

Destination Marketing in the age of Web 2.0

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The travel industry is again undergoing radical changes in less than ten years since the first wave hit, with the introduction of the web in travel. Online travel, however it was and still is defined, in record time became the largest industry on the web. Changes on a scale imagined only by few, have happened since and there is not one segment of the travel industry that has not been affected by that first shift to online commerce. By the end of last century it was mostly in the United States where the initial start-up companies were concentrating their efforts and where at first the phenomenal growth took place.

Today, the impact has been felt around the globe and the fastest growing regions are now Asia/Pacific and Europe, and the original online travel agencies (OTA) are players on the global stage. In the past few years they have, at least in Europe, been joined by the erstwhile written off traditional major tour operators who are now engaged in intense competition with these intruders on what many considered their turf.

In a recent article in Travel Industry Wire the new expression of the "customer-to-customer" (C2C) marketplace was coined. This is a very apt description of what is happening today. Enabled by blogs, podcasts and social networking sites as well as other web 2.0 technology introductions the consumer today can be as informed about anything as never before in history and even more importantly, has the easy means to communicate his or her knowledge and expertise on any subject to anyone else in the world. In terms of the travel industry, everyone can become a travel agent or tour operator, or even destination marketer at least in his own mind. The ingredients and the tools are certainly at their disposal.

Companies and organizations will in future increasingly have to try and interject themselves into all the conversations going on among customers in the marketplace about their product, service or destination for that matter, rather than dominating what in the past very often was a one way communication. This new C2C reality will have a significant impact on the role of marketing in any industry. As Seth Godin, the author of some of the most innovative bestsellers on marketing, including "Purple Cow" has said: "Conversations among the people in your marketplace happen whether you like it or not. Good marketing encourages the right sort of conversations.

The first signs of this new world of Web 2.0, which lets the audience participate in the production and distribution of content and tag it with keywords, are a number of new types of sites sprouting up such as [Del.icio.us](#), [Rojo](#), and [Digg](#). In the travel space there are of course, TripAdvisor and IgoUgo, which have been around for a number of years with active communities of feedback providers. They, as well as the by now considered traditional online travel agencies, face a new type of competition from the likes of [Tagzania](#), [Gusto](#), [Wikia](#), [Boardinggate](#) and many more. The most important feature these sites have in common, is the ability for users to collect information and articles from sites

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they find of interest, add their own comments and tag them with keywords. This makes it easy for sharing with and viewing by friends or the public at large. Google Map mashups, such as [MapMyHotel](#), are another new type of sites allowing travelers to get a detailed look of a property or attraction location and combined with personal annotations and reviews by others get a feel for the place more real and up-to-date than previously possible. In the small group and affinity travel market there is [TripHub](#), which includes a blog for group planners. Of course there is also the "big daddy" of sites Yahoo! They have not only acquired the meta-search company FareChase but also with their Trip Planner made some significant improvements and added Web 2.0 features to its [Yahoo!Travel](#) section. Traditional companies, such as Starwood Hotels also have embraced this new trend. Sheraton now makes customer feedback and reviews the main focus of their web presence right from the home page.

Blogs and podcasts are other developments with significant potential impact on both travel planning and the actual travel experience. Anyone with web access and some basic knowledge of computer software applications can in fact start a blog or publish a podcast, making their experience immediately available to the world at large. Combined with a RSS feed, this new user generated content is easily available for anyone with updates delivered as a free subscription.

The specific impact of Travel 2.0 on the various sectors in the travel industry is yet to be determined. What seems clear already, however, is that the role of any intermediary is being challenged even more by this user-generated content and the free flowing consumer conversations going on 24/7 on all the sites and the transparency this creates. As this web based innovations further develop and become even more user friendly than they already are today, combined with improved and integrated booking functionality the changes will be more dramatic than what we have experienced so far.

For DMO the dynamics of existing business relationships will no doubt undergo rapid and significant change. It will no longer be sufficient to maintain and develop an information rich destination website but build a platform that taps into and feeds off the sites mentioned earlier and to facilitate the dialog among past and potential future visitors. The opportunities have never been bigger to truly achieve WOM (both the mouth and mouse kind) and stimulate the buzz. What no DMO should attempt is to try and control the dialog or manage it. The mirror has never been shinier but it also has never been pointed as directly at the destination and its suppliers as it is today. Accept it, embrace change, innovate and start joining the conversation, today. The alternative is to be left behind and risk being ignored.

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