

Who is advising your potential visitors?

LAWRENCE SMITH offers practical advice on how you can use TripAdvisor to your advantage.

IN the not too distant past, travellers sought inspiration and advice on potential travel destinations from a variety of sources. Research suggests, however, that the internet is now the primary research tool for the majority of travellers, displacing traditional sources such as brochures and magazines.

The internet itself also presents a variety of sources for travellers to gather information from, including official country sites, regional tourism sites, commercial travel portals, and of course the individual businesses' websites.

While these sites are still all-important in the process, especially for making the purchase online, many travellers are now basing their travel decisions on a relatively new breed of websites. These are sites where real travellers are writing reviews, or posting photos or videos about their real experiences.

These sites have become incredibly

popular, for the simple reason that we trust other travellers more than we trust official sites that may have a "marketing spin".

These are real travellers sharing their real experiences online. It's logical that other people are going to seek out and trust this information.

Many terms are used for this sort of content and the sites it features on, including user generated content (UGC), social networking, community sites, blogging etc. Some of the sites where this content is posted include www.youtube.com (video), www.flickr.com (photos), numerous personal blogs and literally thousands of other sites that people are using to connect with each other via the internet. The granddaddy of these sites in terms of travel is www.tripadvisor.com.

TripAdvisor, these days, is owned by Expedia, the world's leading online travel company, and boasts over 15 million


traveller reviews with a staggering 22 million people planning a trip on the site in any given week. One of the core functions TripAdvisor provides is the ability for users to say good or bad things about places they have visited and products they have experienced.

This feedback forms the basis for rating how good your business is and every day, millions of people base and change their purchase decision on this information.

If it doesn't already, TripAdvisor is likely to play an increasingly important part in your business. Here are a few tips on how to make TripAdvisor work for you and your business:

- See if your business is already profiled – if so, go to the "Owners Page" (near the bottom) and check out the help section.
- Add a description of your business, including photos and video to your page – it's free.
- Sign up to get notified of any new reviews of your business - it's also free.
- If you do get a negative review, respond to it! Everyone has a bad day at times so you need to engage with the person who thinks poorly of you and understand why. If you deal with it well, the future potential damage of the complaint will be mitigated. After all, the way in which you deal with it stays there for all to see.
- Encourage your happy clients to post positive reviews on the site – think creatively how you can do that.

Social media (or whatever you want to call it) is here to stay, and it can have a significant impact on how visitors perceive your business, based on other people's opinions.

Embrace it, encourage it, and be the very best you can be. Every visitor is a potential media outlet and their positive reviews and comments are simply the best marketing tool you have! 

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