

On the Web

Resorts Tap Into Social Media

Once seen as merely another venue for the resort industry's voracious booking-engine appetite, the Web is finally seeing greater use as more resorts are blogging and using social and professional networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn. For the most part, companies are using social media to enhance brand affinity.

Blogs

In the blogosphere, dedicated resort sites tend to be, as might be expected, resort driven. While many bloggers will share their great spa experience or complain about an awful hotel stay, they're not blogging about a particular company or place with sustained regularity. Of course, innumerable blogs are dedicated to particular types of travel (luxé, business, frugal, etc.), but again, these blogs by nature are not resort specific.

New England-based InnSeason Resorts, a timeshare developer and operator, started its first blog (innseasonclub.wordpress.com) in October 2007 as an instructional resource.

"We hoped for improved communication with our vacation club members," says Paul Carney, vice president of resort services. "We were two years into the launch of our points-based vacation club and realized we were offering many benefits that our members weren't taking advantage of. It was a time where we were adding several new use components and wanted a way to informally announce them to our membership. We searched and found that our Club members were more Web-savvy than our traditional weeks owners and thought a Blog would provide the vehicle to keep the members informed."

Wyndham Vacation Resorts/WorldMark by Wyndham launched a blog (wordsofwyndham.com) in June 2008 that more closely resembles a typical travel site: "The blog includes destination suggestions, packing tips, places to visit in various locations and more," says Georgia Ball, the company's Web production manager for eCommerce Web Services.

"Social media is a new area for Wyndham Vacation Ownership, and we believe it can become a very positive service to our guests as well as a powerful marketing tool to supporting

our organic search strategy," Ball says. "We anticipate that this can generate positive 'word-of-mouth' about our brand and provide us an opportunity to take a leadership role in the space."

Networking Sites

In the members-only world of professional and friendship networking sites, Facebook hosts multiple employee and alumni groups devoted to a particular site or brand, with most larger (and some smaller) resort and recreation companies represented. Oftentimes, these aren't corporately run groups, but instead are started by rank and file employees, with or without their company's official sanction. Most of these groups look to connect present and former staffers by the common ground of employment. More rare, however, are groups like the Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts Talent Community, managed by Nicola Thomson, whose LinkedIn profile denotes her position



as director of management recruitment and selection for Four Seasons. She describes the group as providing "connectivity for hotel

professionals interested in learning more about career opportunities and personal growth with Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts."

Facebook has its share of employee and alumni groups, too, but also has fan pages, such as the Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide Inc. fan page. Fan pages are set up so that anyone with an affinity toward a brand or company (or celebrity or location or whatever) proudly can show their allegiance on their Facebook profile. Again, though, it seems that few resort entities are actually creating these pages.

So, what's next on the Web for resorts? Perhaps the ubiquitous video-sharing service, YouTube.

Consumers are already posting videos from their resort vacations, so maybe resort operators will be next. "We are currently exploring expansion into video on the Web," says Wyndham's Ball. "It's a great opportunity to visually showcase our resorts and enhance the experience for our guests to interact with our brand online." **R+R**

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