

Technology

The Power of Social Networking

Social media isn't just for trading pictures anymore—it's for trading in on business growth

You've probably heard of—or even tried—several of the social media brands: Facebook, MySpace or LinkedIn. People seem to be spending hours on them, so why shouldn't they spend some of that time on your business? Well, they can, if you understand the rules and realize you have to give as much as you get. From the philosophy behind social media's success, to how you can best create your own version, it's not as hard as you think. And it just might be easy money.

Choosing a Strategy

Ryan Bifulco, president of Atlanta-based online marketing firm Travel Spike, says there are many different strategies for social media. Most of them, however, boil down to defense and offense. "Defense is if a travel agent puts a social network on their own website because they can control all their content," he says. "It's not like TripAdvisor, where you can't get rid of bad reviews. At the same time, you won't get as much respect because visitors have warning bells when they feel all the information is being filtered."

For the best defensive stance, says Bifulco, it's best to always steer the conversation in a positive direction. For example, if you sell honeymoons, start an immediate discussion on the topic and encourage visitors to post pictures from their own honeymoons.

Going on offense, Bifulco says, means signing up with a top social media outlet, such as MySpace or Facebook, and allow-

By signing up with a top social media outlet, agents become part of a community and can create more business



ing that community to participate in any way they want. "It helps to start this position by introducing yourself and [stating] that you're a travel agent—without getting into a long commercial," he says. "Just tell them you're offering free advice. When people feel you're a part of their regular community, they'll be bringing business your way."

Show Your Offerings

Bifulco also believes social media may be better for an agency with several offerings as opposed to an exclusive specialization. "You want to have enough areas where people will have reason to talk on the message boards," he shares. "It's hard to find many people just interested in Greece, but if it was all of Europe, then you have something."

In addition, consider adding video as much as possible to give a full-fledged experience. Even just a URL coming from YouTube is a fast way to get users talking. "You can even have a video contest from people's trips," he says. "We had one of our clients do one for best port trips over the last few years. It was a big success."

Bifulco says his company works with clients for weeks or even months to develop a strategy. This way, when the network is ready to launch, there is a PR marketing plan behind it. They also identify blogs that are most likely to link to you and send them messages introducing your social network.

"Have a plan of attack," Bifulco suggests. "Many of the successes in social media didn't happen by accident."

—Eric Butterman