

NURTURING NEW MEDIA

The global reach of social media applications has transcended the boundaries of casual interaction and spawned a new business communications model for meeting planners worldwide. Claire Malcolm reports

Few companies can afford to ignore the social media phenomenon. From a geeky buzzword to a business must-have, its myriad applications and platforms are being adopted by Fortune 500 companies, exhibition powerhouses and independent planners alike.

Corbin Ball, a US-based professional speaker and consultant on meetings technology, believes that social media is a perfect fit for the industry.

"Meetings are the original social media, and associations are the original social networks. These tools tie in naturally to market events and engage attendees before, during and after the event," he says.

The shifting statistics out there confirm the power of social media. Facebook alone has in excess of 400 million members and is viewable in 70 languages; 65 million users are now also accessing it via their mobile phones. LinkedIn, the online business community, boasts 60 million users and, in the past year, has witnessed a growth spurt with one million new members per month. Twitter logs 75 million users to date with 50 million tweets per day.

The growth in its usage has been fast-tracked by the global economic situation as companies look at ways of stretching the marketing dollar, as well as being a case of right technology at the right time. "Low or no cost is nice, but this trend is far larger than that. It speaks to humans' natural desire to connect with one another. This is also why we have meetings," remarks Ball.

Paul Parsons, director of interactive marketing for Dubai-headquartered web development company Western Voice, says that promoting events through social media is now an integral part of any event marketing campaign. "Initially, businesses looked at this being a new, innovative marketing

TOP 10 TACTICS

Ramp up your social media efforts with easy-to-implement activities

- Create a Twitter list of your organisation's key staff/sponsors/speakers
- Build real relationships by replying, retweeting and joining discussions
- Make your tweets retweetable
- Promote an event, campaign or movement with Twitter hashtags
- Create a blog and add the feed to your Facebook page
- Integrate show photos/video with existing channels/vehicles.
- Submit key blog posts and articles to social news sites
- Use a 'share this' widget on blog posts, web pages etc.
- Ask an online question, get an active discussion going
- Upload Flip Media video from the showfloor/gala evening post-event

channel that offered the added benefit of being 'free', but the driving force behind social media has been the social element of it. As user bases grew, businesses also couldn't ignore platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn as highly targeted information distribution mechanisms for them, which were much more efficient than traditional media," Parsons comments.

One new community that is aggressively pursuing its membership and services agenda is i-meet.com. An online resource for meeting planners, it also doubles up as a marketplace for suppliers, blending contacts, industry insight, insider intelligence, special interest groups, a members-only supplier rating system and an online RFI tool.

Individuals can join i-meet to create an active profile of themselves as well as link it to other social networks such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Companies can list themselves for free, or pay to have an enhanced entry.

In May 2010 the site reached the 20,000 member mark (with sign-ups from 140 countries), a number it plans to more than double by the end of the year. Europe and Asia in particular, are strong growth markets and i-meet.com already has local communities in over 30 countries.

MEETING A NEED

A late 2009 survey conducted by US-based Champion Exposition Services, which looked at the growth in the use of social media within the associations industry, found that 83 percent of respondents already use one or more digital tools, with 91 percent committed to using them in the coming year.



The expectation from clients and attendees that social media platforms are available is also growing, according to Ball. "Although this is more naturally embraced by the digital natives, everyone will be relying on these tools to make purchasing decisions, to communicate, to share ideas, to collaborate and more."

"Organisers may use this application pre-event to communicate. For social events, more and more invitations are being sent to guests via Facebook and Twitter as people sign-up with certain user groups. For in-house events the traditional ways of communication are still valid."

Parsons says a good social media strategy cannot only help jump-start interest in an event but also be the base from which the event is launched. "Using social media in the run-up to an event provides a great insight into expectations, which allow events organisers to adopt and address the expectations of the attendees which in return provides a more personal touch to an event and builds up a genuine customer loyalty," he says.

According to Champion, the most commonly used digital tools are Facebook (67 percent), Twitter (54 percent) and LinkedIn (48 percent). However, according to the survey event planners are not leading the way as early adopters with the primary reason in signing up to new marketing tools driven by attendee demand (69 percent).

More and more planners are also using Facebook to 'friend' local, on-the-ground contacts to cement fledgling business relationships and open up new communication channels.

While Facebook usage for pre-show attendee marketing is now a given, and 82 percent of respondents are already busy tweeting in the run-up to an event, other opportunities are being ignored. Only 33 percent of respondents are using video applications, with just 48 percent benefiting from discussion forums.

It's also an ongoing industry learning curve with tweets flowing freely but the application of specific hashtags not being used to follow conversations or communicate with key



players; a mere 23 percent use hashtags to aggregate tweets and only 36 percent are actively encouraging direct messaging.

And the meetings industry is not wholly receptive to the intrusion of technology. According to US-based Benchmark Hospitality International's Top Ten Meeting Trends for 2010 report, despite increased usage of Facebook and Twitter, the corporate meeting segment is still focused, quite naturally, on traditional face-to-face contact.



Users feel comfortable using platforms such as Facebook which means that their experience in finding the information is a much friendlier one

56 USE AND ABUSE

One of the debates surrounding the use of social media is its management and potential misuse. Ball says: "I believe in the golden rule of marketing – market to people in the way and where they wish to be marketed. All channels have opportunities."

Atlantis, The Palm is one example of a supplier adopting a multi-media approach. The hotel uses Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. "The cross-section of the three reaches our key demographics and target markets," says Euan Mitchell, director of online marketing for Atlantis, The Palm, Dubai. "For us it is a dynamic way to communicate effectively in real time. With the growth of mobile access and new technology such as the iPhone, it is key to have an element of social media within a communications strategy," he adds.

It's also not a question of replacement marketing, rather something that is complementary to the more traditional marketing mix. The tailoring of a social media strategy using multiple tools/channels is necessary to build on strengths.

"In many ways it is almost the exact opposite of traditional marketing. The good news is that the tools are easy to learn. The bad news is that to learn to use them efficiently is not nearly as easy," says Ball. "There are no bad applications, only poor usage."

The integration of social media into a wider marketing strategy can also run the risk of becoming a black hole of time and resources if not managed effectively. "Re-allocation of existing marketing resources is important. Staff training and policies on using social media efficiently and effectively are also very important," says Ball.

The strengths of individual platforms can be leveraged in targeting the right communities. Exhibition organiser IIR Middle East, which runs the Cityscape series of global real estate investment and development events, set up its own community – Cityscape Connect – in 2009 to develop year-round industry interaction.

The professional networking platform, which currently has around 2,300 international members, includes video interviews with industry movers and shakers, market research reports, industry news and discussion forums and Q&A posts, as well as updates and 'early bird' offers for its global exhibitions. Cityscape also has individual Twitter accounts for each trade show.

The challenge, moving forward, is maintaining presence on social media platforms, in order to preserve brand integrity. From the adaptation of verbiage to suit the medium, to regular maintenance and updating, the entire process needs to be carefully managed.

"By allowing users to be able to share and add their experiences, this provides a free source of content that is relevant, and also allows engagement between fellow visitors such as videos, photos, comments and recommendations," says Parsons, but acknowledges that this needs to be monitored for quality.

"We have to think differently about content creation. Shorter and more frequent postings are the way things are going. We need to think in content creation mode. What was an email response to a question or an issue becomes a blog post, for example," says Ball.

ONE SIZE FITS ALL?

From the Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre's Facebook page to EIBTM's blogs, there are multiple avenues to get the message out there.

One of the advantages of using Twitter is spreading the workload with followers able to retweet to their own network of contacts or post to Facebook pages, for example.

For Parsons, Facebook is a natural ally with consumer-focused events due to the sheer number of users. "Users feel comfortable using platforms such as Facebook which means that their experience in finding the information is a much friendlier one. The use of LinkedIn for event listings can also be affected through setting up a more formal group," he explains.

"Twitter is a great platform to be used as a communication tool for an event but it shouldn't be used if it isn't supported by either a website or an alternative presence through another social media platform. Combining email marketing with social media is also a great medium to use to highlight an event, and expand on the message inside the email itself – it also adds the most important part, which is the viral element," he adds.

Rahaf Harfoush, social media strategist and author, and current associate director of digital interaction for the World Economic Forum in Geneva, also advocates Twitter as a prime online resource.

At a telecommunications conference in Spain she encouraged the assembled delegates to tweet questions, thereby opening up the discussion outside of the venue itself.

She points out that this method of communicating has another benefit – that of increasing the comfort factor among attendees, some of whom wouldn't necessarily want to stand up and ask a question in front of a large audience. However, she takes care to point out that this type of live interaction requires a confident speaker and isn't simply an off-the-shelf solution for a meeting planner. Through the use of Twitter this also extends the conversation beyond the closing address of a conference, and also has the potential to create ongoing relationships through other mediums such as Google and LinkedIn groups.

MEASURING UP

As with all other forms of marketing activity, ROI is important, but is social media success easily measured? Parsons says: "If a strategy is in place when setting out to utilise social media then you are able to measure the success, especially if clear goals are also set. These goals can be the number of fans/likes (to measure the overall reach) or click-through rates from the social media platforms onto event websites. However, how this translates into accurate ROI is still difficult to measure."

Ball thinks it's simpler than that. "These tools can be very trackable. There are lots of ways to measure: increased traffic to site, increased replies to blogs, increase in social media buzz about your company. The list goes on and on," he says.

Parsons adds: "Some event companies still prefer to use this traditional method of communications, where trusted databases are often utilised. The fact that databases collect on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn doesn't allow you to export this for future use, and this does put some event organisers off, even if they are reducing the viral marketing element of their marketing."

Champion Exposition Services' 2009 survey also revealed that a growing number of companies (18 percent of those surveyed) are hiring specific talent to handle social media development and management.

The need to allocate dedicated resources to this new area is an important consideration, as Ball explains: "My recommendation is to take 10 percent of your existing

Set the Strategy

Social media strategy 101

- Know your audience/preferred communities for effective engagement
- Set objectives and a timeline for implementation – pre- to post- event
- Evaluate the tools you want to use and tailor to the event and audience
- Refine your marketing approach – focus on showcasing added value
- Put the right resources in place to manage the process
- Measurement – track success and failure for next time

Statistics courtesy of: Jeremiah Owyang, Altimeter Group; Econsultancy Digital Marketers; Burston-Marsteller Fortune Global 100 Social Media Check-Up



marketing budget and allocate it to time for someone to lead the social media initiative: to help set the policies and objective, to train and excite staff on the use, to monitor results and to make sure the time is being used efficiently."

The Champion survey also revealed that this is having an effect on bottom line with 18 percent reporting cost savings through the adoption of social networking practices and using Facebook and Twitter to replace traditional marketing efforts and communication with attendees. A further 33 percent have reportedly. Seeing a drop in the use of direct mail by replacing it with social media channels.

POST PARTUM

Ultimately, the judicious use of social media is all about creating a sense of community. But using the multiple platforms and applications simply to be part of the global trend is a common mistake.

Parsons says: "Strategising the social media activity for an event in three stages is sensible, and often overlooked. The pre-event stage should be about information and awareness utilising platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube for this purpose.

"During the event, live webcasts or webinars using tools such as Twitter can be useful especially when trying to gauge the feedback of those attending. Post-event marketing is regularly ignored, but when platforms such as YouTube combined with Facebook are available, this shouldn't be the case. Those who didn't make the event can see what they missed out on, subscribe to information on future events while exposed to the organisers brand." The uploading of edited video content from the event onto YouTube or embedded within a blog, brings the marketing strategy to full-term. It's also a useful resource to retain for the following year when ramping up for the next event, as a visual reminder of a successful outing. And once posted on the conference site or YouTube, attendees can easily share through other sites like Facebook and LinkedIn.

Parsons cites the recent digimedia 2010 event, held in Dubai, as a positive example of social media application, as he explains: "From the design and construction of their website to the social media accounts that were set up, they enabled the message of the event to be distributed throughout the web for all those interested in the event. Updates and videos were then posted which were targeted at the correct people for a minimal cost.

"During the event and seminar they also informed attendees that they could tweet live, so those who couldn't make the event were able to benefit. This also allowed the event organisers to monitor response. The followers they have now built up will be an integral part of the marketing and communications for next year's event, as well as continuous feedback and communication until then."

As an ongoing wave of applications and platforms continue to swell the social networking menu, the nurturing of new media needs to be fostered alongside the comfort blanket of traditional mediums. The push to concentrate on social media alone is not a strategy for success, it's like signing up for boot camp, you have to work hard to reap the benefits. ●