

reactive



web 2.0 for the
tourism & travel
industry

foreword

by Craig Hepburn, Global Web Master, STA Travel

In an industry where experience means everything, the user-generated content revolution has opened up a whole new area of opportunities for the travel industry.

Travel consumers have until now relied heavily on travel journalism and traditional media to help guide them through the best places to go and most exciting things to do. Web technology has now become more easily accessible and the creation of good content has shifted to the customer and the traveller using blogs, podcasts, wikis and map mashups the consumer can share, experience and research their own travel adventure.

The youth market has also whole-heartedly embraced online social communities to share experiences and collaborate with peers from other countries, religions and backgrounds. STA Travel have been involved in these areas and are extremely excited about the opportunities this offers our market. We offer our customers the tools to blog about their adventure, use Flash applications to plan their flights, look up their friends using mapping technology, and our customers can even subscribe to the latest travel events and flight offers using RSS. We believe by allowing our customers to decide how they want to create, read or consume information they receive a more personal online experience.

The Web was designed to be a universal space of information where everyone could contribute; we are now seeing the true beginning of this revolution.

Craig Hepburn,
Global Web Master,
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introduction what is web 2.0?

the basics

Web 2.0 describes the second generation of Web-based services that have gained massive popularity by letting people collaborate and share information online in previously unavailable ways. Examples of the use of Web 2.0 are social networking sites, wikis, blogging and podcasting. With more than 9.5 million citations in Google, Web 2.0 is clearly generating tremendous interest online and must be taken seriously by anyone managing a Web strategy.

how does it relate to the tourism and travel industry?

As an increasing number of people research and reserve travel online, Web 2.0 is providing consumers with countless tools to find, and design, not just the cheapest trip, but the perfect trip.

Recent research has shown that more than 6 in 10 leisure travellers use the Internet or an online service to obtain information and prices,¹ further highlighting the need for Tourism and Travel Web sites to make the best possible use of technology to enhance usability, provide useful tools and increase bookings.

This white paper aims to demystify Web 2.0, and explain how it can be particularly useful to the Tourism and Travel industry, allowing brands to better serve customers, and capitalise on the new commercial opportunities that are now available.

blogging



the basics

A Web log, or blog, is a Web site where entries are made in journal style and displayed in reverse chronological order. Blogs often provide commentary on a particular subject, such as food, politics, or travel; many also function as personal online diaries. A typical blog combines text, images, links to other blogs, Web pages, and media related to its topic. Blog content can be unpredictable and varied in quality, as the technology allows any member of the public to create a blog for free, in only five minutes.

things to consider

- *Are you committed to frequent updates of your blog?*
- *Do you have anything interesting to say... on a frequent basis?*
- *Are you prepared for the open dialogue that blogs promote?*
- *How will you promote the blog?*

why create a blog?

There are a number of reasons why companies choose to use blogs on their Web sites:

- Corporate blogs can solicit direct feedback from customers, by allowing the public to make comments on blog posts. This is being used by companies in place of formal focus-group testing.
- Companies and individuals use blogging to become recognised as an industry expert.
- Internet users are frequenting blogs—one in every 200 UK internet visits went to a blog last week.¹
- Many companies are blogging as a less formal (more personal) communication channel.
- And of course, a blog can also be used for fun and self expression.

how does it relate to the tourism and travel industry?

Among users who seek information on the Internet, more than a quarter have visited a blog to review information about a destination or travel service supplier in the last 12 months.² This pattern reinforces the emerging relevance of travel communities as an information source.

As blogs are seen as a personal communication channel, visitors tend to see them as a more impartial source of information than corporate Web sites. Consider the difference of asking a friend to recommend a hotel in Brussels, to ringing the Hyatt Brussels and asking for their opinion!

¹ Hitwise, October 25, 2006

² 2006 YPB&R /Yankelovich National Leisure Travel Monitor™, 2006

blogging examples and potential

- **Starwood** have assembled a team of travel writers to contribute to their blog (www.thelobby.com) with the aim of helping Starwood Preferred Guests stay on top of the latest travel trends and build brand loyalty.
- **Eurostar** have commissioned local Parisians to post blogs on www.voiceofacity.com, creating a travellers guidebook with a truly ground-roots feel.
- **STA Travel** allow the public to browse and create their own travel blogs at (www.statraveljournals.com).

monitoring blogs

By tracking what is discussed in blogs, companies can stay abreast of the public's opinions of their brand and that of competitors. It can also be a replacement for phone surveys, focus groups, and other traditional methods of tracking consumer opinion. There are many Web sites for monitoring /searching blogs, each have their strengths and weaknesses and are good for different purposes;

- **Technorati** (www.technorati.com) is the best known and monitors more than 30 million blogs, with almost four million updated with new content at least once a week.
- Others include **Feedster** (www.feedster.com), **BlogPulse** (www.blogpulse.com), **Blog Lines** (www.bloglines.com) and **Google's Blog Search** (<http://blogsearch.google.com>).

responding to blogs

Along with the good, can also come the bad, and companies should expect there is a chance that negative feedback could appear in the blogosphere. Many blogs allow you to 'comment' on a posting. For crisis management this raises an interesting dilemma, should the company (or PR firm) respond to a negative comment, or remain silent?

podcasting



the basics

A podcast is an audio file (usually in MP3 format) that can be downloaded from a Web site. Podcasts are most commonly downloaded to an iPod, hence the name, but can also be used with other MP3 players. Users can *subscribe* to a podcast through iTunes (or similar software) using RSS (see page eight). Any new podcasts will then automatically load onto your iPod.

how does it relate to the tourism and travel industry?

Many travel Web sites are using podcasts as a way of delivering an audible experience of featured travel destinations. Thousands of guidebook podcasts exist, covering almost every destination. Most are free and can be found on destination sites, online news outlets, and music stores such as iTunes. Recent additions to iTunes' podcast section, for example, included segments about the San Diego Zoo's monkey enclosure, the Texas city-island of Galveston, and Chicago's Millennium Park.

Creating a podcast can be cheap and easy, and so it's not just big brands that are making podcasts – ordinary people are recording their own opinions and observations about their trips. Type in the words 'Los Angeles' in iTunes' podcast section and LA bound travellers will find a host of opinions about the best of Southern California, including **Foodcast**, a show about Los Angeles restaurants.

examples and potential

- **Lonely Planet** are providing free destination-based podcasts at www.lonelyplanet.com/podcasts
- The online travel agency, **Orbitz** offers audio descriptions of travel destinations at www.orbitzinsider.com
- **Virgin Atlantic** has a trial of nine podcasts with destination-based content, which include sound effects and music in addition to commentary. See <http://virginatlantic.loudish.com>
- The UK's **Independent** newspaper (<http://travel.independent.co.uk>) has launched a travel podcasting service exclusively with mobile phone company **Vodafone**. Each podcast is presented by Simon Calder, The Independent's travel editor.
- Independent companies such as **HeartBeat Guides** (www.heartbeatguides.com) and **Soundwalk** (www.soundwalk.com) have been launched offering destination podcasts for sale.

social networking & user-generated content



the basics

Social networking describes the trend towards Web sites becoming gathering places where relationships are formed among a great number of people in a virtual space. Until recently content on the Internet was created and published by business, but with the rise of sites such as **MySpace** and **YouTube** the Internet community is now creating, not just consuming content.

how does it relate to the tourism and travel industry?

First and foremost, social networking sites let Web users communicate with each other in an extremely efficient way, by enabling them to congregate around specific interests (such as a holiday destination).

Social networks empower travellers and, in one respect, enable them to operate outside the establishment, sharing information and ideas (such as hotel or destination reviews) that are unfiltered and free of marketing bias. Established online travel Web sites (such as **Yahoo! Travel**) have the benefit of a high volume of site visitors, and many are embracing Web 2.0 to enable this customer base to create online communities, driving repeat visitation and loyalty.

examples and potential

The potential for businesses to leverage the power of social networks is substantial. Many big travel brands have embraced user-generated content, and are exploring building social networks.

- **TripAdvisor** (www.tripadvisor.com) was among the first to capitalise on the opportunities of Web 2.0, and a range of general and niche social-based start-ups have followed suit. The site boasts 23,000 featured destinations, and is among the top ten visited Travel Web sites in the UK¹.
- **Yahoo!** has been busy integrating a range of Web 2.0 tools with its new **Trip Planner** tool (<http://travel.yahoo.com/trip>), which enables travellers to view and rank trip plans produced by its large customer base.
- Travel companies such as **Contiki** have created dedicated **MySpace** Home pages (www.myspace.com/contiki) featuring travellers comments and featured offers, and allowing other MySpace users to sign up as 'Friends'.
- Designated as a community space for travellers, the revamped **Sheraton** Web site (www.sheraton.com) encourages visitors to share stories, advice and photos relating to their travel discoveries, favourite destinations, etc. Sheraton management says the portal is a reflection of how people now research and buy their trips.

online video



the basics

Around three quarters of all home internet users in the UK (18 million people) now have a broadband connection¹. With the rise in availability of broadband, so too has the commercial viability of uploading and viewing video online.

As of mid 2006 there are tens of millions of video clips available online, with Web sites dedicated entirely to offering free video clips to users, and many established sites adding video content. While some video clips are taken from broadcast media, user-generated video has become incredibly popular (most prominently with **YouTube**).

Video is being used online in a myriad of ways, from online advertising, to social networking, to rich media Web sites.

how does it relate to the tourism and travel industry?

For travel and tourism operators, online video provides the ability to create a depth of engagement that, until now, has been restricted to TV travel shows. Care needs to be taken when relying on video to provide an online experience, as visitors on slower Internet connections will find the delayed load times frustrating, damaging your brand's reputation.

Alongside professional video, many holidaymakers are travelling with digital video cameras and uploading their footage to sites such as those listed below. It is now possible to search for user-generated video and explore the real sites and sounds of a holiday destination.

examples and potential

- **YouTube** (www.youtube.com) is set to become the most popular online video Web site². YouTube allows users to create their own travel profiles and itineraries, post videos of their trips, and comment on each other's posts.
- The new site **Travelistic** (www.travelistic.com) bills itself as the 'YouTube for travel', and combines user-generated video with professionally produced programming, some of which is exclusive to the site. The company plans to move into content creation, with a travel-themed 'video podcast' in the making.
- The **MGM Grand Las Vegas** have been lauded for the rich use of video in the 'Maximum Vegas' section of their corporate Web site (www.mgmgrand.com), demonstrating the experience and facilities of the hotel.

¹ BMRB, January 2006

² Hitwise, September 2006

RSS



the basics

RSS is a file format that is used to subscribe to content updates such as blogs, latest news, offers or podcasts. To view a subscription, you require an RSS reader, of which there are many available such as: FeedDemon, NewsGator, Rojo and Spotback. There are also alternatives such as Google Home page, MyYahoo or Windows Live Space. By selecting an RSS feed on a topic of interest, you can keep track of a large number of your favourite Web sites or blogs, without having to remember to check each site manually or clutter your inbox.

To subscribe to an RSS feed, first choose an RSS-reader, and then look out for these symbols



how does it relate to the tourism and travel industry?

Online travel agencies, airlines, even hotels, have launched RSS feeds in the past year, primarily focused on travel deals and advertised specials. It is relatively easy and economical for travel companies to test out feeds as a supplemental means of communicating with more tech-savvy travellers.

The main benefits/features of RSS are:

- RSS feeds entice subscribers to visit the Web sites mentioned in the feed, much like the links in an eNewsletter.
- RSS content does not have to compete with email and spam for the users' attention. It's more likely that your message delivered via RSS will get through to the users.
- RSS feeds work well for search engine positioning because they help get inbound links from other Web sites. Feeds are also an excellent way to let the search engines know that there is new content to be indexed.
- RSS feeds can be used to syndicate content to other Web sites, thereby expanding the original site's readership and reach.
- Many RSS readers allow users to forward items in RSS feeds to their friends, family and co-workers, much like the viral marketing 'forward this message' feature in eNewsletters.

examples and potential

- Many travel agencies such as **Expedia** (www.expedia.com), **STA Travel** (www.statravel.com), **Virgin Holidays** (www.virginholidays.co.uk) and **Orbitz** (www.orbitz.com) offer customers the opportunity to automatically receive new promotions via RSS as soon as they're posted on the site.
- The Conde Nast Web site **Concierge.com** (www.concierge.com) delivers insider recommendations on the world's greatest destinations via RSS.

tagging



the basics

Tagging is a new way of categorising information online. Any piece of content (such as a blog post) can be assigned multiple tags, and will then appear under each of these as categories. This is a break from the strictly linear navigation of Web sites pre-Web 2.0. Tagging is particularly common in user-generated content sites and the blogging world.

how does it relate to the tourism and travel industry?

Consumers are increasingly turning to tagging to sift, sort, and share information about travel planning and buying. Imagine if you could somehow view the collective travel planning knowledge of everyone that has been before you, effectively eliminating all of the dog-eared journals and underlined notes in travel guides. Well, this is exactly what is occurring with tagging.

Broadly speaking, tagging is used for two purposes: *saving and sorting* your own content, and *browsing* other people's content.

Suppose you are considering a trip to Paris. Naturally you start your online travel planning journey by searching for 'travel to Paris France' in a search engine, where no less than 29 million results are returned.

Perhaps you refine your search, and begin to visit some of the referenced pages. As you visit these pages, you *save* or "tag" those you like with a service such as Del.icio.us (www.de.licio.us), in a process similar to identifying browser favourites. Perhaps you tag a museum's Web site with "must visit", "Van Gogh" and "Montmartre". As you tag items, a 'tag cloud' is created, *sorting* the items of interest, which can be used as an anchor point for future searching and tagging.

airport accommodation activity art
bars beer bicycling brussels friends
gallery louvre marais mont martre
museums must visit paris van gogh

tag cloud example

A feature of sites such as **Del.icio.us** is the ability for another traveller to Paris to browse other people's tagged Web pages, providing content of much greater relevance.

A further type of tagging is the newly popular *geotagging*, which is the process of adding longitude and latitude tags to content, which then allows content to be displayed geographically on a map. This technology is still emerging, with some newer mobile phones allowing photos to be automatically geotagged with the current location of the photo, and uploaded to sites such as Flickr.

examples and potential

- **Flickr** (www.flickr.com) allows users to store, search, sort and share their photos. Tagging allows users to categorise each of their photos making it easier for others to find images under the same tag. Travelling to Venice? Search 'Venice' to see other people's photos. Flickr also allows users to geotag, upload photos, and then display these on a world map (www.flickr.com/groups/world/pool/map).
- **Travbuddy** (www.travbuddy.com) is a site for sharing travel experiences with others and includes popular tags for global destinations along with a tag search feature.

mash-ups & open APIs



the basics

'Mash-up' is a term for seamlessly combining two (or more) different sources of information to create a new experience. The most common is the combination of **Google Maps** with other information (e.g. cycling routes).

An Open API is the technology that makes Mash-ups possible. By providing their software as an Open API, companies such as **Google, Flickr, YouTube** and **Del.icio.us** allow the public to create limitless combinations of these services.

how does it relate to the tourism and travel industry?

Mash-ups have already been embraced by the travel and tourism industry to a great extent, the most common being the combination of Google Maps with other sources of information (such as hotel locations).

Still a nascent technology, currently only a small number of technology companies are providing Open APIs for their software/Web sites. Over time this range will grow, and so too will the opportunities.

Consider how maps, images, movies, sounds and reviews can all be combined to give a very real idea of what a destination has to offer. If you see functionality from a site that you like, explore to see if they offer an Open API, and consider mash-ups as a way to present content in new and interesting ways.

examples and potential

- **The 'Random Day Out Generator'** (www.randomdayout.co.uk) by **Locale** combines a number of data sources to create a mapped itinerary, using Virtual Earth (Microsoft's equivalent of Google Maps).
- **Virtual Tourism** (www.virtualtourism.blogspot.com) combines travel destination information from a variety of sources; text from Wikipedia, maps from Google Maps and video from YouTube.
- **The Blogabond World Browser** (www.blogabond.com/WorldBrowser.aspx) is a great way for travellers to explore blogs and stories in a visual way, mashing-up user-generated content with Google Maps.
- **43 Places** (www.43places.com) works in a similar way and combines Flickr photos, RSS feeds and Google Maps with tagging and user-generated content, allowing users to share their favourite destinations.
- Meanwhile, **Trip Advisor** (www.tripadvisor.com/LocalMaps-g60763-New_York_City-Area.html) displays hotel rates on a Google Map of New York.

wikis



the basics

A wiki is a type of Web site that allows site visitors to easily add, remove and otherwise edit and change the site's content, normally without the need for registration. The most popular of which is **Wikipedia**, which is the most popular Education/Reference Web site in the UK¹.

The term *wiki* can also refer to the collaborative software itself (wiki engine) that facilitates the operation of such a Web site.

how does it relate to the tourism and travel industry?

In the past, publishers such as Lonely Planet and Rough Guides have paid a long chain of contributors to get a Paris Guide into bookstores and travellers hands; authors, editors, designers, printers, distributors... the list goes on.

A wiki streamlines this process to one person—you!. If you have an opinion on a given topic, a wiki will let you share this with the world, for example visit <http://wikitravel.org/en/Paris>, click on the 'Edit' link and start writing.

There is considerable debate over whether information found on wikis is factually accurate, as there is no (or little) formal editorial control. Instead, this control is put in the hands of the public. For example, if an eager Paris Hotelier describes their property as 'the best hotel in Marais', before long another visitor will correct or delete the entry.

In fact, a study by the British scientific journal, *Nature* showed that Wikipedia comes close to Encyclopaedia Britannica in terms of accuracy².

examples and potential

- **Wikitravel** (www.wikitravel.org) is a project to create a free, complete, up-to-date, and reliable world-wide travel guide. So far they have 12,000 destination guides and other articles written and edited by Wikitravellers from around the globe.
- **World66** (www.world66.com) follows suit, allowing visitors to browse and edit destination content.
- **TripAdvisor** (www.tripadvisor.co.uk) have recently launched the **TripAdvisor Wiki**, allowing visitors to edit travel guides to support the large number of existing travel reviews.

1 Hitwise, May 2006

2 Nature Journal, December 2005

AJAX



the basics

AJAX is shorthand for Asynchronous JavaScript And XML, and is a development technique for creating interactive Web applications. The intent is to make Web pages more responsive by exchanging small amounts of data with the server behind the scenes, so that the entire Web page does not have to be reloaded each time the user makes a selection. This then increases the Web page's interactivity, speed and usability.

how does it relate to the tourism and travel industry?

When applied appropriately, AJAX can make Web sites more responsive and give users more contextual information without needing to refresh the browser. This is a growing area, and one that established travel companies are well positioned to capitalise on. A better user experience may well be the key to shift loyalty among online travel agencies.

Many flight fare aggregators are using AJAX to create a fast and seamless user experience when sorting through a large number of flight options.

examples and potential

- **Kayak** (www.kayak.com) aggregates fares from over 100 airlines, and uses AJAX to provide a great user experience. In particular, when viewing available flights you can choose to filter results by Airline, Stops, Departure Time or Airports – doing so dynamically updates the search results, instead of reloading a new page with each change.
- **Sidestep** (www.sidestep.com) provides a similar service and can search flights, hotels, cars, vacation packages and activities.
- **Farecast** (www.farecast.com) is the first airfare prediction Web site. They aim to help online travel shoppers save money by answering the question; *should you book now or wait for a cheaper fare?*
- **Google Maps** (<http://maps.google.com>) elegantly uses AJAX to allow the user to scroll, pan and zoom maps without reloading the page.

final word

Many marketers are already experimenting with Web 2.0, and some have moved on to commercialising it. Web 2.0 provides fantastic opportunities to those travel and tourism marketers who are willing to understand and embrace it.

Tim O'Reilly (the technology publisher who coined the term 'Web 2.0') described it as 'an attitude rather than a technology'. The common bond of social networks, wikis, RSS, podcasts et al, is that Web-based information is now in the hands of the public, and they can create, share, listen, read and even sell this information in ways that suit them.

The result is a myriad of new ways to engage with customers, build loyal communities, and maximise online revenue through your travel and tourism Web site.

If you are interested in discussing how Web 2.0 can benefit your business, please contact Reactive on the details below.

get in touch

Please contact us to discuss your online communication requirements.

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