

TRAVEL RESEARCH ONLINE

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Blogging
for
Travel Agencies

Marketing Toolbox Series

www.travelresearchonline.com

Blogging for Travel Agencies - An Introduction

Of all the new “social media” platforms that have recently appeared on the scene, blogging has quickly come the most widely adopted and economically viable. Many of the agencies that participate in [TRO’s Community](#) actively blog and do so successfully. A few considerations will assist you in developing a blog that meets your overall strategic objectives and will contribute substantially to projecting your brand in your community.

The decision to start a blog should not be taken lightly. To begin, your resources are limited and to do a good job with your blog will require much time and effort. Focusing on a few marketing tactics well is a better course of action than continual but unfocused effort spread between too many marketing tactics. It is highly likely that your blog’s success will come over a long period of time and will be limited in scope compared to other more traditional marketing venues such as concerted networking in your community. It would be the rare instance where a blog is a first line marketing tactic for a travel agency. A blog’s contribution will initially be incremental - an excellent opportunity for an agency with otherwise established marketing channels.

About 33% of adult internet users in the US indicate that they currently read blogs. That is a big audience, but realize that according to some estimates **there are over 100 million blogs on the internet!** A well written blog will influence and engage your customers and potential customers, provided you can commit to developing topics and discussions that will involve their interest. A blog is an outbound marketing tactic that can extend the reach of your brand, but it also invites commentary and discussion - a double edged sword. A well managed blog can assist you with forming stronger relationships with your community and to develop a conversation in which you and your readership can share your mutual passion for travel.

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Blogs also give you an opportunity to demonstrate your expertise and can lead to other opportunities in your community for writing and speaking. Your “voice” will be directly available and accessible to your readers, thus humanizing your business profile. A blog also becomes a terrific proxy for focus groups as you can track conversations to see where your community’s interests are developing.

Just as in our discussion of [travel agency newsletters](#), your blog must have an editorial mission - a reason for being, as well as a point of view and a voice. So your first step is to decide exactly what you will be blogging about and how you will present your messages. Your editorial mission should focus on your selection of topics and your anticipated audience. What will your blog feature? Why will it be of interest? How will you engage your readers and entice them to comment and involve themselves?

Begin by reading as many blogs as possible. Note how most blogs have a core theme around which their editorial mission is built. Few blogs are about “what I’m doing now” (that’s

Twittering and another set of columns altogether). The website Alltop (<http://travel.alltop.com/>) is a very good resource for reviewing a wide selection of travel blogs. Start your own editorial mission quest by reading several of these travel blogs daily for a couple of weeks. Follow the ones you choose closely and watch how the publishers develop their topics around central themes. Choose one of interest and engage the writer by leaving a comment. Look at existing comments on the blogs to see how to best encourage and develop “conversation.” Note also the consistency of “voice” of the writer(s). There is a definite perspective that informs the editorial copy of any good blog, and it will seldom waiver. It is that voice that keeps readers coming back for more.

A blog can be a terrific tool for your company, but like so many other decisions, should only be adopted with a great deal of forethought and commitment. The first step is to develop your editorial mission and voice.

Exercise:

- 1. In 20 words or less, can you define the editorial mission of your proposed blog?

- 2. Name three travel blogs that you do enjoy and follow them for three weeks. Can you state what it is about those blogs that you find attractive? Pay special attention to the editorial mission, the voice of the author and the way comments are handled.

Topics, Voice and Policies

Just as with any content driven marketing tool, it is important to give appropriate time and consideration to the process by which you will select your topics and the tone of voice you will use to express yourself in the blog. One of the first and most important lessons to learn is that **a blog is not a selling tool** - it is a communications vehicle and the content should reflect the two-way nature of a conversation, not the single-direction model of a brochure.

Most good blogs are not overtly promotional, but rather focus on topics and the larger issues of importance to the blog's readership. Thus, rather than talking directly about your agency and specials that are available, most travel agency blogs should delve into destinations, logistics, tips and ideas related to travel. You want the content you choose to be compelling and to be both interesting and valuable to the reader. Tailor your content so that visitors will benefit from their reading. By providing useful information, you help to ensure readers will return at a later date. A good way to do so is to create a serial...a series of articles on a given theme spread out over a regular publication cycle that will provide new information each day on the topic.

Your research oriented reading should be a source for your articles. Spend some time each day combing travel websites and newspaper travel sections for ideas. Keep a file of ideas from which you can draw when needed. You can use articles from other sources either as inspiration for your own content, or you can comment on your reading, for example, on trends you see developing from your survey of sources. If you have a niche market, a blog is a great opportunity to showcase your expertise. Giving clients inside tips on cabin selection, theme-park navigation, safari basics are all ways of capturing their attention and demonstrating the value-add of your blog's content.

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In general, your tone should be light and fun. After all, you are blogging about travel, not life insurance! You readers want to know about travel - how it works, how to travel better and how to make the most out of the travel opportunities they have. Demystify the process for them. Be their inside travel guru and they will appreciate your efforts. But keep the tone and voice authentic and allow for the type of commenting and two-way conversations that are inherent in blogs.

Naturally, the conversational aspect of a blog carries some risk. Most blogs will establish a set of comment policies to which readers must adhere. In general, indicate that comments are welcome and that it is "OK" to disagree. Equally important, however, is to establish up front that it is not "OK" to be disagreeable. Let readers know that you reserve the right to edit or not publish any comment and that emailing a comment is an acceptable way of commenting if they do not wish to publish directly to the blog pages. Request that the readers be polite in all instances and to address the issues raised in the articles, not the personality of any other commenter or author.

Remember that in the world of blogging, the comments and your replies to comments are as much a part of the content as the articles themselves. When readers comment, thank them for the comments and reply to them in an insightful and appreciative manner. Encourage a comfortable and safe environment for your readers to feel good about leaving comments.

Create a sense of community on your blog and with a bit of proper promotion and luck you can grow your blog's readership.

Exercise:

1. Start an "idea" file. Review some travel sources like USA Today and find articles that inspire you to comment. Twist the articles to meet your own needs. Can you directly relate the topics to your potential readers?

2. What policies will you have on comments? Will you accept all comments? Will you permit views that disagree with you? What language will you permit? How will you handle a comment that makes a personal attack on another poster or yourself?

Promoting Your Travel Agency's Blog

Like any communications tool, it is not enough simply to have a blog. You must properly promote your blog to fully realize the potential it has for your agency. Building general community awareness of your blog requires a concerted effort and a continual attention to public relations and the other marketing tactics that you have learned as a business person.

Because a blog speaks for your company, and is by nature conversational rather than promotional, it has a much more “personal” impact on consumers than many other marketing tactics. Therefore, . But the power your blog has to shape readers’ perceptions of your company is lost unless they can find and interact with it. Thus, promoting your blog is an important, extremely vital, part of your overall blogging strategy. Realize that your blog does not exist in a vacuum. Ideally, your blog is one of many components to your marketing channels. As always, use each of your marketing channels to support the others. Utilize every other marketing effort you undertake to promote your blogging activities.

For example, when you place a display ad in a newspaper, don’t forget to add a small reminder to “*visit our blog at www.travelfarther.com/blog/.” A link to your blog should be prominently displayed on your travel agency website and the URL for your blog should be on all of your company’s marketing collateral like brochures, itineraries and business cards. Include the blog’s URL in the signature line of all of your emails and be sure to incorporate the blog address into any trade show materials you typically use. When you write articles for local magazines or newspapers and newsletters, place your blog address in the author’s blurb. When you have speaking engagements, make sure that your blog receives a mention either by you or from the person who introduces you at the event. Each of these cross-marketing opportunities are excellent ways to continually push the existence of your blog into the mindshare of the public and to emphasize the importance of your blog in your overall marketing plan.*

...a blog is an excellent opportunity to humanize your company and to strongly communicate your company’s [brand mission](#) and ethic

It is also a good idea to promote your blog via traditional public and media relations channels. Acquiring a few key readers in your community can result in a much wider audience. For example, if a local newspaper reports on one of your blog entries, you can be assured of an immediate uptick in the number of people who will visit your blog. Likewise, mentions by local radio personalities or other important influencers can cause others to take notice of your blogging efforts. To create this type of local “buzz”, your content needs to strike your readers with both novelty and authority...and that is the topic of tomorrow’s article.

Blogging with Authority

With so many blogs vying for attention, you will want yours to stand out, to speak with an authority that captures the attention of your readership. As a professional travel consultant, you have a real expertise on a topic of interest to the public. The key to delivering blogging articles that truly engage readers and eliciting comments from them is to generate content that is lively, unexpected and fresh. Making sure that your blog is communicating on both an intellectual and an emotional level will keep your audience returning to your blog for new information.

Deliver original content to your readers and avoid hashing over the same materials that every travel blog covers. “Original” doesn’t mean that the topic has never been discussed; it simply means that you relate the topic directly to your readership in a way that provides them with new insight into the importance of the topic to them. For example, if you discuss how to safeguard a passport when traveling internationally, don’t just lay out “the facts” - infuse the article with a personal anecdote that happened to you or to a client. Use your “voice” to establish a rapport with your readers. Relate to them in an original way.

Find new sources of information by reading continually in your area of expertise. Read other blogs, consumer magazines and trade articles to stay on top of current trends and dynamics in travel. Stay ahead of your readership by aggregating and discussing information that they may not yet have encountered elsewhere. This requires a very active reading commitment on your part, but it is absolutely necessary to providing new, engaging topics to your audience.

Have a “theme” or “perspective” that you use to tie your blog posts together. That theme may be your expertise in your niche market, your love of shopping when you travel or your passion for sustainable tourism. Return to the theme often in your posts so that you string together your articles with a common structure and insight. Likewise, stay consistent in your “voice” so that readers know where you stand on your favorite issues and peeves.

Don’t be afraid to be controversial. On occasion, find a reason to go against the grain of common wisdom when your instincts tell you that a different perspective would lend new insight. If everyone is saying now is a terrible time to travel to Europe, find a contrary perspective and run with it. Intelligently surprise readers with new ideas or ways of thinking.

Keep your blogging articles lively, but short and to the point. Know what you want to say and structure your posts to drive your point home. Don’t meander or digress.

Invite comments and respond to them. If a reader makes a good point, say so and incorporate their perspective into your thinking and articles. Authentically offer praise to your readership’s insight when it is merited.

Don’t hesitate to link out to other authorities. Providing your readership with new sources of information will make your brand memorable each time they refer to the new resource. By providing new reference resources, you demonstrate your own knowledgebase and authority.

As a professional travel consultant, you are an authority on a very popular topic. Use that edge to your advantage and seek to provide your insights in a lively fashion on your blog. Your readership will thank you for it and you stand a good chance of developing a loyal following.

Exercise:

- 1. Describe your strengths in the realm of travel planning. What types of travel do you know best? What destinations? Do you have a niche or a perspective that you can speak to with authority?

- 2. Try your hand at being contrarian. Write the most outrageous line you can think of and see if you can construct an article around it. Practice a point of view that will be fresh and unexpected: e.g. *“Why I will never cruise again and you shouldn’t either!”*

Final Tips and Considerations

Let's wrap up with a few basic concepts and tips that can put you on the road to having a blogging program that can be one of your most important client acquisition and retention tactics. A bit of planning early on will generate big returns as your blog begins to grow and your approach becomes more demanding of your blogging system and setup.

Blogging requires much less knowledge of programming and HTML than building and maintaining a website. Nevertheless, the initial setup is greatly facilitated by a hosting company or technical assistant with experience in setting up a blog. Most blog programs offer a variety of templates from which to choose. One of the first decisions is to either set up your own independent blog software on your own servers or to use a hosted solution where the blogging software remains on the servers of your provider. Hosted solutions are easier to use and manage. Some good places to begin are Wordpress (www.wordpress.org) and Blogger (www.blogger.com). These sites will get you up and running very quickly. You may want to begin with a hosted solution for the sake of convenience and a quick start and later move to an independent platform if you feel constrained.

Most hosting companies have all types of "blogging freebies" you can add to your blog. Use these cautiously as they can really make your blog look like Times Square and detract from your content. Buttons, images, tag clouds, maps, guestbooks and dozens of other add-ons are available. Again, my suggestion is to obtain some professional design assistance and stay as clean and professional in your look and feel as possible.

Most blogging consultants will tell you there are five types of blog for organizing the blog perspective:

- **CEO** - the top dog speaks for the company
- **Aggregate** - several people write at various times
- **Staff** - one or more company employees are the posters
- **Specialist** - a super-expert/niche theme and author
- **Customer evangelist** - You allow clients to blog about your company

While these lines are far from absolute, they do provide good, general guidelines about the style of blog you want to present to the world. Most agency blogs work best using the CEO or Staff approach. Make sure that the person who has the posting responsibilities understands company guidelines and permissible topics.

Be sure to proofread and spell check. Almost daily I find spelling errors and grammatical faults in our articles here...*ouch*. I wish I could blame the daily editorial schedule and our deadline pressures, but those are not excuses. Typos do nothing for the professionalism of your blog, so search and destroy.

Blog on a regular schedule. Fresh content draws your readership in. Whatever you do, don't allow your blog to go unattended for extended periods of time. People like routines they can predict and rely upon and will give up on your blog if you neglect it.

Search engines love blogs. The content is often original and unique to the blog. In addition, most blogging programs generate URLs for stories that are very search engine friendly.

Have a thick skin. When you open your blog up to comments, not everyone will be a fan. You will have a group of “Angels” and “Devils” that will likely appear from time to time. Incorporate your Angels by sending them off-blog emails from time to time about upcoming stories and ask for their input or comments. Let the Devils be devils and moderate as lightly as possible.

A well thought-out blog is a tremendous asset to your company’s marketing strategy, but is also a serious commitment of time and energy - precious resources. Once you have opted to create a company blog, the time you spend planning and organizing your blog in its earliest conception is a terrific investment.

Exercise:

- 1. What type of blog will yours be? CEO? Aggregate? Staff? How will your choice of style influence your selection of topics and voice?

- 2. What will your editorial calendar look like? How often will you blog? When will you gather your ideas and by what day of the week will you be ready to publish?

Resources

Blogging Systems:

<http://www.typepad.com/>

<http://www.movabletype.org/>

<https://www.blogger.com/>

<http://wordpress.org/>

Good articles and guides:

Choosing a Blogging Platform:

<http://www.problogger.net/archives/2006/02/15/choosing-a-blog-platform/>

BecomeaBlogger.com

<http://www.becomeablogger.com/> – a set of free videos on Wordpress

PC Magazine: Blogging Platforms

http://www.pcworld.com/article/128620/blogging_platforms.html

Sample Travel Agent Blogs

Annie's Escapes

<http://anniesescapes.wordpress.com/>

Travel With Me

<http://luv2travelwithme.blogspot.com/>

Sample Supplier Blogs

Starwood

<http://www.thelobby.com/>

Publisher's Corner

Marketing Earnestly
By Richard Lark
February 9, 2009

Many travel agents will openly confess that marketing is not their forte. After all, a large percentage of travel agents, if not the overwhelming majority, very rightly are travel agents not because they love marketing but because they love travel. Many have a very limited background or formal training in marketing, but manage to conduct a reasonably viable business out of the capacity to communicate their enthusiasm for travel and for being of service to others.

That said, however, it's time for travel agents to get serious about marketing. The stakes are high. It would be not only your own business but I dare say the future of the entire travel agency distribution channel. [Read the rest of this entry.](#)

Editorial Musings

Borgs, Michael Phelps and travel: Handling mistakes
By John Franzen
February 2, 2009

Last week, Michael Phelps got into a little trouble for using a blog. He immediately went into damage control and apologized for his "outrageous endorsement" and hoped for the best. He made a mistake. He realized it. And now the cards will fall where they may—he has already been suspended from competition by USA Swimming and Phelps' dropped him. In a matter of three days, he probably lost \$10 million dollars and a good chunk of his reputation.

Michael Phelps will likely be fine—a lot less wealthy, but I think he will pull through and compete in London in 2012. But what happens when you make a mistake in your travel business? [Read the rest of this entry.](#)

Point-to-Point

"First of all... YOU BE NICE!"
By Mike Caplin
February 3, 2009

We all read so much these days in the current economic climate about marketing, advertising, technology and strategic planning. And we... much to talk and written about customer contact and customer relationship management.

It seems to me that when contact with our clients and customers is referred to using some of these terms, that it almost implies a detached and impersonal manner. Uncharacteristic for me, but nevertheless that's how I perceive it!

I've spent my entire working life (over 40 years) in the travel industry and I've considered every one of those years to be also working in the customer service business. That's right: interacting and dealing with people, human beings...not faceless entities that I have to "manage a relationship" with. [Read the rest of this entry.](#)

Agent Perspectives

Making trade shows work for you
By Tom Petrakis
February 13, 2009

As a firm believer in the power of face-to-face marketing, I really like exhibiting at shows. I know it can be expensive and time-consuming, but I think it's the best way to promote my "brand" (which, after all, it is).

To maximize my success at shows, and to make the most of the time and money invested, I have some guidelines that I've developed over the years:

Picking a show: I like to pick shows that attract the right demographic for my business (industry, geographic professionals) and where I will be the only travel agent.

For this reason, I tend to stay away from hotel shows and women's magazines and instead choose "niche" shows like the Saltwater Sportsfishing Show or the Fine Furnishings Show. They both attract consumers with significant disposable income (I'm able to afford expensive habits like boats and hand-crafted wicker furniture), and I am always the only travel agent. [Read the rest of this entry.](#)

Supplier Profile

HOMERIC TOURS - Homeric Tours - Great Destinations

John Madro, Homeric Tours' Vice President of Marketing and Sales is a happy guy. He should be. 2007 marks the company's 40th year in business and Homeric Tours holds the position of being the number one tour operator in Greece. "We give a great product with excellent service," says John, "the emphasis is what we call the Homeric equation which is always: Great rates + excellent service = satisfied customer." The 2008 tour operator has posted a profit every year since the beginning, and Homeric Tours is a model of efficiency and professionalism that travel agents can trust. [Read the rest of this entry.](#)

The 365 Guide

Blogging for Travel Agencies - Tips and Considerations

This week, The 365 Guide has looked at basic considerations for incorporating a blog into your travel agency's marketing plan. Let's wrap up with a few basic concepts and tips that can get you on the road to having a blogging program that can be one of your most important client acquisition and retention tools. A bit of planning early on will generate big returns in your blog begins to grow and your approach because you're demanding of your blogging system and setup.

Blogging requires much less knowledge of programming and HTML than building and maintaining a website. Nevertheless, the initial setup is greatly facilitated by a hosting company or technical assistant with experience in setting up a blog. Most blog programs offer a variety of templates. [Read the rest of this entry.](#)

Outposts

Biking Formentera

Why Less is More on the Balearic Islands

All just eighteen kilometers total from tip to tip, Formentera looks like a blossoming being tossed off the south eastern coast of Spain. It is nothing more than a crescent crescent on the world map, and though most people have heard of Formentera's elite or arty Mallorca, Formentera usually draws a "Where's that?" when mentioned. The answer is that talking question is nowhere. There's not much going down on the Balearic's smallest member, which is precisely why it's worth a visit. [Read the rest of this entry.](#)

60-Second Geography

Spain

The Iberian Peninsula country of Spain has been a favored tourist destination for travelers from the Americas and Europe for decades. The long Mediterranean coastline of Spain gave birth to the packaged tour market in the 1960s and remains today one of the most popular destinations in the world for beach and sun lovers.

Use this 60-Second Geography article in your own agency newsletters and on your website. [Read the rest of this entry.](#)

Travel Agent Stories

LK Cruises & Tours LLC - Washington, DC

TRO is going to follow the progress of a few travel agents and their business over the course of 2009 to show our readers the opportunity of entrepreneurship and experiences with other agents. These brave souls have promised to write about both their successes and failures this year. Be sure to leave their some comments if you would like to share some of your own experiences.

My name is Hil and I am the owner of LK Cruises & Tours, LLC. Hil isn't really true. My parents named me Karen. My ex called me Kari, my children call me mommy. So where does Hil come from? In 1984, I wrote a novel; the main character was named Hil, which means "Purpose" in Swedish. Unable to continue many folks that I wasn't understanding it, I decided it was easier to join them, so I became Hil. And that suited me just fine. I've been Hil ever since. I like it, and it serves as a constant reminder to stay focused.

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Travel Research Online (TRO) has as its mission the enhancement of the professional lives of traditional travel agents. To that end TRO enlists the assistance of great suppliers each of which donates to the cause of creating marketing guides, marketing tools and programs for professional travel agents to use in their travel planning practice.

TRO provides free content for travel agencies to use on their websites, in their newsletters and blogs. All without charge.

TRO is dedicated to the traditional travel professional and supports them in their efforts to provide intelligent and expert travel assistance to the general public.

You can learn more about TRO and the many free programs it provides at www.travelresearchonline.com.

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