

March | 2012

HeBSdigital

Converging Social & Mobile: Why 2012 is going to be “The Year of SoLoMo”

| By Margaret Mastrogiacomo & Ritesh Gupta

Recently, Margaret Mastrogiacomo, HeBS Digital’s Manager of New Media & Creative Strategy presented at EyeforTravel's Social Media Strategies for Travel North America 2012. Margaret had a professional chat with Ritesh Gupta, Managing Editor/ Global Correspondent at EyeforTravel, about converging social and mobile in an online marketing strategy.

HeBS Digital, Inc.
Address: 1601 Broadway, 11th Floor, New York, NY 10019
Phone: 212-752-8186 Fax: 212-202-3670
E-mail: sales@hebsdigital.com Web: www.hebsdigital.com

Ritesh Gupta/EyeforTravel: Social, local, and mobile are huge areas of innovation and are lending a new dimension to plans of those travel marketers who are constantly looking for new ways to enable meaningful experiences with their target consumers. What new trends do you foresee for such areas and do you foresee them working in isolation or as part of an integrated initiative?

Margaret Mastrogiacomo:

Here at HeBS Digital we consider 2012 to be The Year of SoLoMo. In travel marketing, there is a major convergence of channels, and social, local, and mobile will work as part of an integrated initiative. These three initiatives speak to key components of a travel consumer's behavior. Social speaks to what we do as human beings and how we share our travel experiences, mobile speaks to our "always on-the-go" nature, and local speaks to the need for information from our immediate environment. The power of these initiatives combined, fills an inherent need for consumers and allows the hyper-interactive travel consumer to stay hyper-connected with brands.

The future of SoLoMo looks promising. Local data drives better engagement and conversions and 1 in 3 mobile searches has local intent. As for future trends, SoLoMo is changing the way consumers access information. Instead of researching attractions during a hotel stay, mobile applications will detect a traveler's location, what they are looking for, provide directions, push specials based on geo-location, and even allow guests to share their experiences in real-time. SoLoMo will ultimately provide more customer service solutions to enhance the travel experience.

Check-ins will become increasingly more important. Mobile applications such as Foursquare, will be more deeply integrated into a mobile strategy and a key touch point in the mobile brand experience. SMS marketing and geo-location offers will become key in how hoteliers target travelers not after but during their travel experience. Hoteliers and travel brands need to begin thinking local and immediate.

Ritesh Gupta/EyeforTravel: The convergence of two technological shifts – with the rise of the smartphone use and the popularity of social media – has created a seismic shift in consumer behavior. Now, wielding their GPS-enabled phones, social media users are more comfortable than ever before in sharing information about their lives, and also expect instantaneous access to information and purchasing no matter where they are in the world. What new trends do you foresee as this convergence is now a part of consumers' lifestyle?

Margaret Mastrogiacomo:

Over 50% of the US population will have a smartphone in 2012. With the rise of smartphones, now more than ever, travelers are accessing information and sharing their experiences in real-time. Mobile websites and applications will need to be more robust than ever. Capturing user preferences to make the mobile experience more customized will be key in providing instantaneous access to information and purchasing. Storing room and service preferences will allow seamless booking and allow the hotel to serve the most relevant content on the mobile website. Integrating loyalty programs into the mobile website experience will be key in delivering this customized user experience.

Mobile websites will also offer more sharing capabilities. Review site integration such as TripAdvisor will prompt guests to share their experiences in real-time and social sharing capabilities will allow guests to easily tweet and share information on social platforms. Ultimately, this convergence means that mobile travel and hotel websites and apps need to be viewed less as a content provider and more as an experience provider.

HeBS Digital partnered with Loews Hotels to launch a mobile website www.loewshotels.com/m featuring 'location-aware' capabilities. The mobile website offers the ability to detect the location of the mobile device accessing the site. The addition of the 'location-aware' feature to the mobile site enables Loews Hotels to provide a potential guest immediate information and data that enables them to know where the closest property is to their current proximity. A mobile device holder in New York City will

automatically receive a prompt to book the Loews Regency Hotel and indicate location-specific special offers and packages. The 'location-aware' capability helps streamline the guest experience by filling in addresses faster and providing directions personalized to the guest.

Ritesh Gupta/EyeforTravel: How can the travel industry leverage the combination of location, activity, demographic and time targeting?

Margaret Mastrogiacomo:

Before industry players even consider leveraging location based services, they need to make sure that all local content such as Google Places is accurate and optimized for the search engines--this is where mobile directories and mobile mapping services pull location information. Once all local information across the web is accurate, travel brands can begin leveraging the power of location, activity, demographic and time targeting.

Effectively targeting potential guests means understanding who, what, where, and why. The ability to target a mobile audience based on social interests and demographics within any geo-location is becoming an important factor in the effectiveness of mobile campaigns. Mobile ads that tap into social interests, demographic, and time targeting, answer an immediate need for consumers. Based on this need, we are going to see a rise in social-geo targeting technology that accesses demographic data based on publically-available social media activity information to better target consumers. Imagine serving a mobile ad or coupon promoting your onsite restaurant's happy hour from 6-8 to a business traveler located within 5 miles of your hotel with a particular interest in dining and entertainment. Suddenly, an ad impression no longer simply garners a click, it answers a consumer need.

Ritesh Gupta/EyeforTravel: Travel companies have been rewarding customers for their affiliation towards social networks and location-based services. A lot was expected from location plus social, and geo-location check-in campaigns were initiated regularly. How do you think the travel industry leveraged such trend in 2011?

Margaret Mastrogiacomo:

In 2011, many hotel and travel brands opened their eyes to the power of a mobile check-in. Many hotels offered check-in specials on platforms such as Foursquare to encourage viral awareness. Multi-property hotel brands, such as the Ritz-Carlton, utilized Foursquare as an online-concierge tool by creating tips about local attractions and landmarks from concierges at its property locations. Any Foursquare user could follow these tips to guide their travel experience.

Another significant way the travel industry leveraged geo-location based services, was through loyalty program integration. Starwood partnered with Foursquare to offer members of the Starwood Preferred Guest (SPG) loyalty program additional points, badges and rewards for their check-ins at participating hotels. The allure of mobile check-ins will continue to flourish with travel recommendations and location-based special offers that drive local foot traffic, especially for local restaurants, spas, etc.

Ritesh Gupta/EyeforTravel: Sales and promotions are termed as the most popular types of information that mobile consumers are looking for when engaging with location-based services. Also, local deals are increasingly an integral part of the mobile shopping experience. What do you make of the mobile shopping behavior especially from the travel industry's perspective as this juncture?

Margaret Mastrogiacomo:

Location-based mobile promotions via LBSN like Foursquare can be used successfully by local entities such as restaurants, bars, lounges, and day spas, as well as by major travel brands that are focusing on local customer engagement. Another approach to appeal to mobile shoppers is to enhance the travel or hotel mobile website with rich, local content and real-time local specific promotions.

It is no secret that sales and promotions are the most popular types of information searched by the mobile travel consumer. According to Amadeus research, 82% of hotel mobile bookings are for same day of arrival. A special offer targeting mobile visitors is a great way to encourage same day bookings, and leverage an advantage over competitors. Hoteliers need to focus on this mobile shopping behavior to drive last minute bookings and to up-sell onsite amenities, such as spa, dining, etc. One great way hoteliers can tap into this mobile shopping behavior is to offer mobile-only “on the go” value adds (free breakfast, free wifi, extra reward points, free spa service, etc) targeting last-minute bookings through the mobile website.

Also mobile can be a great channel for generating ancillary revenues from your current guests. Hoteliers can take advantage of mobile coupons to promote the onsite restaurant, spa, and services.

Ritesh Gupta/EyeforTravel: Even as geo-location apps are enhancing their offerings with new features, it is being mentioned that their growth rate hasn't really taken off in a big way compared to last year. How should the travel industry go about such opportunities considering the current geo-social behavior or the adoption rate of such offerings?

Margaret Mastrogiacomo:

Consumer-generated content is king. As mobile becomes an integral part of the travel experience, social media campaigns will have a deeper focus on guests sharing their experiences during their stay. Social campaigns that prompt guests to share photos and video from their hotel experience and contests that prompt guests to check-in on social platforms for incentives will become more important than ever.

Ritesh Gupta/EyeforTravel: How do you think social location broadcasting and sharing is being leveraged to connect with consumers in the travel industry? What according to you are the latest trends in social location broadcasting and sharing in 2012?

Margaret Mastrogiacomo:

Social location broadcasting allows brands to reach the right audience with the right message on a local level. As travelers share photos, video, and updates in real-time, travel is inherently social. From encouraging check-ins to offering local mobile coupons and deals, brands will continue to incentivize social sharing and focus more on local engagement.

In 2012, the industry will focus on making local engagement and deals more targeted by accessing more than just a user's location. Tapping into information such as a traveler's social preferences and considering factors such as time of day will be key in reaching travelers with the right message. For instance, if a customer's social data reveals a passion for wine and it is 5pm on a Wednesday, a hotel can push its Wine Wednesday happy hour to this particular customer.

Ritesh Gupta/EyeforTravel: How can hoteliers get started with SoLoMo in 2012?

Margaret Mastrogiacomo:

In this SoLoMo age, travel brands must ensure they have the basic foundation for any successful SoLoMo strategy. To get started, travel brands must have a mobile website optimized with fresh, local content and location-based offers; accurate and optimized listings on local mobile directories; and mobile engagement via SMS and social platforms.

About the Author and HeBS Digital

Margaret Mastrogiacomo is Manager, New Media & Creative Strategy at HeBS Digital (Hospitality eBusiness Strategies), the hospitality industry's leading full-service digital marketing and direct online channel strategy firm, based in New York City (www.HeBSdigital.com).

Founded in 2001, HeBS Digital has pioneered many of the best practices in hotel Internet marketing, social and mobile marketing, and direct online channel distribution. The firm has won more than 180 prestigious industry awards for its digital marketing and website design services, including numerous Adrian Awards, Davey Awards, W3 Awards, WebAwards, Magellan Awards, Summit International Awards, Interactive Media Awards, IAC Awards, etc.

A diverse client portfolio of top-tier major hotel brands, luxury and boutique hotel brands, resorts and casinos, hotel management companies, franchisees and independents, and CVBs are benefiting from HeBS Digital's direct online channel strategy and digital marketing expertise. Contact HeBS Digital's consultants at (212) 752-8186 or success@hebsdigital.com.