

Social Media & Relationship Marketing

Develop Fully Connected Consumers Through Social Media

By Michael Barbera, CEO, Barbera Solutions



Mr. Barbera

Social media has shown the world its power. Your power. It's your voice that is shared throughout the world via underwater fiber optic cables and wireless networks. This voice has played a key role in the development of global politics, criminal justice, relationships and economic development.

Economic development is a broad term, but when there is growth in a town, city or county, a hotel is likely to appear. Alike every other business, hotels have a target segment, or two, or ten. It's unlikely that a four or five star hotel will appear in small, rural town, and it's unlikely that a large convention will be held in a small hotel, regardless of geographic location. Although each hotel has target markets, hotels can increase their reach through humanizing engagement on social networks as well as increase their revenues by developing a "fully-connected" consumer.

Hotels, or any industry, shouldn't be on social media just to be on social media. It's the largest voice in your organization, and if done correctly it could provide the largest marginal returns. However, hotels should have a strategy for their social media campaigns. A purpose and an expected call-to-action is needed. An example of a goal could be to gain more customers. Another example is to leverage current consumers into more loyal consumers. I'm going to discuss the latter.

Several independent studies by Harvard Business School, Mostista, Acxiom, Forbes, Forrester and Barbera Solutions have yielded results that identified the catalyst of increasing more revenue from current customers than new customers: fully-connected consumers.

Consumers have a connection to brands. The connection can be a purchase, a friend's purchase, or a memory of an experience. Hotels want consumers that are fully-connected. Fully-connected hotel consumers spent 68 percent more at their favorite hotels in 2014, than consumers who are "connected". The fully-connected consumer is loyal. They prefer one brand over another, and will avoid any easy solution in order to remain loyal to their favorite brands. For example, in 2014, 51 percent of fully connected hotel consumers drove an average 8 miles further from a nearby hotel in order to stay with their preferred brand.

The transformation from connected to fully-connected takes time. It also requires a rewards program and methods that build an experience that keep the consumer returning. Another method to create a fully-connected consumer is through the use of social networking. First, it's important to identify our target segments. Since most hotels have already completed this first step, it's time to identify which social networks are preferred by our segments. Your hotel shouldn't be on every social network. Your hotel should be on the platforms that offer you the greatest return: engaging with your consumers.

Once we have identified the best networks for our audience, it's time to create a strategy. No, a strategy is not posting content and selling our services. It's about a call-to-action. What do you want your consumers to do after they read your post? Let's use news organizations as an example. Like every other industry, print journalism needs to earn revenue. In order to earn revenue, they must sell ads on their websites. However, when a news organization receives more clicks, views and engagements on their website, they're able to increase their prices for third party advertising. The call-to-action for news organizations is to get people to click on the article.

The next goal is to get the reader to stay on the site as long as possible. This also increase the value of the website to third party marketers. In order to get people to click, there needs to be an enticing headline or photo. Something that triggers our emotions. These emotions are fear, anger, sadness, joy, disgust and trust. Many news organizations use click-bait style headlines on their posts and many of these headlines are not accurate representations of the article, but they make the consumer click. And regardless if you enjoyed the article or ignored it, you indirectly earned their organization some revenue.

What is a hotel's call-to-action? The easy answer is "book a room"; however, it's a bad practice to actively sell products and services on social media. I don't recommend it. This is where your marketing staff should be creative, but I will offer a few recommendations.

Customized Experience Hotel consumers prefer to have a personalized experience. It gives the perception that they are the only consumer at the hotel. A recent Cornell University study has posited that leaving a personalized, hand-written letter in the hotel room prior to check-in has increased a consumer's annual average stays by 80 percent. We can't write a hand-written letter on the internet, but we can engage with the consumer through popular channels such as Twitter.

Asking for a consumer's Twitter handle at check-in, or during the booking process is the catalyst of creating a customized experience. This enables the organization to tweet the consumer during the time of reservation, at the time of check-in, two-thirds through the duration of stay and following check out. Tweeting all of these activities with consumers should be treated with caution. Many people don't like persistency. It's important for your organization to accurately assess the fine line between customer service and annoyance. However, when tweeting with consumers, you are sharing your organization's loyalty with their followers. The median number of Twitter followers per account is 208. Your organization needs to capitalize on that number.

The engagement doesn't cease with a tweet to the consumer. It's the organization's responsibility to answer any inquiries, but I caution to use Guy Kawasaki's three rounds of boxing rule. The first post is round number one. The response is round number two, and the next comment is round number three. Take the conversation offline following the third round. An extended thread discussion on social media will give the consumer the perception of an unprofessional organization. Furthermore, we don't want your organization to potentially share any personally identifiable information.

The information we want to share is the names and relationships we have with our customers and partners. When there are events at the hotel, it's important to use strategic tagging by mentioning that organization on your Twitter account. For example, it benefits to tweet, "@AcmeCorp's annual employee gala commences in an hour. We're thankful to host and thankful for their contributions to #charityevent2016". The followers of your brand, the customer and those who follow the hashtag will view the tweet. It's also a good practice to execute strategic tagging as a conservative practice. Your organization should measure the pros and cons of the strategy based upon your overall marketing strategy.

One of the pros of B2B social networking is the use of professional networks. Professional networks account for 5.7 percent of users. LinkedIn is an example of a professional network and is the current holder of the largest market share of all professional networks. The professional networks enable their users to share educational and professional information as well as link up with coworkers and friends to expand their own professional networks. Sites such as LinkedIn, which generates the majority of revenue in this segment from products it offers to employers and job seekers, also give employers a format for posting jobs and finding potential candidates. The site also permits organizations to advertise via pay per click campaigns, fixed price campaigns and content marketing. Content marketing can offer your hotel significant returns from organizations that are seeking company accounts or event space. Over the next five years, this segment is expected to grow as casual social networks, such as Facebook, start to incorporate career features into their own sites.

Furthermore, the average age of the social network user is 37. As a result, consumers aged 25 to 44 are expected to account for the largest percentage of users at 44.0 percent. Many of these users take advantage of blogging sites and professional sites as a way to further their careers and express their interests. These platforms allow hotels to target the needs, wants and cognitive behavior of their consumers. Additionally, many consumers at the younger end of this segment are heavily involved in casual social networking and use the services to keep in touch with friends and family. Currently, consumers aged 25 to 44 are the most frequent users of 12 of the top 19 sites, and this trend is expected to remain steady over the next five years due to advancements made in mobile and tablet technology. Consumers that are younger in age should be the prime target for development into a fully-connected consumer. The lifespan of the consumer is longer and they'll earn more points and more free nights as a fully-connected consumer, which also provides your organization with higher returns.

Consumers aged 45 to 64 are expected to account for 29.0 percent of social networking activity. Consumers in this segment tend to use professional network sites such as LinkedIn most frequently as a way to further their careers, but they are also starting to use casual social media sites more often to keep in touch with family and friends. Advertisers often target consumers in this age group because they, like consumers aged 25 to 44, typically have more disposable income. This segment's percentage of activity is expected to increase over the next five years as technological developments make these sites easier to use. These developments will make it more convenient for

consumers to balance their social networking with their other day-to-day activities.

When in doubt regarding the activity of your social engagement, be active and use the three Bs: Be bold, Be Brief and Be Gone.

Michael Barbera, CEO of Barbera Solutions is a Fortune 50 consumer psychologist and strategy consultant, angel investor and award-winning business strategist. He is involved in both practical and academic endeavors. His areas of practice are consumer behavior, consumer emotions, social psychology, decision-making, brand management, and marketing and long-term business strategies. His clients are on the Fortune 50 list, ABC's Shark Tank, Bravo's Million Dollar Listing, The Food Network, and include Harley-Davidson, the Baltimore Ravens, the Carolina Hurricanes, Microsoft, and the Department of Defense. In 2015, the White House recognized Mr. Barbera for his contributions to entrepreneurship. Mr. Barbera can be contacted at 800-584-8047 or mbarbera@barberasolutions.com

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