

Practice papers

Using social media to improve customer engagement and promote products and services

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was promoted to senior vice president in 2008 and manages and directs all airport marketing and communication programmes at Akron-Canton Airport including: air service development, branding, advertising, media relations, social media and internal and external communications. Kristie is often invited to speak at local, regional and national conferences and forums about airport marketing, branding and social media. Kristie authors 'It's a Trip', a popular airport blog, and can be found on Twitter at @CAK Kristie. She joined the airport staff in 1996 as director of marketing. During her career at the airport, passenger levels have tripled, and the airport has won numerous awards including these from ACI-NA's Excellence in Airport Marketing Awards: 1st place brand campaign (2014) and 1st place in the category Social Media Initiative (2013). In addition to her airport duties, Kristie serves on the following boards: Leadership Akron, The Development Finance Authority and the Marketing Leadership Roundtable. She was also honoured as one of the top 100 Women in Ohio Aviation by the International Women's Air and Space Museum in 2009.

Abstract

Airports across the globe are using social media to engage customers, promote their airline partners and enhance concession revenue. A successful social media strategy is most often built on a solid brand foundation — one that clearly articulates the airport's strategic differentiators and value to travellers. The symbiotic relationship between airline and airport is enhanced by using social media as part of a comprehensive cooperative marketing plan. It can be used to announce new routes or destinations, help to defray the risk to the airline and to ensure the success of the new service to a community. Plus, smart partnerships between airports and their concession partners can increase per-passenger spending while travellers are in the airport. Several airports are either informally or formally partnering with the concession partners in this way.

Keywords

airport, social media, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, customer engagement, airline partnerships

INTRODUCTION

Before social media, there were very few ways for an airport to interact or to be in a relationship with its customers. Airlines and/or travel agents owned that space, largely by either directly or indirectly arranging the traveller's airline ticket purchase. What's more, airlines continue to build powerful relationships with (airport) customers by offering frequent flier programmes in which travellers can earn perks and miles for free travel

or other incentives. Airports, however, have historically been cut out of these important relationships. Airports are, by their nature, public infrastructure buildings and pavement. Most are well maintained and feature ever-improving customer amenities like shops, free WiFi and branded food concepts. But airports that break out of the 'infrastructure mode' and embrace a transparent, authentic engagement strategy have an edge over those that do not.

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Social media has allowed airports, for the first time, to directly interact with customers on an ongoing basis. When Akron–Canton Airport (CAK) began using social media in 2007, our intended audience were tech-savvy younger travellers. Social media has evolved significantly in the seven years since we first experimented with platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Now our audience mirrors our more traditional media profile — adult, 25–54, educated, US\$60,000+ household income. But, unlike traditional media which is a one-way conversation, social media is a two-way conversation. It is a conversation in which travellers can actually get to know the airport they are using. Airports can cultivate a personality and reflect values in a way that simply wasn't possible prior to social media. Bottom line, social media has fundamentally shifted the way airports can communicate with their customers, from a linear model¹ to an interactional model.²

The traveller experience and even the physical structure(s) can be improved by engaging with travellers and gaining their feedback, which is exciting. Plus, customer engagement can also drive loyalty and create a bond between the airport and the traveller. Some airports take this even further by partnering with their airlines and other tenants to drive business metrics like additional airline ticket purchases and improved concession revenue.

Social media is here to stay. The Pew Research Institute reported that, as of January 2014, 74 per cent of online adults are actively engaged on social networking sites.³ More than one billion people worldwide share personal information on Facebook alone. Other social platforms, including but not limited to Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest, LinkedIn and Vine, are rapidly gaining popularity. Other platforms will continue to emerge as people become more connected with each other. Research by

TripAdvisor also shows that the number of travellers using smartphones has exploded. In 2014, 85 per cent of American travellers reported using smartphones before, during and after their travels.⁴ This allows 'social-savvy' airports to engage with travellers before, during and after their flights.

AIRPORTS THAT BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH CUSTOMERS USING SOCIAL MEDIA HAVE AN EDGE

The mere idea of being in a relationship with customers is new to most airports. Indeed, marketing and branding in general at airports is a relatively new phenomenon. A couple of key dynamics have driven the increase in airports that would consider themselves to be marketing organisations.

First, the evolution of airline ticket distribution away from travel agencies to web-based bookings (online travel agencies and the airlines themselves) has added transparency to the air travel purchase process. Now, travellers can decide for themselves which airline/airport to use. In densely populated regions of the United States, customers often have multiple airport options. Airports that offer greater engagement opportunities, competitive fares and a good airport experience will have an edge over others that simply hope that customers will find them. Granted, airports closer to a majority of the customer base will have an advantage, but if your airport isn't one of the lucky few dominant airports, then a well-conceived social media programme could help drive additional customer loyalty and air service success, and aid the competitiveness (success) of the airport within the region.

Secondly, airlines over time have reduced the size and scope of their sales departments. Largely, airline sales departments are now focused on the travel

patterns of major corporations as they drive premium revenue. Airports are increasingly filling the sales and marketing void created by airline reductions in these departments. According to the MRI Doublebase, most airline ticket purchases, however, are made by leisure/vacation customers. Airports need to appeal to all types of customers in order to achieve growth in a volatile, consolidated airline industry. Using social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, airports can delight, inform and interact with customers; airports can build relationships and promote key initiatives.

It is important to note that social media isn't a comprehensive or complete marketing strategy, but rather a powerful tool to extend an airport's brand and promote key services. It is not often a successful strategy on its own. Airports that are already savvy marketing organisations with key messages, core values and vital assets (website, video, photographs and other branding channels) already defined, are more successful at using and scaling their social media than those that are starting from scratch.

At Akron-Canton Airport (CAK), our brand position is based on offering great airfares (driven by the airlines that serve CAK) and an exceptional airport experience. Price + experience = a better way to go®. We have established our core values which include: family, value, respect, simplicity. Our social media strategy is rooted in these core values and our brand identity. CAK is currently participating in these social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Google+, LinkedIn, Vine, Pinterest and FourSquare/Swarm.

Content strategy

Using brand and culture cues to write engaging, creative copy and finding images and video to really connect with our

'friends', we drive customers to our website and to partner websites for results. A strong content strategy will help airports stay organised and keep messages fresh, relevant and authentic. Content strategy includes but is not limited to content calendars, events, milestones and brand guidelines. Content strategy for each social engagement platform requires a unique but complementary strategy. Ideas from each platform can be shared but should be served up in an appropriate fashion for the respective audience. For example, Twitter is limited to 140 total characters including links and photos, whereas posts on Facebook and Instagram can reflect a deeper story. Each platform has a unique audience and structure, so thoughtfully considering each before posting will facilitate a unified brand voice with your targeted audiences. Content from one social platform can easily be cross-utilised on others. For example, photos or short videos posted on Instagram can be shared on Facebook and Twitter (using a photo credit). Some of the most beautiful images of airports, airlines, travellers and other related content are created by others. Airport marketers/communicators often can effectively use those images to help tell the airport's unique brand story because the content is authentically generated by the customers or partners themselves.

Measuring social media

Airports can also create/identify performance metrics based on click-throughs and conversions. There are other engagement metrics built into social media platforms like Insights on Facebook, for example. Using Insights, social media campaigns can be focused on target market segments (destination, business, leisure, social and geographical, etc.), allowing for more effective engagement. Plus, *posts that are based on the consumer's interests*

rather than on the top-down marketing messages and one-way communications of yesteryear help drive conversion and engagement. Gauging customer responses to posts — likes, comments and shares — can help airports measure the effectiveness of their social media/engagement strategy.

SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS HELP PROMOTE AIRLINE SERVICE

One very important way airports can use social media is to promote new or existing airline service. Air service is the lifeblood of all airports. Commercial airports without airline service have significantly less value to their communities, can require public subsidies and generate fewer jobs and less overall economic impact. Plus, airlines are ever more appreciative and expectant that airports will partner with them to support new routes, frequency or service. Airports that offer incentives, like promotional and marketing support, help mitigate the risk to the airline of commencing new service. Airlines take a significant financial risk when offering new flights, especially if there is no historical data to support the case. Airports like CAK that offer social media as part of their promotional air service incentive package have a way to engage with potential new customers about the flights. There are several benefits to adding Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to help launch an airport's new air service.

First, airports can inform their communities about a new flight or airline in a very visual, very enjoyable way, using photos, contests, links and videos. Social posts should be written with the consumers' interest and perspective as the main focus. This approach personalises the experience for the consumer, helping the airport's key message (in this case new air service) to cut through the clutter of literally thousands of commercial messages coming their way every day.

Secondly, airports can help new air service succeed by using social media to drive click-throughs to the airline's website. Links are easily shared on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Pinterest. The links can be shared in a lot of enjoyable and interesting ways to drive higher click-through rates and ultimately generate more bookings for the flights. Many airports use contests to promote a new route, spur early bookings and build awareness about the new service. For example, when Southwest kept CAK on their route map and added new flights, we used Facebook and Twitter to connect the airport/airline with our customers, to promote a contest and generate clicks to Southwest.com. This was especially important since Southwest only offers a single-source booking option at Southwest.com. They do not display content on online travel agencies like Expedia, Travelocity, Orbitz, CheapTickets or Kayak, so educating the community about Southwest.com was/is especially important. Airport officials also wanted to welcome Southwest to the community in a big way. Fun and engaging campaign elements included:

1. *An inaugural flight countdown.* To personalise the excitement, CAK featured photos of employees on Facebook and Twitter, beginning 25 days before the inaugural flight. Excited employees proudly displayed the daily countdown number near aircraft, with Southwest signage and wearing Southwest swag (Figure 1).
2. *An online contest 'Party with Southwest & WIN'.* Ten super fans had the chance to attend our Super Fan Party on the Tarmac. One of them walked away with two tickets on Southwest Airlines® and the contest was frequently promoted on CAK social channels (Figure 2).



Figure 1 Inaugural flight countdown

The banner features the Akron-Canton Airport logo and the slogan 'a better way to go.' Navigation links include 'arrivals & departures', 'routes & airlines', 'the airport', 'parking', 'ground transportation', and 'FAQs'. A flight search bar is set to 'book my flight to' with a dropdown menu, the date '12/11/2014', and 'Morning' selected. A 'fun stuff' link is visible on the right. The main section is titled 'Party with Southwest & WIN!' and contains the following text:

Do you have what it takes to be a CAK and Southwest Airlines Super Fan?

Then enter to win one of 10 invites to our exclusive tarmac party celebrating Southwest's first touchdown at Akron-Canton Airport. Of those 10 lucky winners, one grand prize winner will be chosen to win two roundtrip tickets anywhere Southwest flies in the continental U.S.!

Not only is there a chance for a great prize, but our Super Fan party will have food, music, fun, and lots of swag from CAK and Southwest. Winners can bring a guest and watch as the first Southwest Airlines airplane lands at CAK! Winners must be present at our party to be eligible for the Grand Prize airline ticket giveaway. A winner will be selected randomly from the 10 winners, at the tarmac party.

So get ready for our Super Fan party on August 11, 2012. Party starts at 2 pm. Ten party invite winners will be contacted August 7, 2012.

Let the excitement begin!

Southwest Airlines lands at CAK on August 12, 2012! Offering nonstop, daily flights to Chicago Midway and Denver, you will LUV their big comfy jets and low fares.

Figure 2 'Party with Southwest and WIN!'

3. *Super Social Super Fan party on the tarmac*
 - Real-time filming, tweeting and Facebooking of the first Southwest flight landing at CAK. Party-goers got an up-close view of the Boeing 737 as it taxied to the party zone.
 - A social sharing photo-booth. The zany photos captured the momen-

tous occasion, CAK style. Guests tagged and shared the pics, extending our reach into their social networks too.

- Over the muffin top pie eating contest. The video and photos posted to our social networks were unanimously 'liked' (Figure 3).

Facebook Post 1: Akron-Canton Airport (CAK) shared Akron-Canton Airport (CAK)'s album August 11, 2012
 CAK-Southwest Super Fans! Our photobooth photos from today's tarmac party are here: <http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10151025432851033.430669.84507856032&type=3>

Facebook Post 2: Akron-Canton Airport (CAK) August 12, 2012
 Southwest Super Fan Pie Eating Contest (11 photos)
 What better way to welcome Southwest to CAK than to throw a pie eating contest on our tarmac?

Twitter Post 1: Akron-Canton Airport @CAKairport · 11 Aug 2012
 Our Super Fan Party starts now! @SouthwestAir first flight lands at CAK at 2:30! #CAKSWA

Twitter Post 2: Akron-Canton Airport @CAKairport · 12 Aug 2012
 The inaugural passenger flight departing from CAK. Thanks to @JonathonTX for capturing this. #CAKSWA youtube.com/watch?v=qYb6g...

Twitter Post 3: Akron-Canton Airport @CAKairport · 12 Aug 2012
 More photos from Super Fan party and inaugural @SouthwestAir flight landing are here: facebook.com/media/set/?set... #CAKSWA

Twitter Post 4: Akron-Canton Airport @CAKairport · 12 Aug 2012
 Inaugural @SouthwestAir flight CAK landing from inside the airplane. A whole different view! youtube.com/watch?v=iuMcSw... from @JonathonTX #CAKSWA

Twitter Post 5: Akron-Canton Airport @CAKairport · 12 Aug 2012
 Southwest Airlines lands at Akron-Canton Airport - News - Ohio: ohio.com/news/southwest... #CAKSWA

Figure 3 Super social fan party on the tarmac

The strong visual content that supported the contest, event and countdown was delivered in an authentic CAK voice. Cool photos and videos captured the excitement felt by the airline and the community. Seizing and sharing that emotive feel with our fans increased their interest in the new Southwest service. We also shared introductory flight deals to spur early bookings. The campaign made a big impression on Southwest too, helping to build a strong relationship between the airport and our newest carrier.

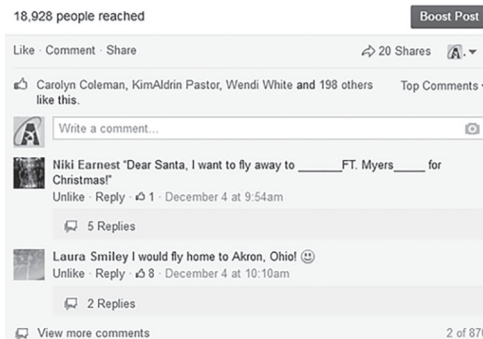


Figure 4 'Dear Santa, I want to fly away to ...' (Facebook)

Lastly, airports can delight their customers while promoting new airline service by simply creating interesting, engaging posts. For example, CAK recently ran a single-day contest on its Facebook page (Figure 4) asking fans where they would want to go most, if Santa delivered them a US\$100 Southwest gift card. It was structured as a fill-in-the blank CAKlib (modelled after MadLibs) that motivated fans to dream about their favourite destination and share it with the airport and other CAK fans. CAK also used Twitter to cross-promote the social contest to reach more people who may not follow the airport on Facebook (Figure 5). The one-day contest/post organically generated 870 comments, and reached close to 19,000 impressions, 201 likes and 20 shares.⁵

INCREASING CONCESSION REVENUE

Generating non-aviation revenue is an important goal at most commercial airports. Non-aviation revenue boosts overall airport revenue and supplements airline



Figure 5 'Dear Santa, I want to fly away to ...' (cross-promotion on Twitter)

fees such as leased space, landing fees and common use charges. Concession partners add to the overall customer experience at airports around the globe. Whether the airport offers branded concepts, local favourites or geographically relevant merchandise (like local university gear or items from a popular local attraction), concession offerings drive revenue and experience making them ideal partners to engage more deeply with customers. Airports of all passenger levels can partner with their concession tenants. The scale and complexity of the promotion can grow and require much more planning, however, at large hub airports with multiple terminals with multiple concession tenants. Airports that would like to experiment with promotions or special retail offers may want to consider finding a single partner and limiting the partnership to a shorter time frame as more of a beta test. Coupons offering an extra discount (10 per cent, for example) is an effective way to drive traffic to a retail store.

Atlanta International, for example, offers(ed) special discounts on retail purchases, if a consumer scanned a QR code featured on an airport backlit wall advertisement. This type of promotion brings attention to the retail outlet or featured product and can stimulate demand for the brand/product, in turn increasing sales. Additional sales drive up profits for the retailer and added revenue for the airport (if its lease agreements are structured as a percentage of sales).

Dallas-Ft Worth International Airport's (DFW) 'Check-in and check out the new Terminal A' promotion is another excellent example of using social media to drive concession revenue. To celebrate the opening of the Airport's new Terminal A, DFW partnered with American Airlines® and Einstein

Bros.® to entice travellers to 'check-in' at Terminal A on Foursquare. The airport and its partners offered 15 per cent off any purchase at Einstein Bros. for those who checked in. During the 18-week promotion, the offer had 2,095 views and 2,083 unlocks – which translates to a 99.5 per cent redemption rate.

Akron-Canton Airport has also partnered with concession partner MSE to drive awareness and increase revenue. In 2011 the airport and MSE opened a new, larger food court. To celebrate the grand opening, CAK mounted a Fan versus Food Challenge to highlight the freshly prepared food offerings. The airport posted a video of the event on YouTube and posted pictures on Facebook and Twitter. CAK also promotes popular brands like Cinnabon® and Great Lakes Brewing Company's Christmas Ale by snapping vivid, mouth-watering photographs of the items and posting them to various social networks. By promoting dining and product offerings, airports can increase awareness about the airport's concessions and drive increased sales and revenue.

SUMMARY

Consumers interact with brands and organisations they like most thanks to social media platforms including but not limited to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. Airports are no exception. Many airports understand the value of customer engagement and have active social media programmes. They truly are the perfect facilitator for such conversations. Airports that are not branding their 'place' and getting to know their customers better will be at a competitive disadvantage compared to those who are fully invested in their social strategy.

Engaging with customers, promoting airline service and enhancing concession

revenue are just a few of the potential benefits to airports seeking a deeper relationship with their customers. A social media strategy built on a solid brand foundation — one that clearly articulates the airport's strategic differentiators and value to travellers — will help connect customers and airports, resulting in better air service and a stronger bottom line.

References

- (1) Lasswell (1996) described the 'linear model' as a one-way process in which the speaker speaks and the listener listens. The model is based on five questions — who, what, in what channel, to whom, with what effect? See Gwynne, R. (1999) 'Communication models', available at: <http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~rbrokaw/commtheory.html> (accessed 14th January, 2015).
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- (5) According to Facebook, 'organic reach is the total number of unique people who were shown your post through unpaid distribution. Paid reach is the total number of unique people who were shown your post as a result of ads'.