

# How the travel industry can use social media to stay relevant in and beyond a crisis

Social media is a tricky world to navigate for brands at the best of times, but especially hard during COVID-19. What makes social media the powerhouse that it can be for a brand? What are the rules that brands and startups should be following? We broke it down for you by speaking to an expert.

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Maddyness spoke to Stuart Chapman, Head of Social Media at MMGY Hills Balfour, a fully integrated creative agency, specialising in PR, social media, sales, marketing and branding. Stuart has handled campaigns for Brand USA, Las Vegas and Croatia.

Travel is an industry that has been hit hard by COVID-19, but there are still ways to be buoyant with social media activity in this challenging time. Although Stuart's expertise is in travel media, these principles and ideas are highly transferable to other industries wanting to connect to their consumers with authenticity and originality.

# [Maddyness] What would you say are three main social media principles that all brands should follow?

[Stuart] It sounds obvious, but first things first – obsess about your audience. Make sure you know exactly who they are, what interests them, how they spend their time on and offline. And remember to hone in on why you're in business in the first place; what customer needs does your business/destination/product/service provide? Once you know *who* you're talking to and *why*, it lays the foundations for *how*.

Define your social media mission and objectives to align to your business goals and customer needs. Think about the role social media can play. Perhaps it's to raise brand awareness or increase traffic to your site. Maybe it's to drive new appointments or increase app downloads. Whatever it is, have a plan of action. And remember – it's useful to keep an eye on your competitors, but what's more important is to find your own voice.

Finally, don't be afraid to try new things. During lockdown we've seen a plethora of new functionality being rolled out by the likes of Facebook and Twitter to meet an increase in usage and evolving customer needs. If there's something which catches your eye that could support your objectives, give it a go. If it doesn't perform as expected, learn why and move forward.

## As we slowly and carefully emerge from lockdown and start planning to travel again, how should travel brands communicate through social media?

After three months of armchair adventures and virtual tours, there's a need to pivot from inspiration to invitation. We know consumers are actively starting to plan their next trip, so it's a good time to guide them from passive scrollers to proactive engagers. From polls to messenger bots, the in-built platform functionality can help to drive new conversations.

A large part of recovery will come through building reassurance and trust. Many consumers are keen to travel, but question what that experience will look like in this 'new normal'. The role of social here is to help alleviate these anxieties. People trust people, so user generated and influencer content can both play significant roles in showcasing, in real-time, what a destination, hotel,

or airline experience is like. Alongside this, there's still a need to share useful information to help aid decisions. It's about finding social-first ways to bring these messages to life. I'd love to see brands move away from dull text-heavy creatives, and create content which effectively communicates the key messages in a way which is fit for social.

Finally, as we enter this new normal consumers will place greater importance on community, sustainability and social impact. There's a real opportunity here for travel brands to demonstrate how travel can be a force for good. It's a really interesting direction. A collective, unified voice on social can be incredibly powerful. For example, we recently ran a campaign with the WTTC called [#TogetherInTravel](#), encouraging the travel industry to unite, share their love for travel and keep wanderlust alive. With people from over 160 different countries visiting the campaign microsite, it hit home the power of a community and that purpose-driven activity can resonate globally. That's exciting.

## On Instagram, how do you keep people engaged- is this through stories or static posts?

Both have a role to play as they offer slightly different functionality and user experience. For many, that carefully curated instagram feed is being used more of a shop window to entice potential new followers, with stories then keeping people coming back for more. Ephemeral content, which is only available for a short time period, allows brands to share real-time updates without the fear of having to make it perfect. This allows quick turnaround times and ensures an on-going drumbeat of activity to keep your brand front of mind. Who knows, one day the main focus of instagram might switch from feed to stories!

## What are your tips for growing your social media audience organically?

Find a way to add value. Be it entertainment, information or inspiration. Ask yourself why people will actually want to follow and engage with your brand and what will keep them coming back. Find your own voice in the process – imitating means you're not standing out. Finally, don't just chase the numbers. Sure, they can be used as helpful indicators, but they're not the reason you're using social media.

# What is the benefit, if any, in engaging on other brands profiles – creating conversations on their pages?

If there's a purpose, or an organic natural opportunity to collaborate or join a conversation – it can be a great way to align with new audiences and elevate your brand voice. Just don't plan a conversation on Twitter... users will see straight through it. Be authentic, timely and relevant.

# In the current climate, do words or images have a greater resonance?

Both have their place, so it's not an either or. It depends on the message you're trying to share. The most important question is what medium works best to share the message/story/narrative with the most impact.

*Stuart Chapman is Head of Social Media at MMGY Hills Balfour, a fully integrated creative agency, specialising in PR, social media, sales, marketing and branding.*

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Article by CLEO MCGEE