Social Media for Airline Industry
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**Introduction**

**Influence of Social Media**

The emergence of user-generated content via social media is influencing trade environment. Social media is enabling travelers form communities around brand/an airline. Social media is transforming how airlines establish and adopt their customer relationship policies? Social CRM is engaging customer proactively through empowering customer. Improving customer experience is main objective (Morgan, 2010).

Social media channels represent a huge opportunity for airlines in terms of word of mouth referrals. With ~46% of social media users posting online reviews (Mintel, 2010), the impact is significant on the opinion of potential travelers searching for next travel deal. Social media empowered traveler can aid airlines in service definitions by assuming the role of co-creator- highest level of value a customer can provide to airlines.

**Influence**

Social media has high influence on travel bookings. Of those who used social media to research travel plans, only 48% stuck to their original plans.

Emirates celebrated its’ 27th anniversary by launching an official Google+ account, which has since attracted more than 161,300 followers; British Airways reached half a million Facebook fans.

As quality service at low cost becomes increasing commonplace, airlines are seeking new and innovative ways to enhance overall customer experience throughout the passenger travel cycle. According to study conducted by the Centre of marketing research – “social media is most effective in customer empowerment and connecting brand to the traveler”; through these airlines are looking to improve customer service, lead generation, and increase web traffic.

This paper outlines best practices to adopt social media and how social media communication offers Airlines an edge to improve existing relationships, and increase brand reach.

**Embracing Social Media**

Social Media has become a force for democratization of communication. The airline industry is the second most socially devoted industry. On Facebook, it is ranked only slightly below telecom industry. Social media is playing an increasing important role in airlines’ daily operations.
How to adopt social media is a key part of an overall marketing strategy for an airline. Two commonly applied models are **Dedicated** and **Integrated**. While integrated social media model gathers staff from different departments of an airline, a dedicated model proposes a specific group of staff solely committed to social media activities. Integrated model formed from all-business functions ensures a consistent and deeper view of an airline is projected across the web platform. An integrated social media team has helped JetBlue and Delta airlines gain more followers compared to Virgin America and KLM, who have the dedicated social media model.

A few years ago, musician Dave Carroll allegedly looked out the window of a United Airlines plane and saw baggage handlers tossing his $3,500 Taylor guitar like a basketball. It arrived at his destination in two pieces. Conventional attempts to resolve the matter failed, so he created a catchy little tune called “United Breaks Guitars” and posted it on YouTube. More than 8 million hits later, and with the media all over the story, United buckled and donated $3,000, at Carroll’s suggestion, to the Thelonius Monk Institute of Jazz.

United Airlines, badly stung by adverse publicity, began to get the message and set about learning how to leverage social media. Now, United routinely responds to social media complaints. Individuals have “tweeted” about a problem only to be contacted by United to resolve the matter.

United clearly took to heart the U.S. Marine Corps unofficial mantra: “**Improvise, Adapt, and Overcome.**”

An excellent example of a notable social media initiative made by an airline company would be in February 2007 when David Neeleman, CEO of JetBlue, made an announcement on Youtube to address the concerns of JetBlue’s customers when a severe snow storm occurred, causing a system-wide chaos, extensive delays and flight cancellations. He also provided them with assurance that the company will implement strategies to increase future efficiencies to minimize the impact if similar external issues reoccurred and affected flights.

**Regulate**

The informal nature of social media and the fact that it is not generally closely monitored can produce a higher risk of legal liability for the company. In particular, the traditional and serious vetting processes for advertising and press releases are almost non-existent because social media marketing is a daily torrent. Moreover, blog posts and comments on online communities are usually not screened before they appear. Any unscreened content put online can spread globally in minutes, sending negative sentiments about the brand all across. This occurs so quickly that by the time the brand team notices and plans to take necessary actions to resolve it, the damage is done. Social Media policy should provide a clear expectation of what is permitted and forbidden to be posted. To avoid common issues like:

**Listen**

To stop adverse situations and negative sentiments going viral in the industry, Airline must have in place well-defined policies that facilitate consistent Listening. Listening where and what people are talking about the brand is crucial to brand image. Listening tools like (Radian 6, HootSuite, etc.) empower Airline to capture traveler sentiments.

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**Best practices adopted by top Airlines**

Well defined policy or framework for adopting social media needs to be in place to mitigate risks and avoid any potential legal liability. Thoughtful use of social media and the development of a coherent social media policy are essential. Key tenants of policy making are-

- **Listen**
- **Empower**
- **Regulate**
- **Analyze**
• Inadvertent posting of confidential information and trade secrets
• Publishing of defamatory or otherwise inappropriate content
• Unlawful or criminal information from being posted
• Dissemination of negative statements or sentiments

A well-crafted social media policy should:
• Avoid un-vetted postings
• Encompass what can be said, who can say it, and the manner in which things should be said
• Address potential pitfalls in a clear manner that is consistent with other Airline policy and procedures
• Distinguish between business and personal use of social media channels
• Inform Airline employees of the rules and regulations

While strategizing social media plans, it is important that the brand identifies the social channels for their brand. They should identify what channels are appropriate for sharing content about brand and how well-used they should be while imparting information.

Empower
Airlines could use their existing human resources and communications policies while developing social media secured framework. “Our employees are our brand ambassadors”, says CEO – AirAsia X.

It is important that employees are informed well about the policies and they address positive content online and handle negative comments professionally. Companies should provide guardrails for employees so they can safely and successfully engage in social media practices. Employees often seek help and guidance when they are considering launching a blog. Provide them the resources they want and need. But clearly define whether the blog reflects the employee(s)’ opinions or the company’s perspective.

As tour operators and vacation packagers continue to understand the value of implementing dynamic packaging technology, travel consumers are reaping the benefits. Travel consumers can now opt to customize vacations rather than accepting pre-packaged alternatives. Empowered travel consumers are exercising more control over their vacations. Dynamic packaging is thus, the most cost effective way for travel distributors to package, distribute and sell vacation products today.

Choices, coupled with increased flexibility, at competitive prices makes NIIT Technologies’ dynamic packaging solutions the first choice for consumers. Travel consumers are now getting accustomed to the kind of choice and flexibility that we can provide.

Include in-company bloggers in the process of developing corporate blogging policies and guidelines. Companies that choose to encourage all of their employees to blog can either provide a common blogging platform, or invite their bloggers to select the platform and domain of their choosing. Think ahead in social media policy development. Develop policies that will extend to other new and emerging communications technologies such as podcasts and video, etc. Once published, distribute guidelines widely. Companies that have facilitated wider distribution had their guidelines shared virally

Companies legal department, include them in the process but don’t let them drive the effort. Seek input from legal when developing blogging polices.
Analyze

Each use of social media generates and leverages different types of data, from simple structured data about the characteristics of a brand's fan base, to unstructured (and often messy and noisy) postings in activity streams, to more complex data captured in a social graph including Facebook's Open Graph. Some of this data (e.g., tweets) is very fast with a short "shelf life," while other data is more enduring, such as a brand's social graph. All this is indeed big data and must be approached as such.

Collecting, organizing and preparing this data for analysis can also be challenging. In surveys conducted in 2011 by Gleanster, 89% of the surveyed executives found the tracking and measurement of results from social campaigns to be very challenging, while 94% found it difficult to generate actionable insights from the social campaign data they collect, which suggests that they may not even be collecting the right data. It is also becoming evident to these executives that social data needs to be integrated with other corporate and third-party data in order to create the metrics and analytics to determine ROI. This points to the realization that while social data, including social graph data, is a new and less tested data type, early adopters of social are still able to recognize that this by itself will not be sufficient for defining the value-analysis metrics and KPIs.

Most common types of social analytics are: sentiment analysis, attribution analysis, and social graph analysis.

Sentiment analysis refers to the measurement of a consumer's attitude towards a brand and its competitors. The attitude may be towards the overall brand or towards a particular product or service offered by the brand. Sentiment analysis can be used to identify certain trends (e.g., a brand's loyalty).

Attribution Analytics, through this the marketer is trying to determine what percentage of each social ad's audience has been exposed to the ad, how many times each ad was seen, whether the use of social media “drove” prospects to properties owned by the brand, (e.g., the brand’s web site, or a store), and whether social media is more effective than paid advertising.

Social Graph Analytics, this is a more recent form of social analytics and it is being made possible by the API-based accessibility of the various social graphs, such as Facebook’s Open Graph. Graph analytics are being used to identify a brand’s advocates and establish advocates that are real influencers.

Harnessing Value of Empowered Traveler

Social media eliminates traditional one-dimensional barriers of communication between the travelers and Airline; allowing Airline brands to develop stronger bonds with the travelers much like a human relationship.

Interactivity, technical infrastructure and service value are the three components of successful presence on on-line social channels. These three elements embody the needs of a community, significance of reliable systems, and acknowledge that participants within online communities interact with each other as well as the service provider. Key implications of three components are:

- Airlines can further develop and improve existing relationships
- Communication strategies can be dialogue oriented
- Dialogue can be improved and communication reach further expanded

Above three continue to alter dynamics of business–consumer relationship completely, thereby offering Airline with an opportunity to increase the lifetime value of the traveler.

Airlines improving existing relationships

Traditional customer relationship management practices are no longer satisfactory for the empowered traveler and a shift towards customer managed relationships is a driving force. Customer managed relationship is ‘about creating an experience, personalizing the interaction with individual customers in ways directed by the customer, and thereby developing relationships’. Customer managed relationship empowers the consumer to decide the level of interaction they want, and how often they communicate with the firm, and tries to personalize interaction directed by the consumer, thus developing relationships. It delivers three major advantages or traditional CRM, namely:

- It is easier to implement since the customer is usually the one doing the complex stuff,
- It creates lock in since customers having invested their data with your organization may not move easily,
- It allows your company to move faster than competition since a trusted relationship is being built with the customer.
Dialogue oriented communication strategies

Social media provides direct and open line of communication from the airline straight to the customer. It not only offers a platform for troubleshooting and immediate updates but also gives customer a voice, an airline an ability to connect at personal level anywhere, anytime.

Social media boosts networking between airline and its travelers, as well as among travelers themselves. The travelers communicate their requirements, express their experience in words and “live with” brands, this offers an enormous potential to improve the understanding of the traveler and his demands. Whoever uses this potential, can convert consumers and customers into real fans and messengers.

Some of the examples in which social media lend itself for the dialogue oriented communication include:

- **Customer feedback** – Inviting traveler to provide suggestions about service on airline in social media. Discuss their inputs with them and find out what is important for them. The objective should be to gain insight.

- **Customer Service and Support** – assist traveler on a social media platform like twitter. Entrench the service online to improve visibility and reach. Consider providing tips to improve travel experience. The objective shall be to improve awareness and show that that airline is concerned with paying attention to individual.

- **Branding on sites like facebook** – create possibilities for traveler to display their interests or endorse themselves by engaging with groups on areas surrounding airline pages. The objective should be Earn trust, create relations, and raise awareness.

- **Promotions** – have contests, service related polls and completions social media platform with objective of creating leads/ awareness. Special offers can be used to drive traffic to a corporate social media page

Make communication reach further

Social networks are groups of individuals who share a commonality. Common bond of social networks may be the community in which members live, their travel destinations, interests, social interests, shared beliefs. In short, social networks can arise from nearly any commonality or even a desire to make friends among their individual members. Social Reach is the number of travelers and potential travelers you can reach through the all social footprints across all social networks. To determine your social reach, add up the total number of fans and followers on all your social media platforms.
To increase your social reach, airline can:

- **Complete Profiles and Update Regularly** – Once airline profile is complete, update it regularly by incorporating new keywords and providing relevant content.

- **Engage with traveler** – Keep the content coming to reach your target audience and engage with them. Reply to comments. Follow them.

- **Content, content, content** – Update airline blog with new posts twice a week; tweet no less than once a day; submit content to at least 3 times a week. Keep issuing valuable content for your fans and followers to read and you will grow your social reach as they pass it along to their fans and followers.

- **Use Top Keywords** – Use the words that you want your airline to be known for and integrate them into airline social profile and content. This helps with search engine optimization and makes it easier to find airline.

- **Promote your Social-ness** – Add social icons and links to your website, email signatures, advertisements, business collateral, etc.

- **Help Spread Your Content** – Add sharing buttons. Encourage people to share, embed, tweet, and email a friend. It’s a key element to helping your content gain social traction.
As social media channels are ever increasingly used for dialogue based communication most Airline need to create different online presence that are linked together and drives traffic to their main hub. This will account for an ever rising share of total communication and marketing budget.

**Getting Started**

With a global rise in population of individuals using social media, adopting Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and other social media platforms gives Airline ability to reach out to a large number of present and potential travelers. In addition, word of mouth is the most effective way to raise brand awareness. Adept adoption of social media will spur viral marketing and not only allow Airline to generate leads. Inflections in the airline industry can be massive. Airlines that recognize subtle market transitions before others are willing to act invest and execute an opportunity to gain a breakout competitive advantage.
About NIIT Technologies

NIIT Technologies is a leading IT solutions organization, servicing customers in North America, Europe, Asia and Australia. It offers services in Application Development and Maintenance, Enterprise Solutions including Managed Services and Business Process Outsourcing to organizations in the Financial Services, Travel & Transportation, Manufacturing/Distribution, and Government sectors. With employees over 8,000 professionals, NIIT Technologies follows global standards of software development processes.

Over the years the Company has forged extremely rewarding relationships with global majors, a testimony to mutual commitment and its ability to retain marquee clients, drawing repeat business from them. NIIT Technologies has been able to scale its interactions with marquee clients in the BFSI sector, the Travel Transport & Logistics and Manufacturing & Distribution, into extremely meaningful, multi-year “collaborations.

NIIT Technologies follows global standards of development, which include ISO 9001:2000 Certification, assessment at Level 5 for SEI-CMMi version 1.2 and ISO 27001 information security management certification. Its data center operations are assessed at the international ISO 20000 IT management standards.