

A Look at Social Media in the Marketing of Antarctic Tourism



What is the role of social media in the marketing efforts of companies engaged in ship-based tourism to Antarctica?

During the past few weeks, I've conducted an informal survey of nearly 150 separate websites and social media pages maintained by 26 different organizations that are members of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO).¹ These 26 are all in the business of conducting tourism – going through the permitting process with their national authorities, hiring expedition leaders and guides, chartering or managing expedition vessels, and marketing their programs directly to customers or through other tour operators and travel agents.²

¹ www.iaato.com Based in Providence, RI, USA, IAATO a not-for-profit 501c3 trade association founded in 1991 to advocate, promote and practice safe and environmentally responsible private-sector travel to the Antarctic. The IAATO website is a great place for anyone considering a trip to Antarctica to learn about visitor guidelines, wildlife watching guidelines and so forth.

² This informal survey of social media used by Antarctica tour operators focuses on 26 organizations using “traditional” expedition vessels: those carrying between 50 and 500 passengers and offering landings ashore in Antarctica. It does not evaluate member companies operating yachts (carrying 12 or fewer passengers) or cruise-only vessels (carrying more than 500 passengers, and which are not permitted to offer landings in Antarctica). Information on all 116 Members, Associates and Affiliates of IAATO can be found in the association’s Membership Directory: <http://apps.iaato.org/iaato/directory/list.jsf>

I chose to look at IAATO operators for several reasons: I'm familiar with the member companies and their market profiles, having served as director of the organization for five years. They also constitute a relatively easily defined universe within the travel industry – albeit a diverse group of companies large and small hailing from 11 different countries – that shares a unique destination visited by commercial expedition vessel. ³

But perhaps more importantly, I suspected this group would find social media ideal in connecting with their customers' interests in the wilderness values and conservation, not to mention the sheer physical beauty of a remote environment like Antarctica. Very simply, it's a place that visitors are passionate about, one that lends itself to a sharing of experiences no matter how often one has been there.

The only continent with no indigenous human population, Antarctica is a vector for subjects touched on frequently in the mainstream media, among advocacy groups and even in our daily conversations: climate change, the welfare and protection of wildlife and the environment, sustainable tourism, scientific research and, last but not least, striking photo-imagery captured by most visitors.

Wouldn't it make sense that Antarctic tour operators would take advantage of social media to highlight their profile and expertise by making a discussion of these topics and images an important part of their marketing effort? I was curious to learn the answer.

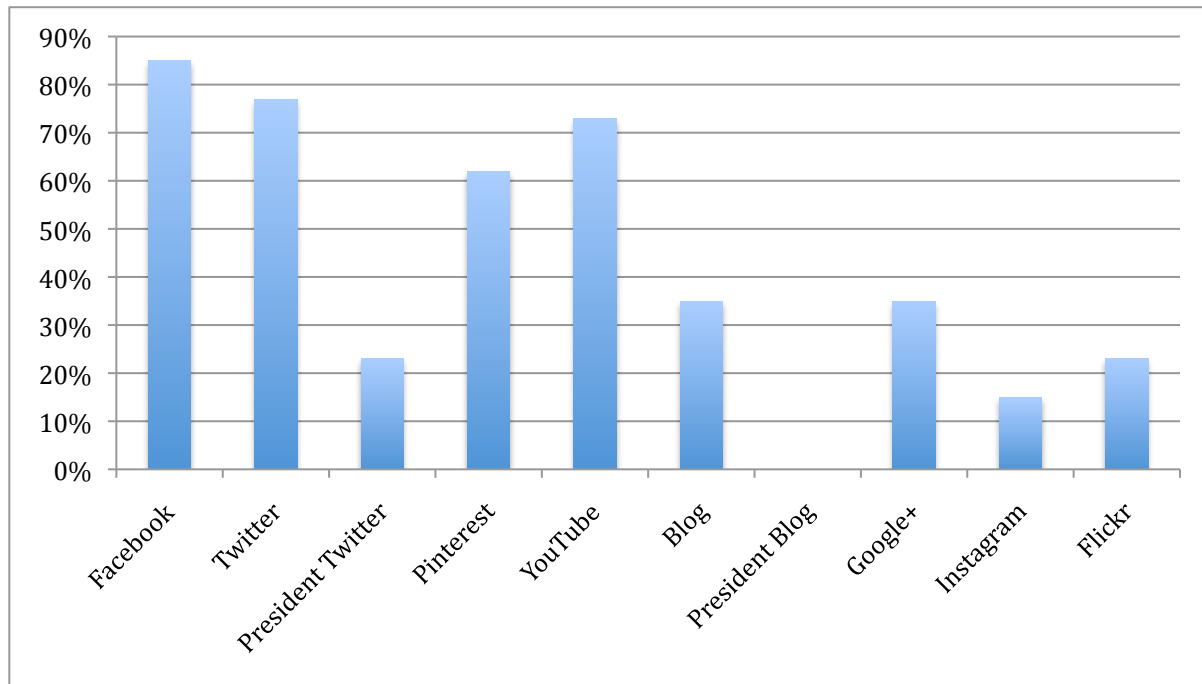
The Findings...

A significant majority of IAATO members clearly think so, with 88% of them engaging in social media with their customers, prospects and other followers. ⁴ Only three of the 26 expedition ship operators surveyed appear to forego the opportunities that social networking provide, while the others use anywhere from one to as many as nine different social platforms to maintain an ongoing dialogue with their followers. ⁵

³ The survey is not connected to or authorized by IAATO since the survey deals with marketing efforts on the part of individual IAATO-member companies and not the association. The mission of IAATO and its members as a trade association focuses exclusively on best practices – i.e. safe and environmentally responsible travel – and excludes Antarctic tourism marketing.

⁴ The social media networking services reviewed include: Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube, company blogs, Google+, Instagram and Flickr. The survey considers these social media applications in the context of B2C marketing, and does not include LinkedIn and other applications that are primarily B2B.

⁵ For purposes of this survey, usage of Twitter both by an organization and its president, chief executive officer, principal, etc. is counted as two social media applications, unless the individual's tweets are primarily personal in nature and not considered as an inbound marketing effort.



Percentage of Antarctic tour operators surveyed using various social media

Not surprisingly, Facebook and Twitter lead among this group of tour operators, with 85% and 77% respectively using these popular networking services as part of their inbound marketing efforts. If one factors in the additional use of Twitter by six of the companies' CEOs or presidents – that's 23% – to post tweets linking to relevant topical articles or destination photos, this micro-blog outpaces even Facebook as the primary tool in the social media toolkit.

The use of YouTube also rates high, with 73% of the operators posting videos of their Antarctic adventures or educational vignettes, often narrated by an expedition leader or naturalist. YouTube makes perfect sense, considering the stunning visuals provided by the Antarctic icescape, breaching whales and cacophonous penguin colonies.

Antarctic tour operators also find the visual nature of Pinterest advantageous in sharing photos posted by their customers or themselves, with 62% maintaining one of the theme-based, pin board-style collection sites. Lesser-used social media by the operators surveyed are company blogs and Google+ (both 35%), Flickr (23%) and the more recent but increasingly popular Instagram (12%).

I took the survey a step further, evaluating all of the companies' social media sites on two criteria that I've labeled *Activity Level* and *Style/Usage*. To be fair, assigning values to these criteria was something of a judgment call, considering the diversity of the operators in size, complexity and nationality; the number, breadth and seasonality of their offerings; their

market demographics and psychographics; and their respective (but unknown) marketing budgets.⁶

But inbound marketing can be a great equalizer, providing exposure to a small company well beyond what it might afford using traditional marketing and PR methods, and even beyond what can be accomplished with a reasonably priced yet superior website. This is borne out in my findings, with a number of smaller companies doing as good or a better job than many of their larger, better-financed Antarctic counterparts in using social media effectively.

The report scores the marketers on a scale of 1 to 3 for *Activity Level* and *Style/Usage*, with 3 being active and 1 indicating infrequent postings. Similarly, social media sites attaining a 3 in style and usage demonstrate what I call the “Four Es” – *Educational*, *Enriching* and *Entertaining*, all of which lead to the bigger E, *Engaging*. A score of 1 in style and usage, on the other hand, signifies an overtly commercial focus on the company’s products and services. Resulting composite scores were an average of the total social media services each operator used, whether it was Facebook alone or as many as nine social networking sites.

Scores for *Activity Level* and *Style/Usage*, along with the number and types of social media used by each of the 26 companies surveyed, can be found in Appendix A.

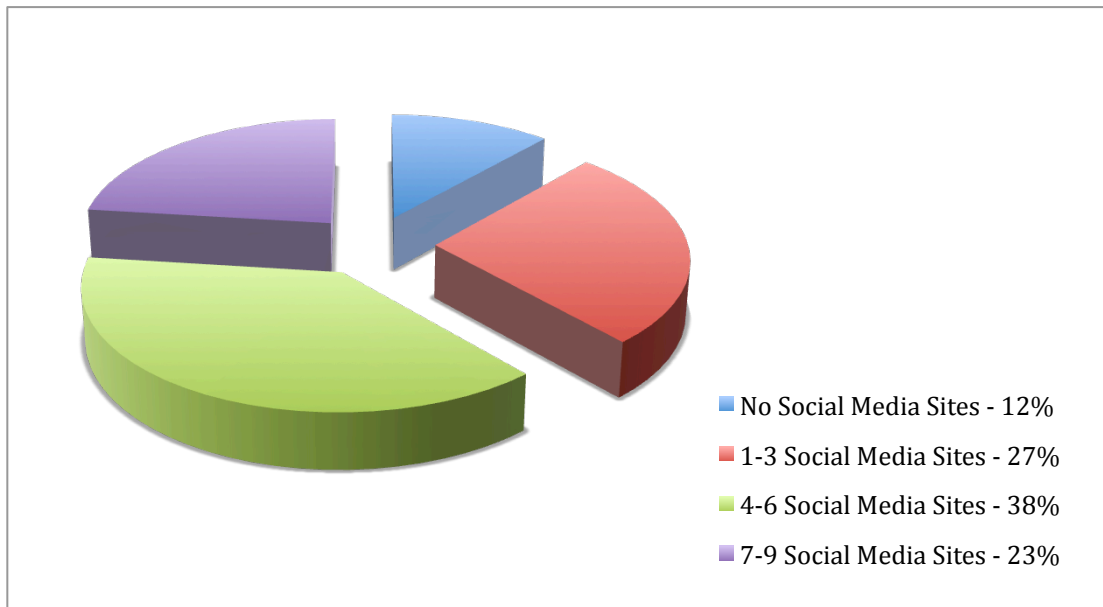


⁶ While they all have Antarctic cruise tourism in common, the travel companies surveyed vary widely. Some offer only Antarctic cruises during the Austral summer, others offer diverse tour and cruise programs worldwide and year-round.

Observations and Recommendations

It's not as easy to achieve the Four Es as a company might hope, even one with a substantial budget for inbound marketing, since it's considerably dependent on the regular creation of thought-provoking content. Cranking out another "this-day-in-Antarctic-history" factoid on Twitter in order to maintain the daily quota isn't likely the right strategy in creating real engagement with customers.

Quality versus Quantity: While regularity in posting is a good thing, an over-abundance of a good thing can have unintended consequences. For example, in a recent online article in *Inc.*, Eric Sherman reports on a study by social media software management vendor Expion that shows followers on Facebook and their online actions declined when top retail brands ramped up their postings.⁷ Expion ponders the reason for this: "...either fans are less engaged or retailers are publishing less-appealing content." Frankly, I think it's just plain overkill.



Number of Antarctic tour operators surveyed using from zero to nine social media – by percentage

Quality versus quantity also applies to the number of social media platforms used by the tour operators. This is no different than the multiple traditional marketing channels – i.e. advertising, direct mail, collaterals, trade shows, websites, etc. – that can be used to attract customers. Better to focus attention on two or three social networking sites and manage them really well – and that means delivering great content – than to spread human and budgetary resources too thin.

Blogs: Maybe I'm biased having been a marketing communications and public relations writer most of my career, but I was surprised to see only 35% of the tour operators using

⁷ "Social Media Marketing: More Isn't Better," *Inc.com*, August 27, 2013. <http://www.inc.com/erik-sherman/is-your-social-marketing-too-much-of-a-good-thing.html#!>

blogs to publish appealing content and “tell their story.” When I began the survey, I even expected to encounter a few blogs written by company principals, separate and apart from the company blog. This wasn’t the case. I’ll come back to that in a moment.

On the plus side, there are some excellent blogs, regularly updated from captains and expedition leaders in the field, accompanied by exceptional photography. Seven of the nine companies that blog also include a comments field, helping to further the give-and-take dialogue within their community.⁸

“It’s All About Us”: The deadliest mistake, in my view, is an over-focus on self. Sure, prospects and customers want to know about a company’s new travel program next year, but when Facebook updates or tweets become nothing more than another commercial billboard, it may be time to rethink the approach. This is an art, not a science, and every tour operator I know has compelling stories to share. But it takes time and hard work to uncover them and use them in creating relevant content that sets their company apart. There’s no formula or voice that works the same for every organization, but a company’s social media style and content goes a long way in defining its identity and influencing the buying decision. As Author and Online Marketing Strategist David Meerman Scott frequently says, “You are what you publish.”⁹

Think of social media as a cocktail party – guests flock around the conversationalist who draws out the best of those around her and who makes them feel welcome and engaged. Those folks go home saying, “That was fun, can’t wait to see her again!” But woe to those who get trapped by the bore who talks only about himself; he’ll likely be “un-followed” at the earliest opportunity.

Dan Zarrella, in his new book *The Science of Marketing: When to Tweet, What to Post, How to Blog, and Other Proven Strategies*, analyzed what he calls self-referential language: “...how often accounts refer to themselves, either as individuals or as an organization. This includes the use of words such as *I*, *me*, *us*, and *we*.” He found that as self-reference increases, the number of followers decreases. As he bluntly summarizes, “...if you’re there [using social media] for marketing and business reasons, stop talking about yourself.”¹⁰

A Voice from the Top: I mentioned earlier that the president or CEO of nearly a quarter of the companies surveyed use Twitter separately from their organization’s postings. This is more than just an ego trip or for personal banter with friends or colleagues. They frequently

⁸ One tour operator – G Adventures of Toronto, Canada – includes in addition to their regular company blog four blogs by their “Wanderers in Residence.” The company also hosts an extensive online discussion forum called “The Watering Hole, [which] is intended for travelers who wish to meet, greet and help each other before, during and after their travels.” Amazingly, the Watering Hole boasts nearly 80,000 registered users, with a total of 100,700 posts covering 23,700 topics.

⁹ David Meerman Scott, *The New Rules of Marketing & PR, Third Edition* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), Chapter 11, 137-168. <http://www.davidmeermanscott.com/about-david/>

¹⁰ Dan Zarrella, *The Science of Marketing: When to Tweet, What to Post, How to Blog, and Other Proven Strategies* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 58-61.

use it as a bully pulpit to espouse the underlying principles and beliefs on which their company is presumably built.

These micro-blogs of observations, links to photos from their own travels, or retweets of relevant industry or environmental news provide them with a leadership platform that supplements and builds their company's standing, and their own, within the industry. And these postings don't go unnoticed in the travel media, building credibility and even making these tweeting presidents the first ones to get a call when a reporter is looking for a quote for his or her next story.

As noted above, I expected to discover a few blogs from company principals in my survey. Having worked closely with quite a few presidents over the years, I've not met many who didn't have a true gift with the pen, and certainly fewer who didn't have authentic observations about their industry niche. In the same way that invested shareholders of a publicly traded company carefully track the CEO's views, a travel company's customer or prospect can interpret the values that run through a principal's blog to help him or her make the right buying decision.

Dragged into using social media...for the better

As an industry group, the Antarctic tour operators did quite well in *Activity Level* and *Style/Usage* of company social media. The group achieved average scores of 2.2 and 2.4 respectively, based on my simple methodology using a scale of 1 to 3. For both the group and for the individual companies, I looked at anything above a score of 2 to be good and above 2.5 to be very good. Of course, it's natural to want to do better, particularly in striving for the "Four Es."

I'll end this report with a look at one of organizations surveyed that I almost didn't include: Students on Ice (SOI).¹¹ Because SOI is a registered not-for-profit organization – its customers are exclusively high school and college students whose travel costs to the Antarctic or Arctic are largely covered by scholarships, grants or other sources of funding – I wasn't sure I should compare the social media profile of this 14-year-old organization with those of their for-profit Antarctic colleagues.

But I'm glad I did. SOI aced both the *Activity Level* and *Style/Usage* tallies with a pair of 3s. This shouldn't be surprising when you take a closer look at the organization's customer base and their "alumni" – what most for-profit operators call past passengers.¹² A bit of arithmetic points to the fact that SOI prospects, passengers and alumni are all Millennials under the age of 35, which is certainly not the norm for the customers of expedition cruise operators, who generally see an average age onboard in the mid-50s or even older.

Executive Director Geoff Green spoke to me by telephone from his office in Gatineau, Quebec. "We began our social media efforts about five years ago, but it wasn't my impetus

¹¹ www.studentsonice.com

¹² Tour operators will tell you that past passengers are the lifeblood of their business, generating both referrals and repeat business in a way that surpasses all other marketing efforts.

that got it rolling. Our alumni – who now number around 2,500 and come from 53 different countries – dragged us into it, so I give them all the credit,” he said.

“This generation of students and alumni led the way. To them, even email is an almost antiquated means of communication, and they check their Facebook and Twitter pages before they do anything else. To keep them connected and engaged, our social media content needs to be relevant, fresh and interesting.”

And it’s paying off. Geoff said that many alumni are now attending conferences on climate change, sustainability and other issues facing polar tourism, having become global citizens in no small part due to their initial encounter with SOI. And their ongoing connection with SOI via social media continues to fuel their passion for polar tourism and its role in making visitors advocates for a better world.

Which brings us back to the entire group of Antarctic expedition ship operators, all of which belong to IAATO. While most can’t hope to attract the younger, social media-savvy generation on which Students on Ice thrives, they are effectively using inbound marketing to strengthen market share, build loyalty and something more:

Social networking offers a near perfect means to actively promote one of IAATO’s core tenets – to create a corps of ambassadors for the continued protection of Antarctica, by offering the opportunity to experience the continent first hand.

To experience it and to share it. And that alone is a very good reason for pursuing an active, engaging social media strategy.



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Page 9

Appendix A

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Inbound Marketing for Antarctic Tourism: A Look at Social Media													
Sep-13													
Tour Operator	President					President					Total	Average Activity Level	Average Style/Usage
	Facebook	Twitter	Twitter	Pinterest	YouTube	Blog	Blog	Google +	Instagram	Flickr			
1 Abercrombie & Kent	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	7	2.7	1.7
1 Antarctica XXI	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	2.3	2.7
1 Antarpplly Expeditions	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	4	1.5	2.5
1 Aurora Expeditions	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	6	2.2	2.3
1 Cheesemans' Ecology Safaris	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	7	1.7	2.7
1 Compagnie Du Ponant	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	5	2.0	1.2
1 Fathom Expeditions	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	1.3	2.0
1 G Adventures	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	8	3.0	2.8
1 Hapag-Lloyd	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1.0	2.0
1 Heritage Expeditions	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	5	2.6	2.6
1 Hurtigruten	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	7	2.3	2.0
1 Lindblad Expeditions	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	9	2.9	3.0
1 Oceanwide Expeditions	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	1.7	1.0
1 One Ocean Expeditions	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	-
1 Passat Kreuzfahrten	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	-
1 Plantours	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	-
1 Polar Latitudes	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2.0	3.0
1 PolarQuest	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	3	2.0	2.7
1 Quark Expeditions	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	7	2.9	2.6
1 Rederij Bark Europa	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	4	2.3	3.0
1 Seabourn Cruise Line Ltd.	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	5	3.0	2.0
1 Silversea Cruises	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	4	2.5	2.0
1 Students on Ice	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	5	3.0	3.0
1 Travel Dynamics	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	5	2.2	2.4
1 Waterproof Expeditions	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	2.3	2.5
1 Zegrahm Expeditions	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	5	2.4	2.6
Total Operators in this survey & of Operators using Social Media	26 88%											Group Avg 2.2	Group Avg 2.4
Total Operators using...	Facebook	Twitter	Twitter	Pinterest	YouTube	Blog	Blog	Google +	Instagram	Flickr	Total		
& of Operators using this SM...	22	20	6	16	19	9	0	9	4	6	111		
	85%	77%	23%	62%	73%	35%		35%	15%	23%			