

Travel PR demands a marketing mindset

A new media landscape has blurred the roles and boundaries of marketing and PR, with interactive technologies presenting a series of new advantages to professionals working in today's travel environment.

By Peggy Bendel

After many years in travel and tourism public relations, I'm bemused by the fact that so many PR professionals, both newly-minted and long-seasoned, still draw a clear distinction between "public relations" and "marketing."

This is an era of great opportunity for PR. With so many exciting new technologies and tactics emerging, and the potential to stretch skill sets into such arenas as constantly-evolving social media, hyper-local news sites and flash sales, I'd like to see more of my travel PR peers identify themselves as marketers, too.

A shrinking divide

Why should travel PR play more of a marketing role? Just in the past 24 hours, the following items appeared in my inbox:

Ad agencies' domination of the PR Lions (awarded in Cannes) this year means the PR industry need to "wake up" and "integrate with other disciplines," according to the category's jury. David Senay, PR Lions jury President and Chief Executive of Fleishman-Hillard, said that when it came to marketing themselves for awards, ad agencies were "better at packaging" than PR companies, which still have a lot to learn.

A report from *Forbes* Insights, "Bringing 20/20 Foresight to Marketing," asks: given the continued emergence of disruptive marketing technologies, how can companies stay abreast, much less ahead, of where consumers will interact with their brands? Marketers today need to view the customer with 20/20 foresight, but are caught in hindsight by focusing on what's worked in the past, not what is working in the present or will work in the future. The survey — whose respondents included travel and hospitality executives — asked about budgeting in 2012 as well. Over the next year, 56% of respondents said they will increase their online marketing spend, 54% will increase their social media spend,

and 50% will increase their mobile marketing spend.

Each of the areas targeted for budget expansion represent opportunities for PR practitioners who embrace these emerging technologies, all of which are predicted to continue growing in importance as the ways consumers research information and increasingly, purchase travel. And that increased spending means less spent on other tactics, possibly including activities traditionally housed within the PR budget.

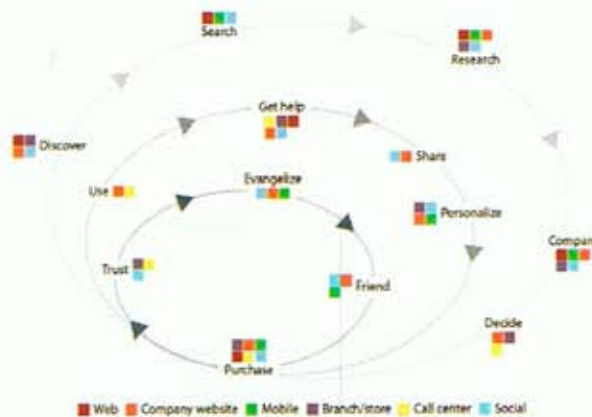
Ideal conditions for interaction

Let's examine just some prominent trends in travel, to see where current opportunities for growth are evident.

According to the Office of Travel and Tourism, International visitors have spent an estimated \$48.3 billion on U.S. travel and tourism-related goods and services year to date (January through April), an increase of 13% compared to the same period in 2010. The U.S. travel and tourism industry is on pace for a record-setting year. According to experts, international visitors could inject more than \$151 billion into the U.S. economy in 2011 if these trends continue.

Given the weak dollar, the United States is a bargain now for travelers from around the globe, and likely to remain so for some time. Do you know from which countries travelers are visiting your state/city/property/attraction? Do you know what they are looking for in a vacation? Can you tweet or post on your facebook page in that language, to make potential visitors feel even more comfortable? What about a simple "Welcome" card or leaflet in appropriate languages for your hotel or visitors' center, or a translation for restaurant menu or spa services?

New technologies and tactics — from Twitter and Facebook to Foursquare, Gowalla, TripIt and others that have undoubtedly emerged as I write this! — provide swift, inexpensive methods for reaching or servicing targeted markets, while adding to our often-overwhelming



This graphic illustrates PR's opportunities to integrate with travelers at numerous points in the sales and marketing process. According to Henry Hartevelde's presentation at the 2011 ATME Conference, today's companies must now effectively engage with travelers across a growing "vortex" of touch-points through which consumers are constantly-connected.

Source: Forrester Research, June 2011. Used with permission.

"to do" lists. But this is not the time — if there ever was such a time — to say "not my job."

As the definition of "media relations" shifts — and the long-standing tactics of press releases, media events, fam tours and pitches morph with the adoption of social media, the shrinkage of the traditional media corps, the expansion of citizen journalism and the proliferation of smart phones making everyone a potential iReporter — PR professionals have an unprecedented chance to redefine themselves and their firms as essential guides for their clients through this new reality.

Embracing the 'marketing mindset'

That notion was particularly clear when I recently attended two travel industry conferences back-to-back this June: the PRSA Travel & Tourism Section/SATW Associates Council in San Antonio, which drew some 250 enthusiastic PR and communications practitioners, and three days later, the Association of Travel Marketing Executives in Boston, where there were exactly four public relations executives in a total attendance of 150.

It's not hard to see why the PRSA/SATW Conference — a long-standing annual event that's on the radar screens for many of us — drew so many travel PR practitioners. There was great programming that focused on everything from web analytics to pitching a variety

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of niche media, networking opportunities with peers and media. But the programming was equally strong at ATME, with top executives from Google, Rand McNally, the Knot and more.

To quote Henry Hartevelde, Vice President and Principal Analyst at Forrester Research and the newly-elected Chairman of ATME, who gave the keynote presentation at this year's ATME Conference, "The lines are blurring within what we collectively call 'marketing.' PR is marketing, eCommerce is marketing, social is marketing. And at the same time, PR is related to eCommerce and advertising is related to social."

Hartevelde's presentation, titled "Agile Marketing in Dynamic Times," outlined many macro-trends that impact travel patterns — essential information for travel PR practitioners — as well as those in other marketing disciplines.

Among Forrester's findings:

Basic types of trips are more popular with active/adventure travel and VFR growing, while 4-7 day trips, 8+day vacations and even weekend getaways are dropping, comparing Q1 2011 to Q1 2008.

Nearly four in five U.S. online travelers now also use social media.

Social commerce is beginning to emerge, with airlines, tour operators and hotels now offering the opportunity to purchase travel on Facebook, for example.

Online travel has no borders, with the global online population expanding rapidly, particularly in Asia/Asia Pacific/Oceania, which Forrester forecasts will comprise 44% of the global online population by 2014, up from 39% in 2009. North America and Europe, while growing numerically, will drop from 16% and 26% of the global online population to 13% and 22%, respectively.

Particularly germane to public relations professionals, the "splinternet" adds complexity to marketing and eCommerce, with users connecting via multiple devices, as smart phones and tablets steal online time from laptops and desktops. Social online experiences, from TripAdvisor to AfarConnect, encourage travelers to connect with their similarly-minded peers, reinforcing that "people like me" continue to be the most trusted source of information.

Hartevelde noted that marketers must craft "story arcs" to benefit from the multiple events and micro-journeys within a person's trip, beginning with planning ("Join our online community to

discuss with peers!"), and through purchase ("Would you like to upgrade?"), departure ("Would you like any extra amenities?"), trip ("Need dinner reservations?"), return ("Please share your comments with our online community, and on Facebook") and next trip ("Download our mobile app to get the best deal on your next trip").

Many of these touch-points and trends provide opportunity for innovative PR practitioners, and the firms that employ them, to expand their "share of customer" by developing expertise in these areas, several of which align with public relations better than any other marketing discipline. After all, we are the storytellers and relationship-builders, and we can help our clients weave together the disparate and often confusing strands of marketing intelligence into a cohesive marketing plan that leverages the com-

pany's brand strengths in new and engaging — not to mention cost-effective — ways.

Firms of all sizes are embracing that marketing mindset. Working on the client side, PR practitioners at airlines, hotels, cruise lines, tour operators and destinations can bring the same marketing-based approach to their organizations, by themselves, or in cooperation with their outside PR counsel.

The result? A more challenging, exciting — and ever more lucrative — path for PR professionals with a marketing mindset.

Peggy Bendel is an expert in travel marketing, crisis communications and media training. She is President of Bendel Communications in New York and Arizona, and sits on the Boards of the Association of Travel Marketing Executives (ATME) and the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) Travel & Tourism section. ◉

Tweets cost PR firm video game client

By Greg Hazley

Video game publisher 2K Games fired PR agency The Redner Group after the boutique firm's president warned in a tweet that the firm would blacklist writers who pen negative reviews of 2K's latest release "Duke Nukem Forever."

The company said Wednesday that it "does not endorse" comments by Jim Redner and that "The Redner Group no longer represents our products."

Redner, a former Director at BNC PR who also worked at Edelman, had already backtracked from Twitter comments earlier this week when he said some reviewers had gone "too far" with reviews and that the firm was "reviewing who gets games next time and who doesn't based on today's venom."

Redner apologized via Twitter after the comments were widely covered online and said he would contact reviewers individually to apologize as well.

"Again, I want everyone to know that I was acting on my own," he said Wednesday. "2K had nothing to do with this. I am so very sorry for what I said."

Reviews of the new game have tended to be negative.

Ben Kuchera, Gaming Editor for tech news site Ars Technica, wrote that while retaliation from companies and

PR reps happens, it has rarely if ever been done publicly.

"Anyone who has done this job for any amount of time has suffered through a dry spell after giving a publisher a bad review, but this is the first time the threat of a blacklist has been made public," he wrote of the Redner incident.

Meanwhile, gamers reacted to 2K's firing the agency in various forums.

"Jim Redner is one of the more dedicated and professional PR people I've had the opportunity to work with," wrote one commenter, aegies, on the neogaf.net forum. "It sucks that a single mistake is going to put such a crunch on his career. We've all said something stupid we wish we could take back at some point."

Others were less sympathetic.

"One bad mistake is all it takes. You're a PR man," wrote another commenter, rez, on the same forum. "If you're the reason for bad PR, that's it, you're done. You spend your whole career getting **** like this drilled into your head. It isn't a 'a little slip,' it had to have been a very conscious decision."

2K is one of four clients listed on Redner's website as of June 16. ◉

