

## **When it Comes to Building an Online Travel Brand, Delivering a Compelling “Show and Tell” of the Travel Experience is Paramount**

*By Paolo Boni*

For travel professionals responsible for online marketing, one word defines what is meant by “compelling content” – EXPERIENCE. This was the recurring theme heard loud and clear at a session in which I participated at TIA’s TravelCom in New York last month.

The session, “Using Compelling Content to Build Your Online Brand,” involved several industry experts, including moderator Gary Sain of Yesawich, Pepperdine, Brown and Russell (YPBR), Jeff DeKorte of AOL Travel, Paul Peddrick, of TIG Global, Scott Ribeiro of Fontainebleau Resorts, and myself, Paolo Boni of VFM Interactive.

The situation is this: broadband has reached mainstream levels with more than 60 percent U.S. household utilization that is transforming how consumers interact online. It was only a few short years ago that flash and rich media were avoided to simplify the shopping path. Today, consumers are hungry for more interactive exchanges online that “show and tell” the “real-life” elements of the travel experience. This is supported by studies show that people retain 20 percent of the information they hear and only 10 percent of the information they read – but 50 percent of the information they see *and* hear.

With active participation from the standing-room audience of more than 400, the 45-minute session provided lively discussion – and some healthy debate. What surfaced were five basic principles that can help travel marketers strengthen their brand online today while better preparing them for the internet-driven tomorrow.

### **#1 – Convey the Experience without Compromising the Purchase Path**

According to YPBR’s annual Travel Monitor, a company’s website is one of the leading sources for travel planning. The panelists all agreed that regardless of the type of travel business, the travel experience actually begins at a company’s website and interactive content like rich media help bring this experience to life.

In fact, AOL Travel recently changed its business model based on the power of the Web.

“We recognize the Web is not only a means for brand building but it is also a mechanism that can hurt a brand since bad news and experiences tend to travel faster than good ones,” said AOL’s DeKorte . “AOL has specifically developed capabilities for rich media, engaging content and entertainment experiences that require broadband to gather and build an audience.”

While rich media such as video and tours create the essence of the experience, e-commerce professionals rightfully want to protect a straight-forward booking process. Scott Ribeiro with Fontainebleu Resorts reports 80 percent of his site’s visitors book immediately so he doesn’t want to disrupt the purchase path with a lot of extraneous media. The solution? Ribeiro provides on-demand access to rich media the other 20 percent of Fontainebleu’s visitors can control.

### **#2 -- Ensure the Experience is Consistent Across All Consumer Touch Points**

After enriching the online experience on one’s own website, the panelists unanimously agreed that the next critical success factor is ensuring the brand is represented consistently across all touch points where consumers shop – from traditional online travel agencies to portals, travel research and destination sites, to meta-search and major search engines, etc.

TIG’s Peddrick likens consumers’ multi-source shopping behavior to, “squeezing cantaloupes,” which means the “show and tell” experience a company creates on its own site must be

replicated in every third-party outlet to avoid brand dilution and commoditization and drive purchases.

While managing uniformity across distribution points can seem daunting, companies like VFM Interactive help travel brands simplify this process by creating company-approved profiles with photos and rich media— like tours and videos -- that are simultaneously updated and distributed to more than 20,000 authorized third-party sources, including Yahoo!, Trip Advisor, Travelocity and Orbitz, to name just a few.

### **#3 -- Expand the Branded Experience with Non-Core Content and Functionality**

Extending online services beyond a brand's core offering goes a long way to making the brand more relevant and showcasing the entire travel experience. Gary Sain reported YPBR's research shows the value of additional features such as customer reviews, destination information and maps, hotel recommendations and the ability to book local activities are among preferred website features frequently cited by consumers.

TIG Global's Peddrick said many of TIG's hospitality clients experience increased website utilization and longer interactions after adding features such as local destination guides or user-generated content, like reviews and weblogs.

A relatively easy way to expand content is to develop closer working relationships between local Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) and suppliers to cross market services. Another is to tap into the host of vendors offering easy and cost-effective "plug and play" interfaces to seamlessly integrate specialized information such as reviews, destination activities, and map features into any travel site.

### **#4 -- Optimize Your Site for Search**

According to Gary Sain of YPBR, if your company is trying to balance limited resources between your website and search engine marketing strategies, you will be best served by investing in the company site first since everything else you do online is trying to direct consumers there.

As companies succeed in creating more enriching experiences online, there are simple resources that help optimize the site, content, destination and pages for web crawling to deliver higher natural search results on search engines and other third-party sites.

AOL offered an example to an audience member about how AOL has recently opened its Destination Guides to DMO websites to provide greater destination content for AOL users, which in turn provides web links and additional traffic to DMO sites. TIG and VFM routinely help their travel clients improve site performance as well as distribution effectiveness.

### **#5 – Embrace Technology... The Future is Here**

When asked to describe predictions for the online travel landscape in five years, panelists used descriptors like "live experience," "interactive," "on-demand," and "fully integrated."

Whether short-segment videos, user-controlled tours, GPS mapping, PDA configuration or mobile-enabled payment, the changing landscape of technology and increased global penetration of broadband will continue to change how travelers shop, compare and purchase travel and related activities online.

For example, YPBR reports only two in 10 travelers today are seeking PDA integration, yet VFM is already developing a PDA integration tool that will allow travel companies to participate in growth here through our media production, management and distribution services.

As travel companies define and differentiate their brand online, marketers must think holistically and ensure their online offering is effectively conveying the entire consumer travel experience.

This ultimately requires more compelling and rich content beyond just the core brand and company website to penetrate all distribution sources.

The TravelCom panelists agreed the future is really now and by developing your travel company's technology platform and rich content today for the trends of tomorrow, you will ensure your brand is well positioned – and more competitive -- in the future.

For more information related to the recent TravelCom panel, *Using Compelling Content to Build Your Online Brand*, contact any of the participating companies below.

- Yesawich, Peppardine, Brown and Russell: [info@ypbr.com](mailto:info@ypbr.com)
- VFM Interactive: [info@vfmii.com](mailto:info@vfmii.com)
- AOL Travel: [travel.aol.com](http://travel.aol.com)
- TIG Global: [info@tigglobal.com](mailto:info@tigglobal.com)
- Fontainebleau Resorts: [www.fontainebleau.com](http://www.fontainebleau.com)

*Paolo Boni is president and CEO of VFM Interactive*