

# Tourism companies turn to social networking

By Joann Vitelli

STAFF WRITER

Atlanta's oldest house museum, The Wren's Nest, has seen a resurgence in visitors since joining the slew of businesses in the hospitality industry that have turned to online social networking as a means of getting their word out.

The home of Joel Chandler Harris, creator of the Uncle Remus folktales, was on the brink of closing in July 2006 when Lain Shakespeare, 23 years old at the time, took over as executive director.

One of the first things Shakespeare did was to create a blog followed by a Web site in May 2007. The two were integrated by September of that year. Shakespeare, who is Harris' great-great-great grandson, said the number of visitors has doubled since 2006 — hitting 9,000 last year.

Blogs, Facebook, Twitter and other Web sites allow tourism companies and other hospitality-related businesses to build online communities. Consumers can post restaurant reviews, travel podcasts or photos, or ask questions about a destination and join forums with others with similar interests.

Andrew Wilson, senior vice president and general manager for the **Atlanta Convention & Visitors Bureau's** Web site, Atlanta.net, sees peer reviews as very influential. He points to the success and growth of TripAdvisor, where travelers can post advice. The site attracts 32 million visitors monthly, and more than 20 million reviews and opinions, according to their site.

While 47 percent of overnight leisure visitors said they came to Atlanta to visit friends and relatives, peer recommendations also drive decision making, Wilson



PHOTOS/JOANN VITELLI

**Building a presence:** Ryan Bifulco's firm, Travel Spike, does online marketing for travel- and tourism-related businesses.

said. Through social networks, visitors to the city are able to ask for advice — including everything from finding the best trails and parks for runners to learning about a restaurant's special events.

**Buckhead Life Restaurant Group Inc.** has a few restaurants with their own Facebook page and recently started to Twitter. Because of the viral effect of Facebook, Jennifer Boozer, the restaurant group's director of marketing, finds social networking tools especially useful for anything that is event-based or where people are invited. Buckhead Life often promotes



**Mining visitors online:** The Wren's House Executive Director Lain Shakespeare has seen a boost in the number of visitors to the museum since going online in 2007.

special menus or events and has been on Twitter for just over a year. Boozer said there are no numbers to reflect how effective these sites have been but they most certainly reach more people — with friends telling friends telling friends.

"I will put up a special and someone is re-Tweeting," said Boozer. "People are so engaged right now, everyone has a BlackBerry or iPhone. We have over 350 followers [on Twitter] without even promoting it."

Ryan Bifulco, president and CEO of **Travel Spike LLC**, believes it's important to be involved in social media opportunities, using all resources to reach your clients.

Travel Spike focuses exclusively on the travel and hospitality industry and getting exposure on the Web for its clients.

"If you don't have a presence, you're

going to be left behind in the dark," he said.

Bifulco said 90 percent of U.S. travelers online have been influenced by others posting blogs, videos, podcasts and reviews, according to market research firm PhoCusWright. Businesses have to look at how people are planning vacations and how that has changed just in the last two years, Bifulco said.

At The Wren's House, visitors have picked up dramatically. Last year, the Brer Rabbit stories were performed 235 times, compared with three times in 2006, Shakespeare said.

"We went from a black hole in the landscape to someone who's seen as a leader, in terms of house museums, in terms of social destinations in Atlanta," he said.

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