

Social Media Marketing for Global Destinations in the Meetings and Conventions Industry

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Executive Summary

Although relatively new, social media has become one of the cornerstones to marketing strategy in the travel industry. It is cost-effective, has an expansive reach, and allows marketers to target specific users based on preferences. Although the leisure travel industry has been faster to adapt these technologies than the meetings and conventions industry, this trend is shifting as meeting planners have found creative ways to use social media for promoting their events.

The most commonly used social media in the travel industry include networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google+. Video and photo platforms such as YouTube and Flickr are also widely popular. Some convention bureaus are also experimenting with newer platforms such as Instagram, Vine, Pinterest, and Foursquare. Important to any social media marketing campaign are management systems and analytic tools, which can help to measure a campaign's reach and effectiveness.

In the meetings and conventions industry, social media marketing has two main purposes: first, to promote the destination to potential new clients, and second, to help meeting planners with delegate boosting. Destinations have found creative ways to utilize all social media platforms available for both content delivery and networking; this report provides myriad examples. One particular bureau, the Austin Convention & Visitors Bureau, has proven so adept at integrating social media that they now offer a free social media marketing service to their clients as a way to increase their destination's value.

When implementing social media marketing, convention bureaus should consider three key strategies: first, using social media as a simple and cost-effective way to promote the destination's brand; second, building professional networks to meeting planners and other decision makers by making connections on platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter; and lastly, using social media to provide value-added services for meeting planners to help with delegate boosting, including building special content guides or offering "social concierge" services for meeting attendees. Destinations can also leverage social media marketing as a convention service to win bids.

Although there are innumerable ways to use social media, convention bureaus should remember that success requires a clear objective and adequate time and resources. Destinations should have a clear understanding of the market as well as trends in technology so that they can find the most creative and cost-effective ways of reaching their target audiences.

Overview: Social Media's Presence in the Travel Industry

Social media's rapid ascent in popularity over the last five years has significantly changed the travel marketing industry, particularly as more and more travelers flock to the Internet to manage their travel-related activities. In fact, PhoCusWright reported that spending on online advertising has eclipsed spending on traditional advertising (print, radio, television), and that social media is now the cornerstone of marketing strategy in this industry.¹

One of the main benefits to social media is cost efficiency: travel marketers revealed that using social media reduced public relations cost by 24%.² Other benefits include the sheer volume of social media users, its viral nature, and social indexing—the ability of targeting content by a user's preferences. PhoCusWright reports that most companies in the travel industry are spending more than 25% of their marketing budget on social media.

The leisure travel industry has been much faster than the meetings and conventions industry to incorporate social media into its marketing strategy, but this trend has shifted in recent years as meeting planners have found creative ways to use social media for their events. Platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter have been critical tools to meeting planners—83% of them use LinkedIn to maintain and create new business contacts, 52% use Facebook to post information or photos after a meeting or event, and 64% use Twitter to tweet live during events.³ Planners are now also incorporating new visual social media tools such as Pinterest and Instagram into their events to showcase event photos or highlight pictures of the event city.

As the world increasingly becomes more digital, social media and mobile marketing will become new norms in the travel industry. In that regard, simply having a social media account is not enough. Instead, CVBs and meeting planners should explore creative ways of capitalizing on social media to reach their audience. The following report reviews the various social media tools currently available, explores current industry usage and best practices for CVBs, and discusses social media strategies and steps for successful implementation.

Social Media Platforms

The most commonly used social media marketing platforms in the travel industry are **Facebook**, **Twitter**, and **LinkedIn**, simply because of the sheer numbers. Facebook reports 1.1 billion monthly active users, Twitter has 200 million monthly active users, and LinkedIn has 225 million members. **Google+**, another major social network, boasts 300 million active users, although only 135 million are actively posting to Google+ pages.⁴ PhoCusWright details the percentage of active travelers who use these networks:

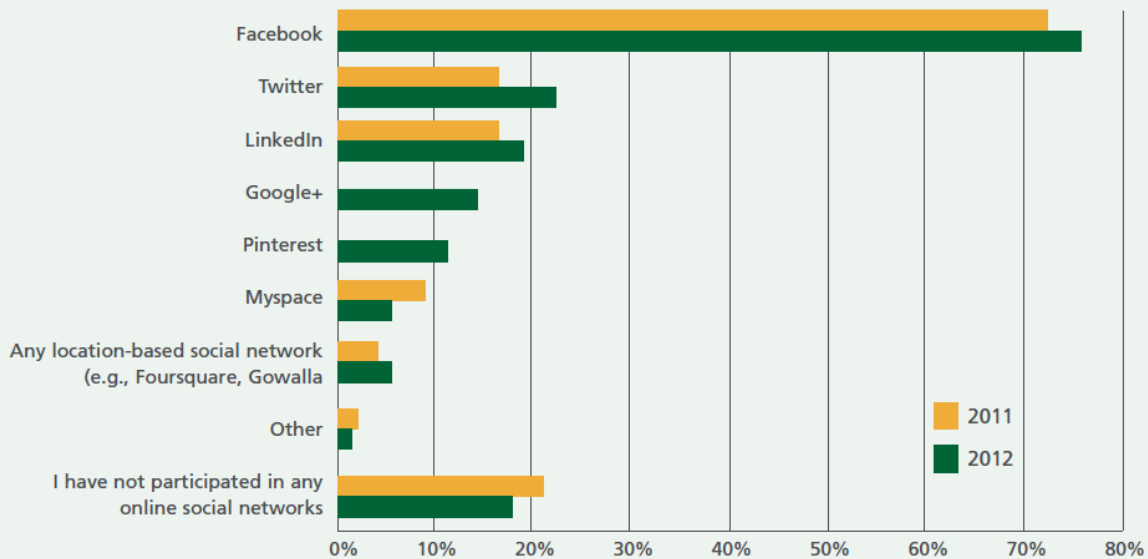
¹ PhoCusWright, "Travel Innovation & Technology Trends: 2012 & Beyond, Special Report for World Travel Market." Nov 2012.

² Eyefortravel, "Social Media and Mobile Strategies for the Travel Industry 2011." Nov 2011.

³ Meetings Net, "Exclusive Survey: Social Media Usage by Meeting Planners." Mar. 29, 2012.

⁴ Business Insider. "Suddenly, Google Plus Is Outpacing Twitter To Become The World's Second Largest Social Network." May 1, 2013.

Figure 25
Participation in Popular Online Social Networks



Question: In which of the following online social networks, if any, have you actively participated in the past 12 months?
 Base: U.S. travelers (2012 N= 2,029; 2011 N=1,932)
 Source: PhoCusWright's Traveler Technology Survey 2012

Secondary content platforms such as **YouTube** (owned by Google) and **Flickr** (owned by Yahoo!) provide social media marketers with tools to easily upload, distribute, and share video and photography. YouTube claims more than 1 billion unique visitors per month, while Flickr has 51 million registered members.

Newer platforms making waves include **Instagram**, a mobile photo and video-sharing platform; **Vine**, a mobile video-sharing platform; **Pinterest**, a visual bookmarking service; and **Foursquare**, a location-based social recommendation app, which also alerts users of specials and deals at venues in their proximity. Instagram, which now has 130 million active users and is owned by Facebook, allows for users to capture and share photos instantly—akin to a visual tweet—and tag them with captions and locations. Vine, which has 13 million users and is owned by Twitter, allows its users to take short 7-second videos to share.

Pinterest, which has reached nearly 50 million users since launching in 2010, has found a niche as an important tool for travel industry marketers, who use “pinboards” to generate visually driven content guides for users. Although Pinterest only captures 11% of active travelers, PhoCusWright reports that the platform is seeing big gains.⁵

foursquare began in 2009 as one of the first mobile apps to incorporate location data into its functionality. At 30 million users worldwide, it is one of the less popular social media platforms, but the evolution of its functionality has evolved immensely. foursquare now allows companies and organizations to build branded pages in which they can write tips, check into locations, and build lists of places that they want to share with their fans.

⁵ PhoCusWright, “Travel Technology Survey 2012.” Dec 2012.

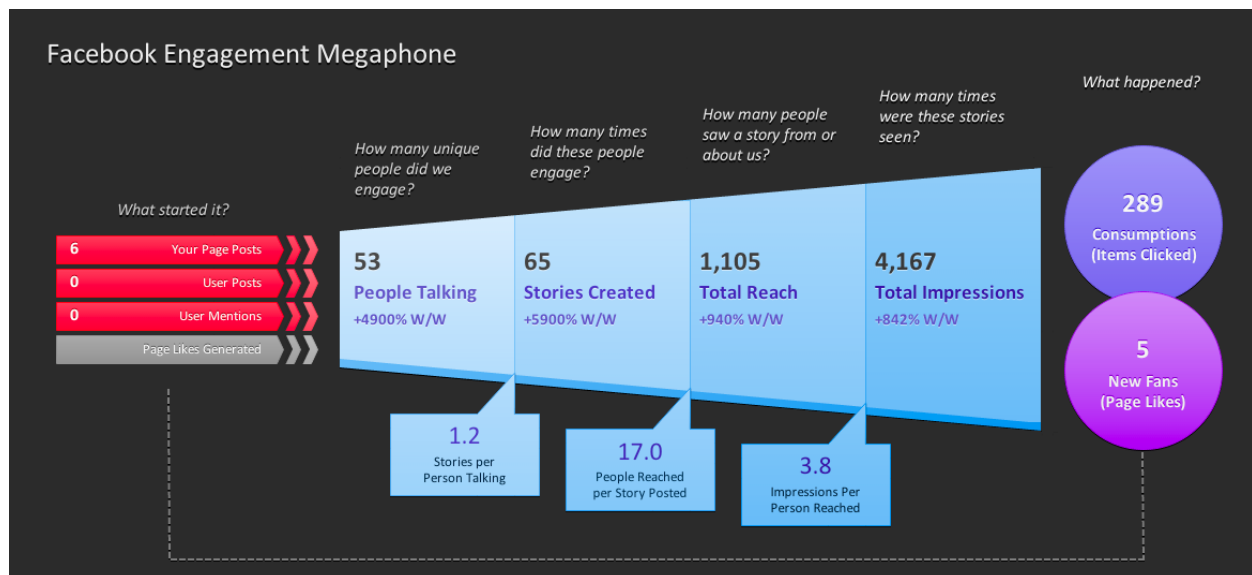
Social Media Management and Analytics

Numerous tools exist to help companies manage and analyze social media data. Many of the individual social media platforms have their own analytics programs, but for companies running a multi-platform social media marketing campaign, additional third-party tools may prove to be useful.

Hootsuite, a social media management system, allows businesses to collaboratively execute campaigns across multiple social networks from one secure, web-based dashboard. Furthermore, it helps streamline team workflow with scheduling and assignment tools and reach audiences with geo-targeting functionality.

Klout tracks influencers based on the ability of a company or user to drive action. Klout uses data from social media networks to measure “True Reach” (how many people one influences), “Amplification” (how much one influences the network), and “Network Impact” (the influence of one’s network). Companies and brands can partner with Klout to offer “Perks” to top influencers.

Platforms such as **Simply Measured** and **Radian 6** offer comprehensive metrics on a company’s social media efforts as a whole. Various analytic metrics include level of engagement (i.e. number of likes, tweets, etc.) to measure brand awareness; level of sentiment (i.e. positive vs. negative posts) to measure brand favorability or intent to purchase; and level of virality (i.e. reposts, retweets) to measure brand reach. Although these are typically paid services, some analytic platforms like Simply Measured offer free reports, such as the one featured below:



Social Media Usage in the Meetings & Convention Market

In the meetings and conventions market, usage of social media by convention bureaus and convention centers has two main purposes: first, to promote the destination to potential new clients, and second, to help meeting planners promote their events to potential attendees (known in the industry as “delegate boosting”). To achieve these goals, the majority of destinations maintain accounts on the most popular platforms—generally Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube—although many rely on the leisure side of the bureau to manage most of the social media efforts.

Destinations are now exploring various ways to leverage social media for meetings and conventions specifically. Some destinations, such as Barcelona, Berlin, and Switzerland, maintain separate Twitter accounts for their conventions market. Other CVBs, such as that of Vienna and Malaysia, have launched mobile apps specifically for planners, though app development has not become widespread due to the large initial investment required.

Although many companies maintain a LinkedIn presence, only a handful of them capitalize on the tools available via the platform. Organizations such as the Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre and Tourism Australia use their company profiles to actively broadcast business news that is targeted to professionals in the industry. This is a contrast to their respective Facebook Pages, where the updates are lighter and geared toward event-goers and travelers. Other organizations such as ExCeL London and the Abu Dhabi National Exhibitions Company (ADNEC) have used the LinkedIn group feature to maintain special networking groups to build connections with meeting and convention organizers.

Newer platforms such as Pinterest and foursquare are much less used, although convention bureaus are finding unique ways of incorporating them into their social media efforts. For example, the tourist boards of Visit Berlin and MySwitzerland have created Pinterest accounts to depict the visual vibe of a city—offering up fun and engaging pinboards on topics such as “Berlinicious” and “Swiss Vintage.” Within the location-based app foursquare, some CVBs have created accounts to pinpoint locations of interests to potential visitors, who can save these places in their “to-do” lists to access when they are actually visiting the destination. Viennainfo, for example, maintains lists such as “Classical Viennese Coffeehouses” and “Vienna’s Music Highlights,” while Visit Tuscany showcases lists such as “Medici Villas” and “Tuscan Specialties.”

In the North American meetings market, convention bureaus are finding unique ways to use social media as a service for meeting planners. For example, the Phoenix and Seattle CVBs provide a “social concierge” during conventions. Using a specially created hashtag for the conference, CVBs can tweet directly to attendees to answer questions about the destination and notify them of local events, deals, and restaurants and entertainment. The Chicago CVB now works with their convention clients to develop interactive gaming challenges with SCVNGR (pronounced “scavenger”), a mobile app in which users can visit places, complete challenges, and earn points. Visit Orlando, the CVB for one of the biggest domestic convention cities in the U.S., now offers its potential clients the services of its convention marketing executive, which works directly with planners on developing social media campaigns for their events.

Offering social media marketing as part of convention services has also given some destinations an edge over others in winning events. In its recent bid presentation for the World Congress on Disaster and Emergency Medicine, the Toronto Convention and Visitors Association included the use of Twitter as a way of exchanging information before, during, and after the meeting. Since the association was trying to increase their student delegation, Toronto's use of social media in the bid stood out, and the destination ultimately won the bid.

In overall social media strategy, one U.S. city has proven itself as one of the most forward-thinking destinations: Austin, Texas. In the next section, we detail how this small market city has become a larger-than-life convention city through innovative social media marketing.

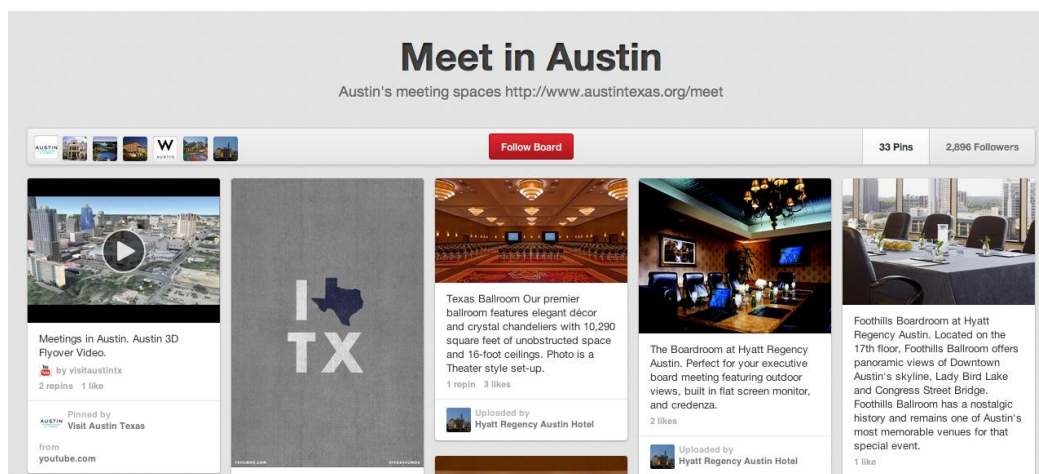
Best Practices Study: Austin, Live Music Capital of the World

Austin, Texas grew its reputation as a convention city by virtue of its highlight event, South by Southwest (SXSW), which began in the late 1980s as music festival. The festival soon has grown to encompass music, film, multimedia, tech, and eco; SXSW now attracts millions of visitors to Austin each year.

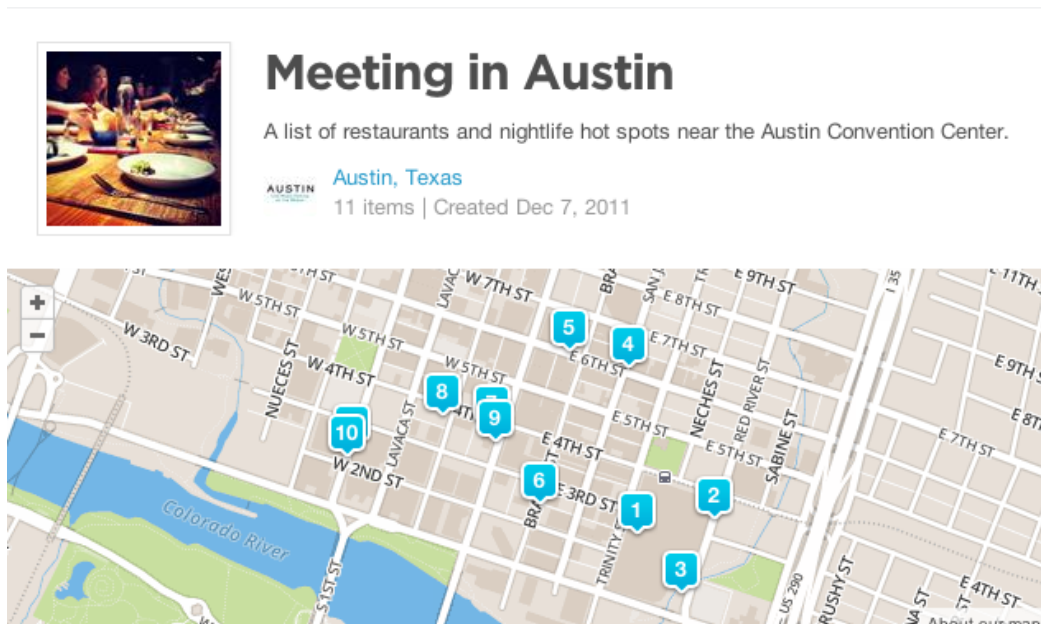
An exemplar of social media marketing success, the Austin Convention and Visitor Bureau (ACVB) maintains a well designed website that serves as a hub for both leisure and meetings market. From the site, meeting planners can access all of Austin's social media platforms—Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, Pinterest and foursquare—as well as download the official Austin Visitors Guide app. The site also features a “Social Media Lounge” that feeds all social media content into the site.

Visit Austin provides content to visitors about the city's offerings, including food, music, events, nightlife, and more. Additionally, the ACVB also curates content targeted specifically to meeting planners and attendees. For example:

- Using social bookmarking tool **Pinterest**, Visit Austin created a special pinboard called “Meet in Austin,” featuring Austin's various meeting spaces. Users can click on the various photos to learn more information about ballrooms, concert spaces, and convention centers.
(Link: <http://pinterest.com/visitaustintx/meet-in-austin/>)



- In location-based tool **foursquare**, Visit Austin created a special list called “Meeting in Austin,” which highlights restaurants and nightlife spots near the Austin Convention Center. Meeting attendees could save these lists to their foursquare accounts. While at the meeting, attendees would be able to see those suggestions on a map based on their GPS location.
(Link: <https://foursquare.com/visitaustintx/list/meeting-in-austin>)



ACVB’s expertise in social media has also allowed them to provide free social media marketing to their clients, providing even more value to their convention services. For the Biomedical Engineering Society’s (BMES’s) annual meeting, ACVB and Sparkloft Media, its social media agency, worked to build a following for BMES members and suppliers by posting updates on Facebook and Twitter about the conference. During the conference, the team uploaded content, videos, and photos from the conference using a designated hashtag. A customized map of Austin also was created for BMES Facebook followers to help attendees find shopping, entertainment and restaurants. Photos and videos were posted to the society’s Flickr and YouTube accounts.

As a result of these social marketing efforts, followers of BMES on Twitter increased by 461 percent; 76 tweets reached 6,500 attendees, suppliers and others; retweets of tweets with the conference’s hashtag reached 45,282 Twitter accounts; and the number of people who liked BMES on Facebook increased by 218 percent. The BMES Facebook page was viewed more than 1,000 times during the conference, and 12 YouTube videos were viewed more than 1,400 times.⁶

Since BMES, the ACVB has decided to offer social media services to its convention clients for free as a value-added service and are reviewing ways to offer different levels of service for different-size clients.

⁶ Small Market Meetings, “The social network.”

Strategies and Implementation

As has been illustrated in the previous section, there are innumerable ways to use social media in the meetings and conventions market, whether it's to promote a destination to potential clients or provide valuable services to assist meeting planners with delegate boosting. Below are three key strategies for social media marketing, with implementation ranging from simple and inexpensive to more complex.

Branding the Destination

When comparing cities, meeting planners will narrow down their choice destinations based on venues, lodging, and transport options. When it comes to making a final decision, however, oftentimes the brand of a city—essentially the perception that visitors have of the destination—plays an important role. Does the destination offer rich culture and history? Is it known for any business industries or universities? Is it known for its cuisine, music, art, or nature? What restaurant and nightlife options does it offer? Will visitors feel welcomed by the locals?

Social media is an easy and inexpensive way to answer these questions and build a destination's brand. Though many tourism boards run social media accounts for the leisure market, there is a lack of integration with the meetings and conventions side. Convention bureaus should capitalize on the content being generated by the leisure sector by integrating it into their own web presence—this requires little time or effort for the meetings/conventions side but provides huge value in terms of presenting a unified brand image.

Implementation:

- Include links of the social media platforms from the leisure tourism side on the meetings/conventions website so that meeting planners can easily access those links.
- Run a social media feed on the website—similar to that of Austin's "Social Media Lounge" or Vienna's "Social Media Newsroom"—to feed content from all the social networks into one location.

Building Professional Networks to Meeting Planners and Decision Makers

Convention bureaus can and should use social media platforms to network with meeting planners and key decision makers. As statistics show, 83% of meeting planners are on professional networking sites like LinkedIn, and the majority of them also use Facebook and Twitter for work-related activity. Although LinkedIn ranks relatively low for the total amount of time spent on the site, the connections made on the site tend to be of better quality because the site is specifically geared toward professionals.

Implementation:

- Use Twitter or the LinkedIn company page to broadcast professional news that is important specifically for planners—upcoming shows and exhibitions, economic incentives and grants, business and travel reports, etc.—and contrast this with casual content that is typically found on other platforms like Facebook.

- Use LinkedIn or Facebook groups to form networks of people in the industry. Some, such as ExCeL and ADNEC, have started their own groups, but convention bureaus can easily connect with many existing meeting planner groups.

Value-Added Services for Meeting Planners & Attendees

Convention bureaus can use social media to add significant value to their destination by building tools that can help meeting planners plan and market their events. As showcased in the Austin case example, social media marketing has now become a value-added service that the city can use to win conference bids. The services can be as easy as curating content specifically for meeting attendees to running social media campaigns on behalf of clients.

Implementation:

- Create special Pinterest pinboards or foursquare lists targeted specifically for convention attendees and include information on local restaurants, nightlife and events happening around their congress hotel or convention center; make such content easily available to meeting planners.
- Offer “social concierge” services for large conferences via Twitter or Facebook by posting about events and local deals happening at the moment, as well as answering questions from meeting attendees.
- Offer social media marketing as part of the convention services package by designating an executive or company to run a social media marketing efforts for the event on the meeting planner’s behalf.

This report presents a general overview of social media trends in marketing to the North American meetings and conventions industry. Convention bureaus around the world are quickly realizing social media’s utility when it comes to attracting new business and assisting meeting planners with delegate boosting—an added value that can ultimately help destinations win event bids. Though the leisure side has traditionally led social media efforts, convention bureaus must ultimately own their own social media marketing in order to best reap the benefits that these new technologies can bring.

This report offers comprehensive services to destinations seeking additional resources, research, and consulting on social media and mobile marketing for meetings and conventions.

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