobile & money.”

According to the report, 52% of hoteliers surveyed said their top challenge was measuring return on investment on organized social activity. The second-largest challenge was measuring the impact/reach of branding and brand marketing through social media. The third challenge was keeping up with new social platforms.
1. HOW DO YOU MEASURE RETURN ON INVESTMENT FOR SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITY?

DoubleTree’s Plazas: “We don’t look into direct return on investment tied to pure revenue, but at the return on activities that look at community growth and engagement. We use the cold metrics of fans and followers, for example, as well as revenue figures, click-through rates and such.”

IHG’s Ayres: “There are a couple of different ways we approach it. What we would consider every day, evergreen social promotions our success is measured in four big buckets. One is social connections, or fans, followers, links, etc. It’s not the end game for us, but it is important to know that we have a large audience to speak it. Impressions are the reach of the folks we are messaging. We also talk about engagement, not the numbers of people we reach, but do they actually engage with the content, are they responding to it, sharing that content with their friends, leaving comments? The last is revenue and traffic number, which is a straightforward look at how much revenue is being driven, how much traffic to our websites is being driven.

“Depending on what the initiative is or the content type is we weigh each of those differently, but these are the four buckets of metrics we use.

“That’s the day-to-day stuff, but on the campaign stuff it can be very specific depending on the goals of the campaign. One of the ways we have expanded the ways we think about social as a channel is to start to treat it in some respects as a traditional advertising platform.”

Loews’ Stevens: “It’s an interesting challenge for most brands. We look at a variety of activities, but the key metric internally is growing brand awareness and brand engagement.

“As far as ROI for Twitter reservations, we look at conversion metrics and total revenue. However, we also focus on broadening the horizon of consumer familiarity with Loews and engagement with the brand.”

Trivago’s Borzatta: “Social media ROI should be measured based on both the social platform used and the specific goals of the company. Companies often analyze how their marketing department measures exposure and use that as a starting point for social media ROI.”
2. How do you measure the impact/reach of branding and brand marketing through social media?

Plazas: “We look at how our content is resonating with consumers, as well as conduct campaigns and sweepstakes that live mainly on social media and allow us further insight into the composition of our community and whether the consumers who are engaging with us are frequent DoubleTree by Hilton guests or those wanting to learn more about the brand before experiencing it.”

Ayres: “We continue to work closely with our platform partners (Twitter and Facebook in particular) to execute more traditional brand measurement research instruments. It’s certainly an evolving space but one we feel is important to help us gauge campaign and program effectiveness.”

Borzatta: “Our social media team aligns with other departments in order to set a benchmark based on similar kinds of branding exposure.”

3. What are you doing to keep up with new social media platforms?

Plazas: “We have some amazing teams at Hilton Worldwide (Holdings), industry-leading agency partners and existing relationships like the one with Google that help us keep up to date with the latest developments in social media. We also have some great regional teams and agency partners in markets such as China, where social media plays such an important role, and get regular feedback on new platforms and what other brands are doing in those regions.”

Ayres: “It’s anything from reading a lot of blogs and tweets and industry news to a larger level having really close relationships with Twitter and Facebook so we get some sense of what is coming down their product roadmap so we can stay ahead of that as much as we can. We also lean into our agency partners to help us stay abreast.

“We do our best to not be too distracted by shiny objects.”

Stevens: “I lead the charge from a social media standpoint. I’m tapped into what specific brands are doing. While we’re aware and monitor new networks and see how they are involving, we want to make sure we’re getting the biggest bang for our buck, and we want to be where the consumers are and are participating on a daily basis.”

Borzatta: “The social media team combines regular research with daily reading of tech and social publications and trend forecasting. We attend industry conferences and hold regular creative in-house brainstorming sessions.”

UP NEXT: SOCIAL MEDIA BOOKINGS ENTER NEW FRONTIER
While a crucial source of inspiration and sharing within the broader booking funnel, Facebook has faltered in its capacity to drive direct bookings. But that does not mean hoteliers have abandoned social media as a distribution channel in general.

On the contrary, hoteliers are turning to social media standouts such as TripAdvisor and Twitter to test a new frontier in the bookings landscape, according to sources.

Nearly 50% of hotel companies have a booking engine or widget on their Facebook page, according to PhoCusWright’s “Social media in travel: Mayhem, myths, mobile and money” study. Bookings generated through the channel, however, are generally low, with 45% of companies surveyed saying they receive less than 1% of total bookings through the site.

“If you think of the way consumers use Facebook as part of their travel experiences, it is very rarely the last point of entry for them,” said Nick Ayres, director of social marketing for InterContinental Hotels Group. In
2012, the company installed a booking widget on the Facebook pages for each of its brands and for the IHG Rewards Club Facebook page. Consumers on the pages enter basic information on the widget and then are directed to IHG.com to complete the bookings.

“We don’t see a lot of customers who come to Facebook and say, ‘I know exactly what hotel I want to stay at, when I want to stay there, and I’m ready to book that hotel.’ Inevitably, if a customer is at that point, they will go to our websites directly or to some other channel,” Ayres said.

IHG has seen the most success with the widget on the IHG Rewards Club Facebook page, he said.

“Because (the Rewards Club site) covers all the brands and the way the functionality works, it casts a wider net for customers to get a sense of what might be available in the IHG portfolio, rather than saying I’m ready to book this one particular hotel,” he said. “Also, our Rewards Club members are more fully engaged and have a preference to book with IHG’s direct channels.”

Other hotel companies have had minimal success with Facebook booking applications.

Vantage Hospitality Group has a Facebook booking widget for its Lexington by Vantage and Canadas Best Value Inn brands, but John Burkard, VP of distribution and technology, said the company has only realized occasional bookings through the channel.

“Overall, it’s not a significant source of revenue,” he said in an email. “We had planned on implementing a similar widget for the (Americas Best Value Inn Facebook) page, but the form of implementation that (GDS and CRS solutions provider) Sabre offers for Facebook would make it extremely difficult to maintain. Given the revenue opportunity versus the effort required, we ultimately decided not to implement the widget on that page.”

TURNING TO TRIPADVISOR, TWITTER
Choice Hotels International was one of the most recent brand companies to initiate a social media booking channel. In May, it became the first hotel company to partner with TripAdvisor to implement the site’s mobile instant-booking feature.

By clicking on the “Book on TripAdvisor” button, customers can use the tool to search for hotels and destinations and complete bookings without leaving the TripAdvisor site. Choice Hotels sends the guest a confirmation number and email message to verify the booking.

“This enables us to plug into one of the biggest distribution players in the industry,” said Robert
McDowell, senior VP of marketing and distribution for Choice. “As TripAdvisor continues to grow, more people are looking at the site for its reviews. This integration allows our guests on the site to book directly in a timely and seamless fashion. For us, it is a combination of hitting on the social aspect of distribution but also driving customers to (the Choice reservations system).”

McDowell declined to share specific data regarding booking volume on the TripAdvisor instant-booking feature.

In late 2013, Loews Hotels & Resorts created a mechanism that allows customers to use Twitter to make hotel bookings. According to Piper Stevens, senior director of brand loyalty, consumers send a tweet to Loews using the #bookloews hashtag. Agents in the Loews reservations center send a return tweet inviting the user to click on a link that opens a Web chat, which the agents use to complete the reservation.

“At that point, the conversation is seamless, just as you would have a chat on any site,” Stevens said. “The key is the chat mechanism is secure and PCI-compliant so we can inquire about personal information in a secure environment.”

Stevens said Loews’ marketers spread the word about the service through all guest-facing communications channels. At the beginning of the day, they send a tweet announcing that the channel is open for booking, followed by one at the end of the day when it is closed.

“We determined Twitter was the best channel in which to promote an active booking mechanism,” she said. “We like the fact it is has a lot of conversation, unlike Facebook where someone may make an inquiry, but it comes through as a message and is a little more passive.”

Stevens declined to share specific detail regarding booking volume on the channel.

Ayres of IHG said his team considered using the Twitter connection but decided against it.

“We’re not sure that unless it is related to a specific offer that having a booking application just for the sake of having one is going to be terribly beneficial for the average consumer,” he said. “The way we use Twitter is more about sharing links to specific deals rather than having an application to be used for that.”

UP NEXT: SOCIAL MEDIA VIDEO SUCCESS STORIES

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INCLUDE INFORMATION ABOUT THE RENOVATIONS ON THE PROPERTY’S WEBSITE.

HANG UP SIGNS THROUGHOUT THE PROPERTY ALERTING GUESTS OF RENOVATION PROJECTS.

STAGE NOISE EVENTS. LET GUESTS KNOW WHEN NOISY PROJECTS WILL START.

GET STAFF MEMBERS EXCITED ABOUT THE RENOVATIONS. THEY WILL BE THE ONES TELLING THE STORY.

HAVE A BACK-UP PLAN IN PLACE IF PROJECT DEADLINES ARE NOT MET.

NUMBER OF MONTHLY USERS

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<td>LinkedIn</td>
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Source: Statistic Brain, Twitter and TripAdvisor
A unique social media solution that combines photography and mobile technology to instantly deliver branded pictures that can be shared to social media.

**entertain & engage**
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Video campaigns on social media—when done right—are proving fertile ground for hoteliers looking to reap guest engagement, sources said.

Some chains are finding success by looking to travelers to help tell their stories, while others are drawing from outside influences to help cultivate brand loyalty.

Here are a few success stories:

IHG TELLS THE RIGHT STORY FOR THE RIGHT BRAND
InterContinental Hotels Group focuses on three key elements when formulating its video strategy plan for social media: humor, insider information and strong storytelling. It’s also important to stay true to the brand, said Nick Ayres, director of social marketing for IHG. www.ihgplc.com

“I believe pretty firmly that video has potential to play a pretty big role in travel and the hospitality experience,” he said.

But Ayres cautioned against hotel companies using video just for the sake of video because it doesn’t work for every brand.

For example, IHG’s InterContinental Hotels & Resorts brand targets experience-driven travelers with insider tips from the concierge as part of its video strategy. The same content might not resonate with guests seeking more practical extended-stay offerings from the likes of Staybridge Suites, Ayres said.

IHG’s Holiday Inn brand in July launched its digitally-led “Journey to Extraordinary” campaign, which celebrates the journey of its guests by sharing their

HIGHLIGHTS

IHG focuses on humor, insider information and strong storytelling when it comes to video.

Ritz-Carlton’s Reserve brand used animation to create a shareable story on social media.

DoubleTree by Hilton has pooled together travel videos from others for its “DTour” initiative.
unique narratives via video storytelling. The content debuted in July and will roll out through November on the brand’s various digital platforms, including Tumblr, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

“Guests have stayed really engaged with this content,” Ayres said, mentioning that Majora Carter’s and Scott Rigsby’s stories in particular resonated with consumers due to the hardships the authors faced.

IHG’s social media team uses YouTube for longer-form videos and Instagram for shorter-form videos, Ayres said. The group also has started experimenting with Facebook video during the past six to 12 months.

“The amount of video that’s now on Facebook is massive,” he said. “They started to expand their advertising. We’ve been testing some of those ad products as it relates to video.”

Ayres said IHG explored the six-second video sharing platform Vine but decided it was not the place for campaigns.

“We did see some engagement on Vine, but it didn’t make sense for us going forward. In the spirit of not being everywhere, we want to be very strategic and helpful,” he said. “For folks that have done Vine well, they do it very well.”

RITZ-CARLTON TAKES AN ANIMATED APPROACH
The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company’s Reserve brand took a slightly different approach with video storytelling when it launched its first social media video series “A Ritz-Carlton Reserve Adventure” on Tumblr and Facebook.

“There are very few brands out there that don’t have a video. When launching this, we saw a huge opportunity to do something different because so many videos in the world of travel are the same,” said Clayton Ruebensaal, VP of global marketing at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company.

In the high-end luxury travel space, which is where the Reserve brand falls, word of mouth is the No. 1 way that people find out about special properties, Ruebensaal said. The brand’s social media team wanted something unique to generate more buzz and sharing.
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The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company’s Reserve brand partnered with Chrlx to create an animated video series (pictured above) to be released on the brand’s Tumblr and Facebook pages. (Photo: Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company)

He enlisted the help of New York City-based Chrlx, a company that specializes in animation and film, to come up with the animated video story of Alice, a young sophisticated woman who takes a journey through the world and stops at each of the six Reserve properties. The brand released the story in eight-second snippets via social media.

“It was a series that in each of those snippets conveyed what we wanted to say about those brands and our target audience. That immersing yourself into culture is really important,” Ruebensaal said. This worked particularly well for Reserve’s audience because the typical guest loves to travel the world and is addicted to travel, he added.

The animated videos launched on Tumblr and Facebook, but the video eventually will be housed on Ritz-Carlton’s YouTube channel, Facebook page, www.RitzCarlton.com, Twitter, Sina Weibo, in addition to being distributed to in-room televisions at the company’s properties, Ruebensaal said.

“The video is on Tumblr because that is the space we dedicated to the Reserve brand. Its audience has a very high household income, and we thought it was a thoughtful place to put it,” he said.

As of 10 October, the video series had generated 57,967 interactions, 29,500 of which took place on Facebook. In total, the video had been viewed 54,823 times, according to data provided by Ritz-Carlton.

HILTON TAKES A ‘DTOUR’ ON YOUTUBE

Hilton Worldwide Holding’s DoubleTree by Hilton brand launched its “DTour” video and photo sharing initiative on YouTube in May 2013. The campaign has proven successful in terms of engagement, generating more than 10 million views, said Diana Plazas, director of global brand marketing for DoubleTree, via email.

Consumers are spending, on average, 10 minutes browsing and clicking around the website, she added.

“For our DTour program, YouTube gave us a way to gather amazing videos of hotel team members, travelers, as well as professional travel bloggers, and use them to share great ideas and suggestions to travelers who are undecided of where to go or what to do once they arrive at their destination, hence continuing to provide them with that rewarding experience,” she said.

CHOICE HOTELS GOES ‘CRAY CRAY’

Choice Hotels International used its “Vacay Gone Cray Cray” campaign to launch into social media, said Robert McDowell, senior VP of marketing and distribution.

The company partnered with YouTube stars Rhett & Link to create a video reenactment of user-submitted vacations gone wrong. The purpose of the video was to connect with millennials on a different media channel, McDowell said.

The video has been shared on Choice’s YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and Tumblr pages. “We’re looking to see which ones resonate with our customer, build brand awareness and drive them to the site.”

The campaign has generated more than 185 million paid impressions and more than 17 million total video views. There have been more than 135,000 total engagements on Choice’s social media channels, according to data provided by the company. ✨

UP NEXT: HOW TO USE PHOTOS ON SOCIAL MEDIA
A picture is worth a thousand words. In the hotel industry, that same photo also might be worth a thousand clicks.

A potential increase in guests and revenue multiply exponentially the more images are employed via social media sites, sources said.

Experts from online travel agencies said hoteliers, apart from adding images to their websites and social media channels, must pepper pictures on OTAs or risk losing out on market share.

TripAdvisor in September published a study showing that hotel websites with at least one photo received 138% more engagement from travelers and had a 225% higher likelihood of a booking enquiry compared to those that don’t have any photos.”

And that was with just one photo, said TripAdvisor’s Stephanie Boyle, senior PR manager.

Properties with more than 100 photos saw a 151%
increase in engagement, while those with more than 1,000 photos saw a 203% increase in engagement.

Boyle said photos are an important element in how TripAdvisor analyzes traveler booking behavior. It’s also one content inclusion hoteliers can have complete control over.

According to the study, “number of photos” was the factor that drove the most traveler engagement, coming ahead of “total number of reviews,” “management responses in the past year,” and “number of reviews in the past year.”

“Engagement levels increase with the increase in the numbers of photos; it’s that simple,” said Boyle. However, many websites still lack photos altogether.

Such photos often answer the questions guests have but that do not occur to staff. “For example, ‘Will I be able to see the chef preparing the food in the restaurant?’” she said.

PICTURE PERFECT
Other advice Boyle said would up eyeball and click time are:

• Change the principal photo seasonally, as this often taps into an audience the hotelier is unaware of.
• Partner with OTA and online companies in using their social media data to help target strategy.
• Employ a two-prong attack of using hotel and destination photos. Boyle said one surprising hit with online surfers were photos of showers. Ask what it is travelers love about hotels and how destination shots purvey a genuine experience. Some guests love the hotel, others love the destination, and some love both.
• Combine high-resolution, professional, hotel-led images with lower-quality guest images. On TripAdvisor, Boyle said, these are separate from each other, and hoteliers are able to submit reports to investigate concerns.

Sara Borzatta, Trivago’s global social media and content writer, offered her own advice.

“Recreational areas (are) a great way to drive engagement, while contrary to popular belief, hotel exterior images are not always the most successful,” Borzatta added.

At the Expedia Hotel & Distribution Summit held in September in Vienna, Benoit Jolin, Expedia’s senior director of global product, said the OTA posted more than 40,000 new property-generated photos every week.

Laurens Leurink, president of Expedia’s lodging partner services, said hoteliers have the power to convert bookings from photos and other social media content.

Borzatta said hoteliers should not be satisfied once the hard work is done. They have to constantly monitor their hotels and guests as to trends and influences.

“The strategy behind posting is similar to an editorial calendar of a publication, with themes, events, seasonality and product development all shaping both the content and the timing,” Borzatta said.

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UP NEXT: 8 WAYS TO IMPROVE SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT
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RESPONSIVE HTML 5 & CSS 3
Destination marketing organizations are ahead of the curve when it comes to social media use, according to PhoCusWright research.

Compared with online sellers, suppliers, travel agencies and travel packagers, DMOs were found to be most active across social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn. DMOs tied for first place with online sellers for Facebook and Google+, according to PhoCusWright’s report “Social media in travel: Mayhem, myths, mobile and money.”

Following are eight social media content tips from DMOs to assist hoteliers in their strategies:

1. GIVEAWAYS GET ENGAGEMENT

“People love giveaways,” Danielle Moon, sales & marketing manager at Minneapolis Northwest Convention & Visitors Bureau, wrote via email. “Since we’re able to track statistics on Facebook posts and tweets, I can honestly say that engagement/reach is higher with giveaways than any other kind of post we do.”

Moon said followers are more likely to share information with friends or comment on giveaway posts. Due to the Facebook algorithm, for instance, this leads to more followers’ friends seeing the post.

“We encourage users to comment or reply to a post/tweet for additional entries into the giveaway. It’s all about getting them to interact; the more they interact, the more people see it,” she said.
The non-membership CVB represents three northwest suburbs of Minneapolis: Brooklyn Center, Brooklyn Park and Maple Grove.

2. SHARE THE RIGHT CONTENT AT THE RIGHT TIME
The mantra at the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority is “giving the right content to the right people at the right time,” according to Nick Mattera, director of digital engagement.

For example, when the power, and with it the air conditioning, went out during a San Antonio Spurs game in June, the LVCVA sent a tweet that leveraged a trending conversation on Twitter.

The tweet allowed LVCVA staff to act on some real-time marketing via Twitter, Mattera wrote via email.

Another example of hyper-relevancy came during last winter’s polar vortex, Mattera said.

“Las Vegas tweeted this image on the heels of an announcement of a blizzard on its way. This also complemented weather-triggered Web banners served to individuals in locations impacted by the storm. While it may be cold, it’s always sunny in Vegas,” he said.

3. LET RESEARCH GUIDE YOU
“Research guides everything we do as an agency,” Mattera said.

He said the organization keeps a close eye on trending conversations on social media sites.

“This happens on a day-to-day community basis, along with quarterly and monthly content planning,” he added. “We’re looking at cultural shifts in social media, using proprietary listening tools to ensure our content is relevant and appropriate.”

Moon, who is one of two people out of an eight-person staff dedicated to social media at the Minneapolis Northwest CVB, said she also conducts research.

She attends industry conferences throughout the year where there is always some type of seminar regarding social media.

“They share their insights about what’s new and trending. We try to implement some and see how they work,” she said.
“I would like to start researching hashtags before using them on Twitter. You know, jump into conversations. It’s harder only having a few people work on social media when large companies have a team of 20 working on just Facebook alone. We have to make do with the resources and time we have,” she added.

4. CONTESTS ARE WINNERS
At the Miami Beach Visitor and Convention Authority, the public relations team finds that contests via social media produce high engagement, according to Grisette Roque Marcos, the organization’s executive director.

“Our latest contest was a photo contest where we asked for submissions of high-res Miami Beach photos, which received a great response,” she said via email.

She said these contests encourage MBVCA’s audience to post and vote, which in turn produces more content on social media as well as engagement.

5. BLOGS GET BUY-IN
Moon said her organization runs a blog that is updated weekly. Whenever a new blog entry is posted on the DMO’s website, it is also shared on Facebook, Pinterest and Twitter.

“We try and write content relevant to what our visitors want to see/do while they’re visiting our area. If it’s a list like ‘Fall Activities,’ people are more willing to share this type of content with their friends.

“There’s something about lists that people like. Not only have we noticed this trend, but many news sources have as well”—take Buzzfeed, for example, she said.

The MBVCA also sees the power in blogs, according to Roque. The organization’s blog is updated at least once every two weeks. In addition, the DMO recently started featuring monthly guest bloggers. For instance, a real estate agent with vast knowledge of Miami Beach was selected to write about the area.

6. LITTLE-KNOWN FACTS LEAD TO BIG ENGAGEMENT
“If we have a fact that people don’t really know about, we try to highlight it,” Moon said. The CVB’s “Did you know…” posts garner more attention than just posting about events, which is the majority of the group’s posts, she said.

“I feel like we’re letting them in on a little secret,” she added. “This can be about almost anything in our area or Minneapolis/St. Paul.”

7. MONITORING MATTERS
Nearly 80% of DMOs surveyed for the PhoCusWright study said they monitor social media at least daily. Meanwhile, all hotel chains surveyed said they monitor daily.

The LVCVA has a staff of five dedicated to social media efforts, Mattera said.
“Las Vegas is a 24-hour town; therefore, our social media team is constantly monitoring what’s going on. By working in shifts we’re able to ensure a maximum 24-hour response time to direct inquiries,” he added.

Moon said her organization is on social media every day. Content is scheduled weekly, and breaking news is spread throughout the week.

“I check up on Facebook a few times a day to see if anyone has asked a question or commented on a post,” she said. “I get notifications on my phone if we get mentioned or retweeted on Twitter. I respond more quickly on Twitter because of the immediate notifications.

“We also try and engage with our partners by commenting on their posts/tweets. We try to have fun with it,’’ she added.

The MBVCA has a dedicated social media point person, but the organization’s three-person staff participates in promotions.

“We monitor social media daily for engagement. When we post anything, if it receives any kind of feedback from our audience, it is absolutely necessary to engage,” Roque said. “We are connected to Facebook throughout the day; therefore, any notifications, questions, comments are addressed within the hour or sooner if needed.”

The group’s Facebook and Twitter accounts are linked, so any postings on one channel also appear on the other. Twitter is monitored at least once a day, Roque said.

8. PICTURE PERFECT
Nine in 10 DMOs surveyed by PhoCusWright said they focus on photos and engagement on social media. By contrast, approximately 70% of hoteliers surveyed said the same.

Moon said all of Minneapolis Northwest CVB’s Facebook posts include a photo.

“Photos receive more engagement than regular text posts,” she said. “We’re branching out on Twitter, trying to do the same.

“At (Destination Marketing Association International) we submitted our Twitter account to Fuse Ideas to calculate our Potential Human Reach. Out of 50 DMOs that participated, we had the most reach per follower,” she added. “They said that we could increase that number by using more photos.”

UP NEXT: HOW TO REACH CHINESE TRAVELERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA
When engaging Chinese travelers on Chinese social media platforms, many of the same best practices hold true: develop a personality, be responsive, and tailor your message to the targeted site.

But hoteliers would be remiss if they failed to also recognize the differences inherent in platforms such as Sina Weibo, Dianping and others, according to experts.

The primary challenge in being active on these and other Chinese social media sites is the language barrier, said Eric Ziegenhagen, social media manager for the Langham Chicago and the Langham Place 5th Avenue in New York City.

There are ways around this obstacle, he added, including the use of visual storytelling.

“That can create some imagery that transcends language and can tell the story of the hotel visually,” he said.

Another workaround for hoteliers not based in China could be to employ the use of native Chinese students studying abroad in the hotel’s home city and utilizing their ability to speak the language, Ziegenhagen said. Hoteliers also might consider partnering with another organization, such as a convention and visitors bureau, that is doing work in China already. Langham Hospitality Group took that route via a partnership with Visit Chicago.

Fangting Sun, a research analyst at Euromonitor International, wrote in an email that Chinese travelers also bounce from social media site to social media site quickly.

“Therefore, the hotels need to catch up with the trend in time and allocate the resources accordingly,” she said.

CHINESE SITES
The most popular social media platform in China is Sina Weibo, which went public earlier this year. According to company figures, it had 123.1 million users as of
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September 2013. Sun said Weibo is an important platform by which hoteliers can promote a brand and build awareness with followers.

Ziegenhagen said the site is similar to United States’ microblogging sites.

“It’s very important to have an independent voice, a personality” on the site, he said. Social media personnel should be mindful and tactful regarding their posts on the site, he added.

Another important site that should be on hoteliers’ radar is WeChat, Sun said.

“WeChat has been developed to be a multifunctional tool for promotion, news and events, booking and even payments,” she said.

Interstate China Hotels & Resorts is active on several Chinese social sites, including Ctrip, eLong, Dianping (a restaurant review and flash sale site), Meituan (flash sale) and others.

“We have seen a great response in our restaurants when doing various promotions through these sites,” said David Givens, the company’s VP of operations.

Givens said many users of Chinese social sites also use the platforms during the vacation-planning process.

“Chinese travelers are very active in looking at hotels in the destination they are visiting,” he said via email. “They want to know what past guests are saying, see what the hotels are like and find out what there is to do at the destination. With the amount of outbound travel from China growing rapidly, these sites are becoming more and more popular and a valuable tool for the Chinese traveler.”

TRIED-AND-TRUE STRATEGIES
Sources said hotel social media managers should not forget about the social strategies that have proved successful elsewhere in the world.

The GM at the DoubleTree by Hilton Shanghai—Pudong, for instance, is engaged on TripAdvisor and adds his email address to his signature following each response. In January 2011, the hotel was ranked No. 180 out of 3,882 hotels in the market and has since moved up to No. 64.

“The company feels it is important to respond to both good and bad comments, as we want our guests to know we care about their opinions and experiences at our hotels,” Givens said.

Givens also said it’s important to stay vigilant and retain an open channel of communication on the Chinese sites. The sites also need to be diligently managed every day.
Most major hotel companies have at some point partnered with bloggers to help spread the word about their brand. These travel bloggers will post entries on the Internet about their travel-related experiences to serve as a “brand ambassador” of sorts. But more and more, hotel brands are looking for unique ways to bring everyday travelers into the fold with their marketing strategies.

And it’s not just by way of blogging.

Hoteliers are increasingly building campaigns around hashtags and allowing travelers to share their thoughts on a particular brand, experience, hotel and more, via photos and videos. Some major hotel brands have gone as far as to include these photos and videos on their websites and in the lobby of hotels.

For example, the 184-room Sol Wave House became the “first-ever tweet experience hotel in the world” when it opened in Majorca, Spain, in summer 2012, according to a report from HNN’s Terence Baker.

The hotel displays its Twitter handle (@SolWaveHouse) and hashtag #SocialHotel around the property, making it easy for guests to snap hotels for their Instagram and Twitter profiles. The hotel also features Twitter-themed rooms and unique drinks at #TwitterPoolParty events. Guests can even request refills to their minibars using #FillMyFridge.

Seems like a perfect fit for the millennial generation, which every hotel company is pining over.

Millennials love social media. They love technology.
They love having an experience that is personalized and unique. If provided this type of experience, millennials are apt to share on social media. When they do so, it increases brand awareness and the rest is history. At least that’s what hoteliers are hoping.

It’s worked particularly well with DoubleTree by Hilton’s “DTour” initiative, which I researched for an article on successful video sharing strategies, which is also featured in this report.

The DTour program crowd sources travelers’ shared experiences and houses them all on one page. Those booking and researching future trips can peruse authentic, user-generated videos, photos and stories from a trusted peer network: fellow travel enthusiasts and road warriors.

The campaign has resonated with travelers of all ages, not just millennials.

We all like sharing our experiences, regardless of demographic. It’s human nature. The smartest hotel marketers recognize and leverage this fact by making it easy for guests to do so online.

One way to make sure you’re hitting the nail on the head is by monitoring existing conversations. The insights gleaned from reading what travelers have to say about your property are invaluable. Monitoring traveler-generated content also can help hoteliers correct issues that might be spurring negative commentary about their property.

Additionally, if there’s not much chatter going on about your hotel or brand, it might be time to implement visual or social cues to spur engagement, as does the Sol Wave House by displaying its Twitter handle and hashtag prominently throughout the hotel.

The American Hotel & Lodging Association has a great guide with five tips to help manage traveler-generated content on social media and review websites such as TripAdvisor:

1. Set up Google Alerts—email updates that send news articles based on a selected topic—to track news articles that mention your brand;
2. Use a service such as BlogPulse to track blog activity and read profiles of bloggers;
3. Track any feed-based sources that mention your brand with an online aggregator such as Technorati;
4. monitor travel review websites to identify strengths and weaknesses of your hotel; and
5. respond quickly to comments, negative and positive.

Since beginning this social media special report, I have spent a few nights browsing certain brands’ hashtags. It is quite interesting to see how my peers feel about their travel experiences. If they have something bad to say about a certain property, I take notice. On an average day, I sign onto my Facebook at least five times. Due to the frequency in which most people sign onto their social media platforms, it’s important for hoteliers to continue to (or begin to) provide brag-worthy, highly shareable experiences.

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