The Power of Social Media for Airports

Social media will be increasingly important in enhancing the airport experience, growing airport revenue, and building passenger loyalty in a changing global economy.

The rapid growth of mobile technology in the past decade has facilitated the development of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. More importantly, the increasing use of social media throughout the world has changed the way people communicate and share information on a daily basis. Social media provides an opportunity for two-way communications in real time—an invaluable tool for airport operators who provide time-sensitive service to large numbers of people.

Although the global acceptance of social media presents opportunities for airport operators to establish a rapport with travelers and to collect useful information, it also presents challenges. Many of the most popular social media platforms are less than 10 years old and continue to incorporate new features and capabilities. Airport operators must evaluate the appropriateness of these platforms for their airports while the uses and popularity of social media are changing continually. This focus piece examines the current uses of social media and their potential benefits for airport operators.

Riding the Social Media Wave
Social media users account for at least one-fifth of the world’s population.

According to Facebook, there were more than one billion active Facebook users worldwide as of October 2012, with more than 82% from outside the United States and Canada. (Active users log in at least once a month.) Although Twitter does not report user statistics, companies such as Statistica and Semiocast that analyze social media data estimate that there were 500 million registered Twitter accounts and 200 million active Twitter users in 2012. In addition, social networking platforms such as YouTube, Google+., LinkedIn, and Pinterest have millions of users. The large and increasing number of social media users provides airport operators with an opportunity to facilitate global travel and social interactions that bridge cultural and communication barriers and enhance the airport experience for passengers traveling throughout the world.
Social media applications such as Twitter and Facebook give airport operators effective ways to interact directly with passengers in real time.

Social media provide for direct and immediate interaction between passengers and airport operators, more so than one-sided exchanges such as press releases or announcements. One of the most common uses of social media such as Facebook and Twitter is for informal communications with passengers to locate facilities and services or provide feedback on the airport experience. Airport operators are using social media to promote their airports by advertising new service by airlines and airport concessionaires, offering discounts, promoting special events, or organizing contests.

Connecting with Passengers

Social media are used to provide updates on the status of ongoing airport projects. For example, San Diego International Airport uses social media to inform the public about its Green Build program. George Bush Intercontinental Airport/Houston provided advance pictures of United's new Terminal B South using its Flickr and Twitter accounts. London Gatwick Airport used Stickybits with bar codes to show videos to passengers in areas affected by construction.

In addition, social media play an important role in communicating delayed flight information, ground traffic delays, and updates during crises. During Hurricane Sandy in October 2012, airport operators used social media to inform passengers of the status of flights affected by the storm.

Building a Brand

An airport’s brand can be enhanced through the use of social media by presenting visual images of the many facets of airport operations and demonstrating the importance of an airport to the regional economy.

Traditionally, public presentations, media coverage, and press releases were the primary tools used for promoting airports. Although those tools are still important, the worldwide use of social media provides an opportunity to reach more people in different ways. For example, Twitter “tweets” with passengers present a human side to an airport and enhance airport customer service. Similarly, Facebook postings about new airline service and airport concessions demonstrate efforts by airport operators to continually improve the passenger experience. While Facebook is used to post updates, pictures, and videos, YouTube is used almost exclusively to post videos of significant airport events such as construction projects, green initiatives, or special community presentations.

In addition to making connections with individual passengers, an airport brand can be strengthened by identifying and targeting key groups in an airport’s customer base. For example, families traveling with young children are typically a key group in the customer base at many airports. To meet its objective of being a family-friendly airport, London Gatwick teamed with SoundCloud in 2012 to provide free downloads of children’s books. (SoundCloud is an online audio distribution social media platform.) In addition, Gatwick introduced a new program for budding authors to submit short children's stories for the chance to be recorded and published through the initiative.

In September 2012, the Dublin Airport Authority (DAA) created the Dubliners @DublinAirport campaign using Twitter, Pinterest, and SoundCloud to promote a DAA-sponsored new theatrical adaptation of James Joyce’s famous collection of short stories performed at the city’s theater festival.
Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are the social media platforms most frequently used by airport operators throughout the world, based on LeighFisher’s survey and analysis of 160 airports.

Nearly a third of the airports surveyed maintain Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube accounts.

LEIGHFISHER SURVEY OF AIRPORT SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

Source: LeighFisher survey and analysis of 160 airports worldwide, as of January 2013.

Facebook Twitter

27% 27%

5% 0%

29% 9%

3% 3%

European airports lead worldwide social media usage

Source: LeighFisher survey and analysis of 160 airports worldwide, as of January 2013.

CALLING ALL CHILDREN’S AUTHORS!

Win the chance to have your story recorded and shared with thousands of families as they pass through Gatwick Airport this summer.

As part of the Dubliners campaign, free copies of the book were left throughout the airport each day in September 2012, together with a note encouraging passengers to “take me, I’m free.” The Dubliners campaign was promoted extensively via the airport’s various social media channels by re-tweeting images and posting a daily audio excerpt from the play. In the past six months, DAA has been nominated for 11 awards for its social media activity and has won two separate awards—the Communications Award at the 2013 Irish Logistics and Transport Awards, and the world’s Best Airport Twitter Feed in the inaugural Moodies social media awards. The Dubliners campaign has been nominated for four awards.

Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport partnered with the Broward County Library to offer 15,000 free e-books to passengers. The e-books are downloaded using a Quick Response (QR) code available at 12 different book stations set up around the baggage claim area. (QR codes are optically machine-readable labels that record information.) Harrisburg International Airport also provides free downloadable e-books so passengers can pick up a free classic novel before a flight by way of QR codes in the terminal and website links.

London Gatwick Airport has joined with SoundCloud to provide free downloads of audio stories for children.
Increasing Nonairline Revenue

Airport marketing efforts using social media can encourage passengers to shop in airport concessions and increase nonairline revenue.

Although the ways that social media can be used to enhance nonairline revenue have not been explored fully, early efforts suggest that location-based applications such as Foursquare can influence purchase decisions through social engagement. Foursquare operates on Global Positioning System (GPS) hardware in mobile devices such as smartphones that allow passengers to “check in” at a business or location; at the same time, it provides the locations of nearby businesses that are registered with Foursquare. In addition, Foursquare can be linked to Twitter and Facebook accounts, so that every time a passenger leaves a status update or check-in, it will be posted to their Twitter and Facebook accounts, increasing the potential number of participants.

Airport operators have set up Foursquare check-in venues at participating airport retailers. With each check-in, a passenger announces to their friends on Facebook, Twitter, or other connected networks that they are at that particular airport retailer. San Francisco International Airport (SFO) sponsored a Foursquare contest that earned the airport an award for the best single social media promotion by a U.S. airport.

San Francisco International Airport won Travel and Leisure’s award for best single social media promotion by a U.S. airport.

Managing Airport Business

Information mined through social media can inform airport business decisions.

Feedback from passengers on concession performance, parking operations, ground transportation, and the overall airport experience can provide valuable, real-time information that’s not available from other sources. The continuing development of new software will allow airport operators to compile and analyze social media data and share this information with others within their organization. Airport operators can develop a “social intelligence” that is forward-looking, global in scope, and capable of playing out in real time.

A number of social media management tools such as HootSuite, TweetDeck, and BuzzStream are available to help airport operators manage all of their platforms. The features of these tools vary, including scheduling and publishing posts, messages, or announcements throughout various social media networks; monitoring and listening to public conversations taking place on social media; and providing analytical and tracking capability.

Companies in the private sector are using social media to initiate conversations and gather primary data on specific topics. For example, General Electric partnered with Virgin Airlines to gather information about what it called a “social” airplane and offered prizes for the best ideas. By using hashtags and enlisting the followers of its Twitter account, General Electric received thousands of ideas that it used to fine-tune its understanding of airline passenger expectations and create new processes for injecting stakeholder input into strategic planning and product development.

Airports with Benefits

Social media is a new frontier for airports.

Pioneering efforts by many airport operators throughout the world continue, although the full potential of social media usage for airports has yet to be discovered. The challenge for airport operators is to:

- Recognize that conversations about airports are taking place on social media already.
- Take advantage of pioneering efforts made by other airports, including their experience with the tools used to monitor social media and the resources required to establish and maintain a social media presence.
- Evaluate potential uses of social media in the context of their airport operations, the needs of the regional population base and business community, and the demand for national and global connectivity.
- Consider potential new uses of social media beneficial and perhaps unique to their airports.
- Estimate the costs and benefits of social media, and the overall value to the airport.

Approaching social media in a systematic way can provide benefits to both airport operators and passengers. With real-time feedback, airport operators have an opportunity to enhance the passenger airport experience through social interactions, which should result in increased revenues, passenger loyalty, and a strong airport brand.

* A word or phrase preceded by a hash mark (#) that identifies a category of interest and facilitates a search for it; used in microblogging and social networking services, such as Twitter.