



Marketing

by Peter C. Yesawich, Ph.D.

Friends, fans or advisors: Do social media influence choice?

Another great article from *The Rooms Chronicle*®, the #1 journal for hotel rooms management! ***Important notice: This article may not be reproduced without permission of the publisher or the author.*** College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Niagara University, P.O. Box 2036, Niagara University, NY 14109-2036. Phone: 866-Read TRC. E-mail: editor@roomschronicle.com

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Social media are the rage among marketers of travel services. And for good reason: there has never been an easier, more interactive way to reach and engage large audiences who maintain similar interests at such a modest cost. That's precisely why social media have captured the imagination of marketers who are now experimenting with novel ways to "join the conversation" and, where appropriate, try to sell something in the process.

The theoretical "reach" of social media does, in fact, boggle the mind: Facebook alone now boasts in excess of 500,000,000 members globally. The incidence of adults who report posting on the other popular sites pales by comparison. But to what extent do active travelers visit these sites, consult the content of these sites when evaluating travel service options and, perhaps most importantly, report that the content of what they find on these sites influences their actual behavior? The answers, as revealed in our 2010 Portrait of American Travelers™, may surprise you.

Among all active travelers in the U.S. (those who took at least one trip that required overnight accommodations during the previous 12 months), just under half (an estimated 46%) have a page posted on a social site. Facebook has achieved the highest rate of market penetration, followed by Linked In and MySpace:

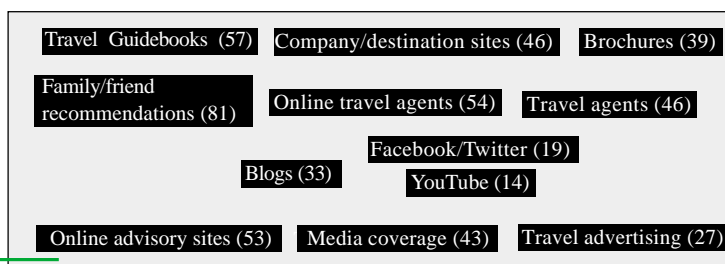
But, theoretical reach doesn't necessarily translate into influence, particularly when it comes to commercial communications. And in three separate national surveys conducted by Ypartnership, fewer than one in ten active travelers has reported that the content to which they have been exposed on social sites has had any significant influence on their final choice of a destination or travel service supplier, as revealed below:

Social Site	% Of Active Travelers With Page Posted
Facebook	91%
Linked In	24%
My Space	23%

One is left wondering why. And the answer probably derives from two additional insights. First, when asked about their primary motivations for the use of social media, active travelers cite the expected: a new and novel way to stay in touch with old friends, to find and make new ones, and to share information, photos and other content about life events. Very few, if any, mention activities of a commercial nature such as sourcing good deals, comparison shopping for products and services, and the like. Second, the perceived credibility of the content of social media is low relative to the degree of credibility ascribed to other sources of information travelers typically consult when making destination and travel service supplier decisions as demonstrated by the percentage of active travelers who are "very/extremely" confident in the information they receive from the media sources listed along the "credibility continuum" below:

Active Travelers	% Agree
Have Made a Destination or Travel Supplier Selection Have Based Primarily On Information Or Feedback From A Social Networking Site	6%

% Of Active Travelers Who Have Confidence In Destination And Travel Service Supplier Information Obtained From The Listed Sources



Thus, the true power of social media derives from their ability to reach large numbers of travelers who share some common affinity in an engaging and dynamic way. Traditional sources of information about destinations and travel service suppliers appear to continue to exert greater influence over consumer choice, however, even though their reach is generally substantially less and the composition of the audiences they deliver tends to be more diffuse. But, it is important to append this statement with the following caveat: this is true today, but may not be tomorrow. Whether and how the influence of social media on travelers' actual behavior grows may be an entirely different question two years from now given the rapidly evolving nature of the manner in which consumers are discovering and engaging with its content. ✧

(Dr. Peter C. Yesawich is Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Ypartnership, America's leading marketing, advertising and public relations agency serving travel, leisure and lifestyle clients. Ypartnership is an integrated marketing communications company that is known for its strategic thinking, breakthrough creativity, and innovation in marketing practice. The firm's Research and Brand Strategy Group is also regarded as one of the most respected sources of insights on the emerging travel habits, preferences and intentions of Americans, and co-authors the widely-acclaimed National Leisure Travel Monitor™ survey with Yankelovich Inc. Ypartnership has conducted research and published analyses on affluent travelers, meeting planners, American gamblers, family travelers, and more. For more information on this topic and the wealth of others examined in the Portrait of American TravelersSM, please visit the Publications section of www.ypartnership.com.)