

Contently

State of Content Marketing: Travel

Brands and trends taking flight in 2015



Traveling–it leaves you
speechless, then turns you
into a storyteller

— Ibn Battuta

Editor's Note

Leo Tolstoy once said, “All great literature is one of two stories; a man goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town.”

More than any other vertical, the travel industry is flush with stories; the very act of leaving one place for another sets in motion both of the narratives Tolstoy speaks of. Travel marketers take advantage of the opportunity by using content to tell their brand's stories in progressively diverse ways—in apps and tweets, in print magazines and interactive video. Fittingly, they're adopting a mobile-first approach, and it's easy to see why: Consumers today are researching and booking travel content wherever they are—the office, the airport, and everywhere in between.

In this ebook, we explore the trends that are changing the way travel brands build relationships with consumers, the companies are doing it right, and what you can expect in 2015. The industry is going places, and we hope this gets you ready for takeoff.

— Joe Lazauskas
Contently Editor in Chief

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Introduction

The travel industry is in a state of upheaval.

Of course, it's not the first time in recent memory that this has happened. (When was the last time you met with your local travel agent?) Before, though, the Internet was the new kid in town rewriting all the rules. Now, it's the Internet's kid brother, mobile, and his trusty sidekick, social. The duo has given way to a new kind of customer: the data-driven traveler.

Using apps like [Uber](#), [Airbnb](#), Google's [Hotel Finder](#), and [EatWith](#), she is able to tailor her own travel experience outside the conventional confines of Travelocity, Expedia, and Priceline. And it doesn't stop there. With Google's Flight Search, she doesn't even need your help getting there in the first place.

For entrenched players, that's the bad news.

The good news: With its white sand beaches, decaying ruins, and foods you can't recognize, let alone pronounce, the travel industry comes ready-made for providing compelling content capable of setting any brand apart from the rest. As online marketing expert Bas van den Beld put it:

“Honest, authoritative, and local content infused with quality storytelling is the future of travel content.”

Trends: Mobile is king

By 2016, the number of Americans who will have booked travel using their mobile device is anticipated to reach [nearly 37 million](#)—more than double 2012's figure. And they're not just booking trips on their mobile devices; they're doing "aspirational research" as well. What this has led to, according to John Straw, founder of Thorium Technology Investors, is a democratization of travel planning not just for families in the United States, but around the world.

"It used to be that 'mum,' the matriarch, would make the decisions on where the holiday was going to be, and [would] execute by walking to a travel agency to order that particular holiday," he explains in "[Travel 360: A Complete Perspective on the Online Travel Industry for 2014.](#)"

"What happens now is that any member of the family can now share holiday information with other family members, many of whom will have tablets too."

These new ideas often come from hip new apps like Hipmunk, which has a heat map that can be adjusted for food, tourism, shopping, nightlife, and "vice." [Research shows](#) that the majority of travelers download travel apps before leaving. Thirty percent report having used an app to find hotel deals; similarly, 29 percent use an app to find flight deals.

Mobile isn't just a key member of the planning committee, however. It also makes a popular traveling companion. An estimated [83 percent of leisure travelers](#) use their phones throughout vacation, while the average business traveler checks her device 34 times a day.

Social conversion

[Eighty-seven percent of people under the age of 34](#) use Facebook for travel inspiration; over half use Twitter and Pinterest. When it comes to the actual journey, 52 percent of consumers report posting photos and videos documenting their adventures.

And then there are reviews. There's no beating around the bush: in the travel world, reviews are king. Among travel sites, review sites [are the most popular](#), so it's no wonder that [TripAdvisor](#), the first site to reach 100 million reviews and opinions, receives more than 200 million unique visitors a month.

[Seventy percent of Americans](#) say they read reviews before going any further in the conversion process, with those written by travelers preferred over those written by travel professionals.

Travel marketing goes viral

If you haven't heard of Tourism Queensland's "Best Job in the World" campaign, let me be the first to welcome you back from whatever remote jungle you've been trekking through for the last several years.

First launched in 2009, the campaign began with a classified ad to be the caretaker of one island on the Great Barrier Reef and quickly went viral. The IAB reports it amassed \$165 million in media coverage and reached a total of 3 billion people—from a budget of just \$1.2 million.

Meanwhile, Virgin America did the impossible last October, when they released a safety video people actually wanted to watch. Not only did the video itself garner nearly 10 million views, but the behind-the-scenes pulled another 375,000.

Finally, Canada's WestJet found a way to cut through the marketing noise that always plagues the holiday season when, last Christmas, they surprised guests arriving at Calgary International Airport with personalized gifts. For their work, the airline took home more than 36 million YouTube views, an 11,000 percent increase in YouTube subscriptions, 42.2 million Twitter impressions, and a 2014 Shorty Award.

More on these campaigns in our Best-in-Class section.



The sponsored content plunge

Many wondered how *The New York Times*' audience would respond to sponsored content when it first appeared on the Gray Lady's site last summer. Pretty darn well, it turns out. According to Meredith Levien, the *Times*' executive vice president of advertising, a package created in partnership with United Airlines reaped more than 200,000 clicks—far more than the average editorial article. Posted just in time for the 2014 Winter Olympics, it featured two videos, including one on ski jumper Sarah Hendrickson, and three interactive graphics all centered around the Games.

Marriott Hotels & Resorts pursued a similar project when they teamed up with Mashable, *Fast Company*, and *Wired* to create three separate campaigns tailored to each of the three notably hip outlets.

Together with Mashable, Marriott produced “The Future of Travel,” described as a “branded content series” designed to cover “some of the exciting developments in the evolving world of travel.” Posts include “Crowdsource Your Next Vacation With These 8 Sites” and “11 Travel Startups You Need to Know,” the latter of which received 56,000 shares. Despite such success, the project seems to have retired: The last article posted dates back to October 2013.

Contrast this with the Creative Braintrust, Marriott's partner project with *Fast Company*. The microsite's design mirrors the rest of *Fast Company*—with the exception of the Marriott logo, which appears prominently next to the publisher's logo in the header. The series is something of an intellectual playground for the founders and CEOs of GeniusSteals, Vayable, Peek, Playtime, and Repurpose, as they muse about how technology is stealing our moments and wonder aloud as to whether virtual reality could one day replace actual travel.

Finally, there's "Where's Next?," a travel series written by travel writers and bloggers that was created in tandem with *Wired*. Though no longer active, the series includes stories like "How to Mail Hard Copies When Traveling Without a Printer" and "5 Innovative Ways to Eat Local." Clear Marriott branding appears in the header, along with a banner atop the sidebar linking to Marriott's millennial-centric "Travel Brilliantly" campaign page.

FAST COMPANY

CREATIVE BRAINTRUST



Keeping things personal

Disney World may be safe for now, but with an increasing interest in unique and personalized travel experiences, they better be thinking about how they can innovate on the standard Micky Mouse meet-and-greet.

Airbnb, which recently raised another \$475 million, isn't just about backpackers who've graduated from the hostel life. They're about houseboats in Hong Kong, villas in Barcelona, and a Canadian-Mountie-inspired log cabin in Ecuador. This was epitomized by Birdbnb, a short film produced by the red-hot travel startup that told the story of 50 artists commissioned to create birdhouses that were

exact replicas of 50 incredible Airbnb homes, located everywhere from Joshua Tree to Iceland to the Philippines.

Looking for a place to eat? With more than 61 million reviews, Yelp is turning tourists into insiders. But even they cannot provide quite the personalization of EatWith, the dining equivalent of Airbnb.

"Travelers are trading in cookie-cutter vacations for authentic experiences that they'll carry with them long after their vacations end," Jamie Wong, co-founder and CEO of Vayable.com, writes. "Instead of relying on packages and impersonal online research, travelers want a truly tailored experience that will be the most rewarding during their precious time off."

Expedia gets this. The travel giant is investing billions to take user data from all 150 sites operating in 70 countries, and is using their app in order to predict what customers are looking for.

"All of this data we get from people should enable us to anticipate the needs of consumers—to personalize, target, give consumers stuff that is contextually relevant," said Andrew Warner, Expedia's senior marketing director in Europe. Warner estimates the reward for doing so falls somewhere around \$160 billion a year.



Attack of the Google

Since Google's launch of their own flight search engine in 2011, their march across the travel industry's closely-guarded territories has been slow but steady. Over time, the app has grown to include international and one-way flights as well as a multi-city option, among other features.

The same year that Google launched Flight Search, they rolled out their very own hotel finder. It, too, has expanded with time—namely with the addition of international options.

Just as important, according to Jono Alderson, is what Google hasn't done yet but could do very soon.

“In an ideal world, organizations would own their own ecosystems; they'd facilitate the research and conversational processes, curate options and ideas, and centralize the whole process of reviews and sharing,” [he writes](#). “With this kind of platform, it's not unfeasible to imagine that a brand could reach a point where they could anticipate the needs of user types before they've been explicitly voiced, to utilize machine learning to anticipate what kinds of travel requirements an individual has based on their earliest behavioral signals, and to provide them with the best possible solution.”

This Orwellian—and highly efficient—vision is precisely what Google+ could become, he says.

Best in class

We get it. Your budget is limited, your target consumers' attention even more so. Fortunately for you, the trail has been blazed by these adventurous brands.

Brand publishing: Cox & Kings

When it comes to brand publishing, Cox & Kings is the [one to beat](#). Available in print three times a year and on-demand as an e-book and PDF, their *Compass* magazine is both beautifully designed and expertly edited. This is no surprise, given who's at the helm: Jennifer Cox, an editor, writer, and broadcaster with more than 20 years of travel media experience.

The print edition alone reaches [an audience of 50,000](#), and has coincided with a 15 percent increase in repeat bookings since its launch nearly 10 years ago. Moreover, the company says they've come to expect an increase

in bookings for any place after it's been the subject of a feature.

The trick?

"We aim to ensure that *Compass* doesn't look or sound like a brochure," Cox said. To do this, she relies on her contacts from her years in the traditional media business. "This ensures that *Compass* 'rings true'; readers engage with genuinely interesting articles and up-to-date news, rather than just flicking through a thinly veiled sales tool."

Commercials that will make you cry: British Airways

Hate it when an ad makes you cry? Stay away from any YouTube video with the name British Airways on it.

More than any other airline, BA has grasped that there's a story in every booked flight. In July 2013, the company published "A Ticket for Mum," in which the airline reunites a son with his mother after 17 years away from home. The two seem unsure whether to laugh or cry as they embrace for the first time in years.

Equally touching is the video's comment section.

"I watched this again and again with tears rolling in my eyes," one commenter posted. "It's been almost 5 years since I met my mom. Good on you, British Airways."

The video, which has since racked up more than 1.2 million views, was followed in February by the story of a couple who, between the stress of family and work, have little room left for each other. "Go Further to Get Closer" tells the story of their escape to England on an all-expense-paid vacation.

"Next time British Airways for defo!!!!" a viewer wrote. In total, the video has accrued more than 2.2 million views.



The campaign heard ‘round the world: Tourism Queensland



The Great Recession was in full swing when Tourism Queensland approached the marketing firm CumminsNitro Brisbane with a budget of just over \$1 million and a goal of establishing the islands of the Great Barrier Reef as a vacationer’s paradise.

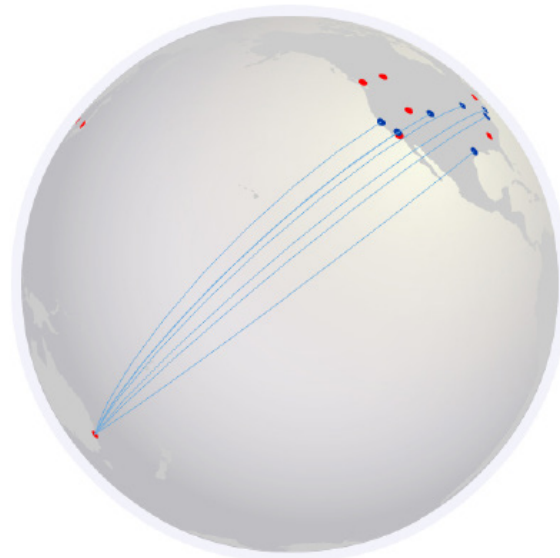
The resulting ad for “The Best Job in the World”—caretaker of a Barrier Reef island—appeared both online and in print in a number of languages worldwide, as well as on a variety of social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and Myspace. It wasn’t long before the international media seized on the story, including CNN, BBC, and *TIME*.

In the end, the campaign generated more than 34,000 one-minute-video job applications from 197 countries, with at least one person from every country in the world applying.

The winner, Ben Southall of the United Kingdom, was paid a six-figure salary to cruise around an island located in the reef and record his adventures via a blog, video, and photography. By the end of the campaign, the event’s website had received 8 million unique visits, with the average visit lasting a full 8.25 minutes.

Hands-on: United Airlines

In January, United Airlines teamed up with *The New York Times* to produce an [interactive graphic](#) highlighting the great distances U.S. athletes traveled in order to participate in not just the Sochi Olympics, but every Olympics dating back to 1980. The paid post also came with an interactive map of the United States that revealed the number of athletes from each state who have competed since 1980, along with the number of medals they've won over the years.



Of course, getting the athletes to where they need to be is only half the battle. United Airlines is equally responsible for making sure the athletes' equipment arrives on time where it's supposed to be. That doesn't just mean ice skates and ski poles, but bobsleds and luges, too. To show how it's done and how much gear has been hauled for each sport over the years, there's another interactive graphic, this time resembling a cabin seating chart. By hovering over different seats, viewers are able to observe just how much gear each sport has brought with it around the world in Olympics past and present. (Hockey, we're looking at you.)

The project was a success. Speaking at the American Association of Advertising Agencies' public relations forum, the *Times*' Meredith Levien announced that

United's piece had received more than 200,000 clicks—far more than the average editorial article.

App for that: Hipmunk

We don't plan on going anywhere without Hipmunk's app, and neither should you.

While most travel apps allow you to compare flights, Hipmunk does so with an innovative interface that lets users quickly observe flight timing and length, layovers included. What's more, not only does Hipmunk sort flights by price, departure, and duration, but by "agony," too. This unique feature is based on a combination of price, duration, and the number of stops, and provides the kind of human touch most every travel brand can learn from.

When it comes to finding a hotel, Hipmunk once again has found a way to set itself apart from the crowd by incorporating Airbnb listings—along with the Marriotts and the Best Westerns—into their results, all of which are displayed on a user-friendly map.



And finally, there's Hipmunk's heatmap. As mentioned before, this feature will use your location to identify the nearest options for food, tourism, shopping, nightlife, and "vice"—shorthand for bars, casinos, and adult entertainment. The results are displayed on an easy-to-use map.

Though Hipmunk itself is not a brand publisher, they provide the kind of excellent and intuitive utility content that all travel brands can learn from.

What's next

When it comes to the future of content marketing in the travel industry, why not ask the experts themselves?

“We are now in the situation, after the Panda and Penguin updates, that businesses need to build a brand in order to build a business. Businesses need to do a better job of catering for consumers, which ultimately is what consumers want, and what Google is imposing on the industry.” —Martin MacDonald, head of SEO at Orbitz Worldwide (via [Linkdex](#))

“Success stories like Amazon and iTunes teach us that consumers today want inspiration, not perspiration. They want recommendations that are personal and relevant: and they reward vendors who can provide them with this kind of customer-shaped experience” —Eric Dumas, CEO of Vayant Travel Technologies (via [TNooz](#))

“Travelers are becoming increasingly influential thanks to social – meaning poor customer service will be heard. The travel industry doesn't have a choice anymore. Those companies must listen to their customers and they have to provide a positive experience throughout a travelers whole experience, or else they will fall far behind.” —Kimberly McNally, sales development representative at [Brandwatch](#)

“When it comes to content marketing, you need to leave the sales pitch at the door. In the travel industry, the point of content marketing is to be helpful to the consumer. Travel brands must make it a top priority to provide consumers with the information and inspiration that they need to plan a trip or make a buying decision.” —Allison Way, director of content strategy at MMGY Global (via [iMedia Connection](#))

“The future of travel is about personalization, human connection, and immediacy and all of these things will be powered by mobile. We'll see a greater level of content and choices customized to individuals based on their mobile data, higher rates of human connection and on-demand service made possible by location-based and mobile technology.” —Jamie Wong, co-founder and CEO of Vayable (via [Fast Company](#))

Predictions for 2015

Based on these trends and forecasts, we can see that original, rewarding content is to today what having an easy-to-use website was to the late 1990s: essential. Breaking that down a little more, here are a few predictions likely to play out in the next year and beyond.

Low-end travel blogs will give way to professionally edited sites and magazines

Google has won many a battle; now they're poised to win the war. The all-knowing search engine knows all about those "Well, it can't hurt to look" searches for a winter cruise, while Google can also help you find a flight from New York to Heathrow from now until kingdom come. If brands want to continue giving consumers a reason to click, they're going to have to provide something Google doesn't: storytelling. And as this reality sinks in, a bidding war will erupt for the best talent as brands race to emulate Cox & Kings' success with *Compass*.

Increase in sponsored content

For brands less interested in jumping into the magazine business, sponsored content will continue to represent an appealing alternative. This will become increasingly true as more and more publishers follow the lead set by the likes of *Forbes* and *The New York Times* in not only supporting paid posts, but also providing the editorial firepower to help brands tell great stories.

More and more brands getting behind the camera

With the success of companies like British Airways, WestJet, and Virgin America, brands are well aware of the power of video. But as one study shows, many have yet to transfer that knowledge into action. According to [Axonn Research](#), 53 percent of companies that agree that video drives engagement are not producing any themselves. What's more, 25 percent of travel companies that aren't using video are eager to join in the fray. It's no stretch, then, to predict that before long, audiences will find more and more videos by travel companies lighting up their social media as this disconnect fades away.

Adoption of social media platforms other than Twitter and Facebook

There's no arguing social is key when it comes to formulating travel plans. Despite this, [less than a quarter](#) of brands employ anything besides Twitter or Facebook. But travel, with its sun-kissed beaches and snow-capped Alps, is an Instagram and Pinterest dream. Brands that succeed in amassing followers on these alternative social media sites by producing consistently quality content will reap the rewards of increased communication and influence with past, current and future customers.

Personalization

Whether print, paid posts, video, Pinterest, or something else altogether, content is on track to becoming increasingly tailored to specific travelers and places. This will become ever more true as tourists ditch the resort for its surrounding towns and villages in the hopes of an “authentic” experience.

Conclusion

Forget upheaval. Thanks to social, mobile, and Google, the travel industry is in a state of total metamorphosis. And just like in times past, there will be losers and winners based on each brand's willingness to adapt. Looking to avoid the way of the travel agent? Forego the one-size-fits-all travel packages and broad, "high-impact" TV buys, and double down on highly personalized, content-rich experiences. A mobile device is the modern traveler's window onto the world, and with the right strategy, that's exactly where they'll find you.

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