

TUTORIAL 28 SOCIAL MEDIA FOR TOURISM



This tutorial has been produced by The Australian Tourism Data Warehouse as part of the complete online education program, Tourism e-kit

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The Tourism e-kit is an initiative of the National Online Strategy Committee and is funded by the Australian State & Territory Tourism Offices



SOCIAL MEDIA FOR TOURISM

Reading time: 15 minutes

Prerequisite: n/a

This tutorial will explain what social media is and how you could use such networks to grow your business online.

1) WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKING?

Wikipedia defines social media as “the various activities that integrate technology, social interaction, and the construction of words, pictures, videos and audio”. Social media is more than a new way to communicate; it refers to an entire online environment built on people’s contributions and interactions.

The communication in social media is done using “social networking”. These sites connect groups of people together. They replicate in an online environment the behaviours that people have in an offline environment (e.g. being part of an association or a special interest group). The online environment is extremely well suited to networking, as it doesn’t involve location or time constraints. Anyone can participate from anywhere at anytime.

Leveraging of social media to market tourism products has proven to be an excellent strategy. However, you will need to be involved for you and your business to reap the rewards.

a) Why can’t I avoid them?

If you don’t want to start creating your own social media content, we recommend you at least monitor what is being said about you online as, in web 2.0, anyone can say anything about you on the Internet. Read the tutorial about Customer reviews and TripAdvisor and the tutorial about Google tools to learn how to monitor your online reputation. If you stay passive, you might lose business.

b) How much time will I need?

It is important that you do not jump the different steps and you take time to immerse yourself and be a spectator. First you should consider engaging in the social media networks listed in section 2a):

- Give yourself 30 minutes to one hour to set up your account per social media network (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, TripAdvisor)
- Then aim for one hour each week per social media network
- When you feel ready, start creating your own content.

c) How can I get involved?

Social media networks are to the online world what an association is to the offline world. Social networks are the meetings, exchange of information and knowledge that derive from you being a member of the association. **You will only get out of your association what you put in. The same applies to social media networks.**

As a small or medium operator, you are able to focus on quality instead of volume. You may therefore be better suited to offer a high level of individual customer service than larger operators. This individual, one on one relationship is also the core component of a successful social media strategy. You should therefore consider engaging in social media to gain competitive advantage.

Let’s have a close look at the steps you should take to become successful in social media. There are 5 steps and you will need to start at the bottom of the ladder.



	Social media (online)	Association (offline)
Inactive: "I am not involved in any manner"	Examples I don't use social media. I have never looked at a blog, have never opened YouTube, and have no idea what a podcast is.	Examples I am not part of the association.
Spectator: "I watch but haven't joined"	I have searched for videos on how to play the guitar on YouTube but I don't have my own account.	I am thinking about joining the local chamber of commerce and have done some initial research, read some of their material, and know who to contact.
Joiner: "I joined but I am not very active"	I have now signed up for a Facebook account, I know the basics but I haven't really explored all it has to offer.	I am now a member of my local chamber of commerce but haven't attended a meeting yet.
Critic: "I am an active member and voice my opinion"	I have started to upload photos to Flickr and left comments on other people's photos.	I have attended a few meetings, met some other members and we chatted about relevant topics.
Creator: "I am the owner"	I have now set up my own blog, or made my own videos and posted them on YouTube.	I have become heavily involved and became chairperson or even started my own association.

The above demonstrates that you cannot expect successful outcomes from social media if you jump the steps and are only using them as a means to an end. Just like being part of an association, business opportunities will eventually arise but they are secondary. Social media requires the willingness to genuinely participate and make a positive difference.

2) SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS RELEVANT TO MY BUSINESS

Since social media come in different shapes and forms a one size fits all strategy is not suitable.

Facebook for instance takes the friendship online and allows people to keep in touch with their friends and acquaintances in a single space instead of using random SMS and emails. Two of the most used features of Facebook are "status updates" and "the wall", a virtual online whiteboard on which Facebook users and their friends can leave messages to each other. Facebook users also join groups to exchange information about specific topics.

Below are a few steps that will help you identify which social media networks could be beneficial to your business.

1. Join different social media networks and become active for a few months at least to reach the "critic" level mentioned under 1c).

2. Identify your target market and how they behave online and which social networking tools they use. The majority of travellers use YouTube, TripAdvisor, and Google Maps. However, there are many more networks you could be leveraging off. Start by asking your customers which online social networks they belong to and seek advice from professionals such as your local tourism association.
3. Create content in these social media platforms to offer your target market your product in a shape and form that they are likely to respond to.
4. Entice your target market to visit your website or contact you so that they book your product. This step is very important, as it is the one that will turn leads into bookings. Your website will need to be professional, up-to-date, and provide all the information your target market will require for them to convert their interest into a booking.

a) Which social media networks do I need to consider for my business?

There are key social media networks that you need to consider as they could help you successfully market your business online and distinguish yourself from your competitors.

All the social media networks listed in this section are free to use and embeddable, which means that they can be placed within the content of your website. They will therefore appear twice: on their respective social media sites and on your website, therefore creating a link between the two. To embed a relevant channel of your social media network you will need access to your files or use your content management system (CMS). If you have a CMS it will only take you a few seconds to place the video, map or reviews on your site.

YouTube

www.youtube.com is a video-sharing site with over 100 million users. Every minute, more than ten hours of video are uploaded to YouTube. You need to create quality short videos about your property or tour, preferably showcasing guests experiencing your product. However, it is important to understand that YouTube is a site where consumers talk to consumers. And consumers, as a fact, don't like nor trust advertising. You therefore need to make your video look real, and not an ad for your business. Show some quirky facts, things that will captivate the online viewer. Think outside the square.

For instance, if you are a bed and breakfast and you happen to also offer fine dining, why not film yourself or your partner cooking up a storm in your kitchen?

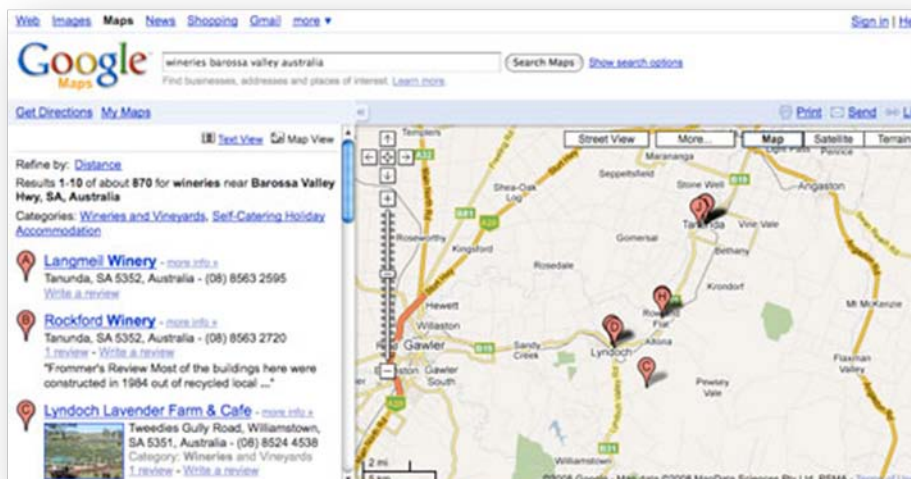
Before you start posting your videos, it is key to remember the social media ladder explained above. Don't jump any step and get a feel for YouTube before you start creating your own content.

Read the "Short videos for your website" tutorial.

Google maps

Online maps are interactive. This signifies that you can go to <http://maps.google.com> and key in your destination, or a type of business in the search field (such as wineries near Adelaide) and the website will return your results on a map therefore allowing you and your customers to make your own itinerary and print it. Maps are such a successful tool that people now use them as a search engines for locations.

A wealth of information – apart from directions – is available on maps. The user will see photos, videos, customer reviews, contact details, and even other places of interests that other users have added on the map. Below is an example of a search for "wineries Barossa valley Australia". As you can see, the search returned the name of different businesses that the user could click on to read reviews and see photos.



Screen capture
copyright: Google

Make sure you read the tutorial about Google tools to learn how to set up Google Maps and Google Local Business Center for your business.

TripAdvisor

Managing your online reputation and reviews with TripAdvisor is so important that a whole tutorial has been dedicated to it. Please refer to the tutorial about Customer reviews and TripAdvisor to learn how to set up your TripAdvisor strategy.

b) What other social media should I consider?

If you have already enabled YouTube, Google Maps and TripAdvisor, you can now move to the second level and consider increasing your online visibility using these medias:

Facebook

www.facebook.com is a social networking site with over 300 million active users worldwide and close to 3.5 million users in Australia. If Facebook was a country it would be the 4th largest in the world. Facebook was first used by university students to keep track of their university friends but is now used by all age groups.

Facebook's fastest growing demographic is those 35 years old and older.

Steps to a successful Facebook action plan:

- 1) Create a Facebook account: www.facebook.com
- 2) Then start identifying the "Facebook groups" and "Facebook pages" of interest to you and your business. To do so, use search bar on the top right of your account and search for topics that match an interest that ties into travel or into your business offerings (e.g. bushwalking, whale watching, wine, art, etc.)
- 3) Join these groups or become a fan of these pages (you can do so on the group or page itself) and participate.
- 4) When you feel ready, consider establishing an online profile for your business and region by setting up a Facebook group www.facebook.com/help.php?page=414 or a Facebook page www.facebook.com/business/?pages. Ensure you give a lot of information on your group or page, including photos, videos. You can also set up an Event related to your group or page.

*For instance, if you were a bed and breakfast in Byron Bay, NSW, why not set up a "Friends of Byron Bay" or "Stay @ Byron" group or page. You will not only be able to post text to your group or page but also add photos, videos and links to your site. **Promote your group to your past and new clients using your***

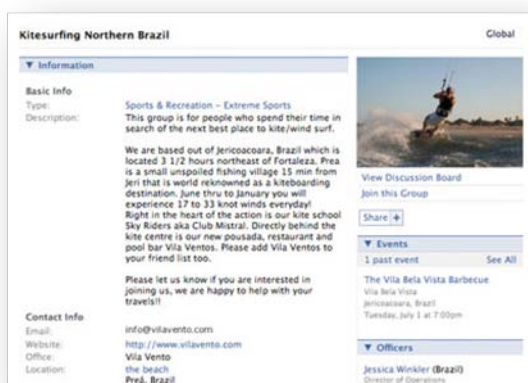
newsletter as well as all to other Byron Bay tourism businesses and you will soon see a growing community. You will then be able to send emails to all your group members using Facebook, or invite them to events.

YOU WILL BE ABLE TO COMMUNICATE TO ALL YOUR MEMBERS AND/OR FANS VIA FACEBOOK'S INTERNAL EMAIL SYSTEM AND THUS PROMOTE YOUR BUSINESS FOR FREE ONLINE.

There is a slight difference between Facebook groups and pages. Read this article for more information www.thegogglesdonothing.com/archives/2008/01/facebook_groups_vs_pages.shtml.

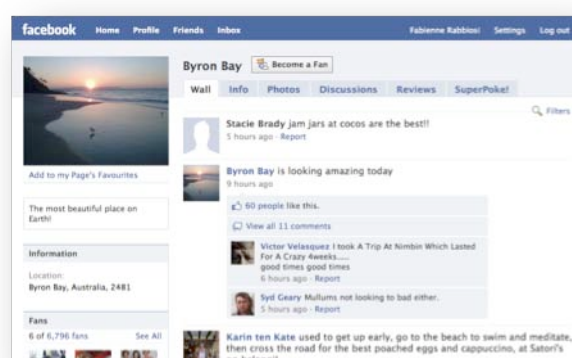
Facebook Group example

Kitesurfing in Northern Brazil



Facebook Page Example

Byron Bay



Screen capture copyright: Facebook

Facebook also offers the possibility to display ads (paid for service) and target them to your market directly. For more information on Facebook ads: www.new.facebook.com/ads.

Flickr and Picasa Web Albums

Flickr www.flickr.com and Picasa Web Albums <http://picasaweb.google.com> are online photo management sites on which anyone can upload their photos and share them with the world. Flickr has a stronger online community focus than Picasa and is described in the tutorial titled Images: Going online.

Displaying your property or tour's photos on online photo management sites will increase the exposure of your product and allow you to capture a different market. These photos can also be easily integrated into your website with a little bit of programming or by using a WordPress blog with a free WordPress extension for Picasa or Flickr. These extensions are called "plugins". You can find them by Googling "picasa plugin for wordpress" or "flickr plugin for wordpress" (there is no need to use capitals in search engines).

Podcasting

A podcast is a media file (generally audio) that is distributed over the Internet. The advantage of podcasts is that they can be subscribed to just like you would subscribe to a website or blog via RSS feed: see the tutorial about Blogging. People can download podcasts to their computers or MP3 players and listen to them wherever and whenever they like.

Podcasting is a very good medium to increase your brand awareness by providing informative and educational content.

For instance, if you are a whale watching tour you could interview whale experts and produce a mini series of podcasts freely available on your website and on the biggest podcast repository: iTunes from Apple: www.apple.com/itunes/store/podcasts.html.

If you would like to start podcasting, this article from podcasting tools will help you get started: www.podcasting-tools.com/podcasting-101.htm

If you are interested in podcasting but not yet ready to become a podcast creator, start by being a spectator. Download iTunes from www.apple.com/itunes, install it on your computer and search the iTunes store for podcasts (they are free). For instance, you could search for:

- Your favourite radio show
- Online marketing tourism
- Northern edge Algonquin (a podcast from a tourism business in Canada)

Subscribe to the podcasts of interest and listen to them on your computer or on your MP3 player!

Blogging

Blogging is one of the most common social media marketing strategies. Please visit the tutorial about Blogging for more information.

Twitter

Twitter was born in 2006 and is now one of the most popular social networking and interactive micro-blogging service.

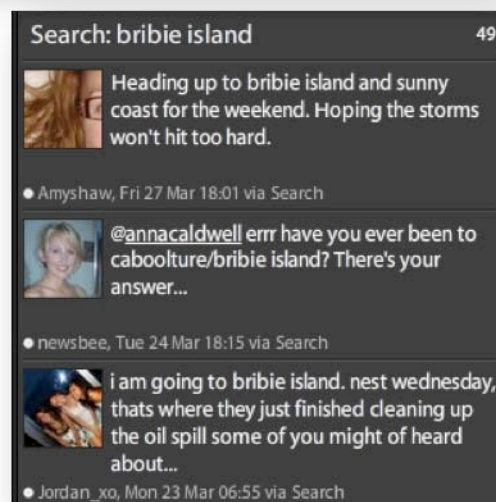
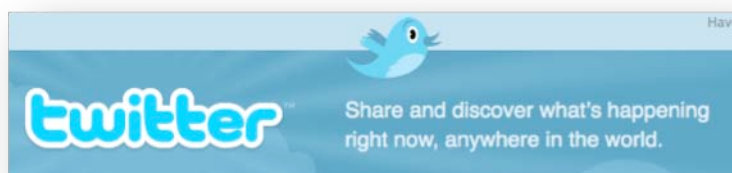
Twitter enables people to send short 140 character messages to Twitter using a web or phone interface. If people are interested in a users' messages (called tweets) they may decided to "follow" this user and therefore be informed every time they send a new tweet.

People use Twitter to share facts, experiences or to let the world know about what they had for breakfast. Learn more about Twitter by watching this short video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddOqidmaxoo.

Apart from being live, addictive and perceived as a waste of time by many, Twitter has numerous professional and business benefits.

As a tourism business you can use Twitter to:

- Keep with industry news and influential people by setting up searches in <http://search.twitter.com> or Twitter programs such as TweetDeck and by following users
- Build industry contacts



- Gain brand exposure in a casual, social, personable environment
- Monitor your online reputation and engage with your fans and/or prospects
- Share quirky facts about what happened on tour today

To get started follow the below steps:

- Visit www.twitter.com and create an account
- Download and install TweetDeck www.tweetdeck.com. TweetDeck is one of the many programs that will allow you to “tweet” (message) without having to log into the Twitter website itself. You can also install the Tweed Deck iPhone application.
- Set up a search with TweetDeck for a topic of your choice. For instance, if you are a tour operator located in Bribie Island in Queensland, you could search for “Bribie Island” (see image above).
- When you feel confident, start to follow people whose tweets you are interested in and engage.
- While setting up and learning about Twitter, also give your past customers and fans your twitter address. A twitter address follows this format: @mytwitteraddress. Not only will they be able to read your tweets but once you have found your Twitter “voice” you will be able to inform them about your latest stories, dugong sightings etc.

There are many ways you could use Twitter for your business. This article will provide you with 50 ideas: www.chrisbrogan.com/50-ideas-on-using-twitter-for-business/



c) Which other social media networks?

There are literally thousands of other social media networks you could consider for your business. This list will provide you with a list of over 350 social media sites: <http://mashable.com/2007/10/23/social-networking-god>.

d) Measuring the success of your social media strategy

As with any strategy you need to be able to assess the return on investment of your time and resources. To measure your success start by defining your objectives:

For instance, if you intend to set up a Facebook Fan page for your region, your objective could be to grow the group by 10 fans a week. If you are using Twitter to promote a new tours page on your website, measure how many visits were generated by your Tweet using TinyURL (<http://tiny.cc/faq.php>) and/or Google Analytics.

Every month report on your objectives and achievements:

	<i>Objective</i>	<i>Achievement</i>	<i>Relevant social media activities during the month</i>
Facebook:	10 fans	15 fans	Added 12 photos to group and 3 guest comments on the wall
Twitter:	80 new visits	104 visits	Tweeted once a week in the late afternoon

Repeat every month.

Another great tool to use is Google Alerts. For further information on Google Alerts refer to the Google Tools tutorial. There are many other social media monitoring tools available: <http://www.marketingpilgrim.com/2007/08/26-free-tools-for-buzz-monitoring.html>.

3) RELATED MATERIAL

a) Related tutorials

- Bringing people to my site with e-marketing
- Blogging
- Google Tools
- Customer reviews and TripAdvisor
- Images: Going online
- Video for your website

b) Related websites

- Benefits of Twitter: <http://blogs.reseo.com/2008/11/benefits-of-twitter.html>
- Twitter for travel and tourism: www.wilhelmus.ca/2009/01/twitter-for-travel-and-tourism.html
- Twitter Search in Plain English: www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGbLWQYJ6iM
- Social Media in Plain English: www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpIOCIXijPE
- Podcasting in Plain English: www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-MSL42NV3c
- Social Networking in Plain English: www.youtube.com/watch?v=6a_KF7TYKVC