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### **Six Ways to Integrate Social Media**

*By Eric Blanc, President, Association for Convention Operations Management*

There's no getting around it—social media is here to stay. The question is: How can our industry use these powerful new tools to achieve our communications and marketing goals?

Perhaps Einstein, in his infinite wisdom, had the answer—long before anyone put the words “social” and “media” together. Imagination, he said, is more important than knowledge. In the online age, this concept means that people who know how to use social media creatively are destined to surge ahead of those who only have knowledge of the tools.

Keeping that in mind, here are six innovative ways to make social media work for you.

#### **1) Open the Facebook floodgates.**

Cory Chambers is director of sales and marketing for the new 1,005-room JW Marriott hotel in Indianapolis, which is also the largest JW Marriott in the world ([jwindy.com](#)). Chambers' challenge was to create buzz for this striking 34-story blue glass hotel that anchors four Marriott hotels at the city's convention center. And that's where his clever Facebook gamble paid off—an online photo contest centered on the new hotel, with photos submitted and voted on by the public.

“We have this fantastically beautiful building,” he says of the majestically curved structure with about 7,300 shimmering windows. By asking people to upload their visions of the building, he accomplished all three of his goals: to increase Facebook's fan base; generate “cool pictures that we might be able to use,” and heighten awareness of the new hotel.

In less than a month—after almost a year of low-key results through traditional advertising and PR—the contest opened the proverbial floodgates. Facebook fans doubled, adding thousands of potential visitors who were now enthusiastically spreading the word about the hotel.

The photos included everything from a vibrant wide angle shot of the building to a nighttime shot saturated with reds and deep blues to one of Chambers' favorites—a young birthday boy wearing a JW Marriott construction helmet, goggles and vest with the convention center and hotel in the background.

## **2) Podcast with pride.**

The Indianapolis Convention & Visitors Association has been broadcasting “Doing Indy” podcasts (short videos about the city) every week since 2006 ([visitindy.com](http://visitindy.com)). The bureau was the first in the country to launch podcasts, with some devoted exclusively to meeting planners, says Bob Desautels, CMP, senior manager of convention services.

About 25,000 people signed up for the podcasts through iTunes, and are notified whenever a new video is ready. The podcasts, also on YouTube, have upgraded Indianapolis' image, says Chris Gahl, association spokesperson, adding that although many in the hospitality industry are suffering, tourism in Indianapolis has grown approximately five percent the past few years.

The visitors' association, meanwhile, added around 52,000 Facebook fans its first year, primarily due to giveaways and gift certificates. “We're proud of that,” says Gahl, noting that the site attracted many meeting planners. The planners, in turn, forward information about the giveaways to potential conference attendees, urging them to become Facebook fans so they're eligible for the drawings.

Also in its social media arsenal, the bureau pays writers to post 200-300 word articles about happenings in the city “with snappy copy filled with hyperlinks.” These posts, he says, are viewed as very credible because most are written by journalists and professional bloggers. The blog also features recent tweets from the center's Twitter site.

## **3) Talk the talk with Twitter.**

When the Louisville Convention & Visitors Bureau entered the social media realm about three years ago, it started on Twitter, not Facebook. “It was the newest thing out,” says Gathan Borden, marketing manager, adding that Twitter has been very successful in attracting visitors.

The bureau's newest focus is popularizing the “Bourbon Trail” of local distilleries so it may someday be as famous as California's Napa Valley ([gotolouisville.com](http://gotolouisville.com)). Conventioneers often take a day to see one of eight distilleries in the area, says Borden, noting that in a recent survey, 40 percent of people with Bourbon Trail passports were conventioneers. (The passport is a leather bound booklet that earns a prize when stamped by nine restaurants on the “Urban Bourbon Trail.”)

The visitors' center also uses Twitter to attract meeting planners at conventions, luring them via smart phones with promises of free bourbon at the booth. Twitter sends a message that “Louisville is a cool, happening city, and we're technologically savvy,” says Borden.

Zack Davis, the bureau's convention services manager, echoes his sentiments, saying that although Facebook is good for a slow buildup, only Twitter can give real-time updates on prizes, drawings and other special offers at conventions. “When you're on-site, it's definitely a Twitter world,” he says.

## **4) Cross promote – relentlessly.**

The Albuquerque Convention & Visitors Bureau has been involved with social media for about a year and a half but it already has more than 51,000 Facebook fans and is very active on Twitter, YouTube and Flickr.

“Each social media channel that we're active on right now serves a different purpose,” says Tania Armenta, vice president of marketing communications and tourism. “There is some overlap but we've found the unique aspects of each channel and how we can best use those.”

Albuquerque's Facebook page drives people to YouTube videos about the city as well as the Web site ([itsatrip.org](http://itsatrip.org)). On the Web site, convention delegates can pursue special interests during their free time, communicating with experts in 10 categories, including ballooning, Hispanic heritage, Native American culture and outdoor recreation.

#### **5) Create convention microsites.**

Albuquerque's convention bureau takes communications a step further by designing microsites (small, personalized Web sites) for groups that use at least 500 hotel rooms on a peak night. Convention delegates can link to the microsites from their conference registration page and get updates on speakers, exhibitors and attendees, along with links to Albuquerque's Web site. There, meeting professionals can ask questions 24/7 or even line up temporary convention help through a special media planners' toolkit. “They love it,” says Denise Suttle, CMP, assistant director of convention services. “They can get so much more done.”

#### **6) Collaborate with industry professionals.**

People in our industry also share information—even with competitors—on sites such as LinkedIn group pages. Melissa Laskowsky, CMP, event services manager at Georgia Mountains Center ([gainesville.org](http://gainesville.org)), is also chair of continuing education for the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM). ACOM's LinkedIn page is primarily for discussions of industry issues and trends. “We work for rival companies in rival cities,” she says, “but we help each other out.”

Laskowsky has been quite successful in raising awareness about ACOM's monthly continuing education seminars through Twitter and Facebook. The programs fill up earlier, she says, while also attracting potential ACOM members.

Back on her home turf in Georgia, Laskowsky uses social media to fill events at large arenas without having to send press releases to journalists. Social media, she says, “is really just a way to make everyone aware, especially the newer workforce coming in ... For them, it's like breathing. They just really communicate differently.”

The bottom line: Regardless of where you may be in your career, everyone in our industry needs to use social media wisely so we can take full advantage of all it has to offer.

#### **Eric Blanc, CMP**

Eric Blanc is the President of the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM) and is a tenured professional with over 18 years of experience in the hospitality industry. He is the Director of Sales and Marketing for the Tampa Convention Center in Tampa, Florida after serving as a National Sales Manager with the Freeman Companies, based in Orlando, Florida. Prior to his time at the Freeman Companies, Eric served as Senior Convention Services Manager at the Tampa Convention Center and Tropicana Field (formerly known as the Florida Suncoast Dome) in St. Petersburg, Florida. Eric is actively involved in the hospitality industry and is a member of NCBMP (National Coalition of Black Meeting Planners) and PCMA (Professional Convention Management Association). For more information on ACOM, call (609) 799-3712, email [info@acomonline.org](mailto:info@acomonline.org), or visit the ACOM website at [www.acomonline.org](http://www.acomonline.org).

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