

Sales & Marketing

The Importance of Local Partnerships

By Keith Chouinard, Director of Sales & Marketing, Hotel Viking



Mr. Chouinard

Connected. Conscientious. Curious. Simple, but accurate, these three words sum up the common core of traits Millennials bring to a travel experience. The named generation, defined as those born between 1980 and 1997, range from young adults about to graduate from college to 30-somethings juggling career and family in pursuit of that elusive sweet spot known as life-work balance.

While they may be at different stages in their life journeys, research shows Millennials have a keen interest in travel experiences that connect them to their destination.

A recent article in G Brief, a digital magazine published by Urbaneer Creative <http://urbaneercreative.com/>, a creative consultancy for businesses seeking to engage the Millennial generation, identifies travel — with a twist — as a key interest among Millennials. That twist, a drive to gain experience and learn while traveling, is what sets the generation apart from its forebears.

As hoteliers, it makes sense to create programs and partnerships that address our Millennial guests' expectations — because Millennials love to travel. Statistics cited by G Brief indicate they average more business travel than recent generations (4.7 trips per year) and keep up a similar pace for leisure travel (4.2 trips per year). When it comes to average per-trip spend, Millennials are expected to outpace previous generations in the next few years.

While speaking at ITB, one of the travel industry's leading conventions, earlier this year, Sarah Kennedy Ellis, SABRE's vice president of marketing for hospitality solutions, announced interesting projections. Based on SABRE's analysis of activity across approximately 10,000 booking engines, Ellis acknowledged the widely held belief that Millennials will take first place in travel spend by 2020. She encouraged members of the hotel industry to plan accordingly and to implement targeted programs now. "By 2017 or 2018, Millennials will be the hotel industry's most important market," said Ellis.

Industry research into Millennials' travel habits is copious, but some characteristics come up over and over again. For the purposes of this article, let's agree on a few points:

- Millennials seek authentic travel experiences,
- Millennials share the pros and cons of their experiences via social media,
- Millennials are inherently suspicious of canned or traditional marketing initiatives.

With those points in mind, let's take a look at how strategic marketing partnerships can leverage Millennials' core travel traits.

Connected - There's no question Millennials are the most connected generation in the history of mankind. According to a G Brief report, 49 percent of Millennials search for and plan travel via their smartphones. The demographic is also highly engaged in social media while planning travel, with a whopping 87 percent of those surveyed citing Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest among their sources for travel inspiration. And it doesn't end with the planning: The phenomenon comes full circle when individuals who planned their travel based on social media recommendations become the advisors as they post reviews and photos from their own travel experiences.

Consider this: Less than two years ago, a survey by Chase Card Services revealed 97 percent of Millennials post on a social network when traveling, with 75 percent posting at least once per day. That's an enormous network of active travelers ready, willing and able to influence their peers' travel decisions. Hotel Viking has a dedicated team assigned to monitor and engage thoughtfully with our social media community, further expanding its reach. Clearly, the growth potential through user-generated content is exponential.

Conscientious - In a departure from previous generations — maybe because they grew up during an era in which a

global shift in awareness put increased emphasis on environmental responsibility and cultural mindfulness — Millennials are more likely than their parents and grandparents to incorporate “giving back” into their travel plans. Our community partnerships include programs with the local fire department and the public library, organizations that appeal to guests who choose lodging based on the property's record of community involvement.

A recent study by HVS, a consulting company for the hospitality industry, revealed 70 percent of Millennials surveyed expect to incorporate immersive experiences into their travel plans. Seventy-eight percent said they wanted to learn something (a new language or skill) while traveling. Leveraging that interest through strategic marketing partnerships is a no-brainer — and it's easy. Some of our most successful “learning” initiatives are also social in nature: A series of beer-pairing dinners showcases local craft breweries; an oyster sommelier and high-traffic blogger does on-site oyster tastings; and a group of talented Instagram photographers share tips for capturing the best shots around Newport. Need inspiration? Take a walk around the block or check the local chamber of commerce directory for information about businesses and organizations that complement your brand message.

Curious - Millennials show little interest in packaged tours and one-size-fits-all travel experiences. They are independent, comfortable traveling alone or with friends, and inherently curious about the people, culture, cuisine, economy and landscape of the destinations they visit. This awareness led to our partnership with the Newport Polo Club among others.

In a May 2016 report, Millennial Travel Trends: A Look at the Largest Generation's Habits, Hospitality Net [HospitalityNet.org] offers insight on how marketers can effectively connect with Millennials, a demographic numbering in excess of 79 million. Key to the findings: Millennials are by and large an adventurous lot. Thirsty for knowledge, they are apt to be spontaneous when presented with a unique opportunity, but they can sense a set-up from a mile away. Authenticity and originality presented through partnership opportunities and shared in the moment via social media channels routinely trumps traditional advertising.

Practical Application - Six months into my tenure as director of sales and marketing for Hotel Viking in Newport, Rhode Island, I see the potential for strategic marketing partnerships at every turn. Partnerships to date include sponsoring sporting events and developing cross-promotions with local retailers, but the effort goes beyond sales and marketing, tapping into creative solutions and promotions suggested by members of the hotel staff at large. A side benefit: increased employee engagement and morale.

A nine-week series of beer-pairing dinners ranks among our most productive partnership initiatives. With executive chef Barry Correira on board, we partnered with nine local breweries to zero in on Millennials' well-documented affinity for craft beers. The series, popular among the 25-34 set, succeeded across the board by bringing new guests into the hotel, showcasing Chef Barry's culinary finesse and expanding our social media presence via our partners' channels.

We've also had great success partnering with food bloggers to explore Millennials' stated interest in culinary travel. Oyster sommelier and blogger Julie Qui [inahalfshell.com] returns for two engagements this summer; one at our rooftop venue, Top of Newport, and again to host a dinner in our main venue, One Bellevue. The partnership effectively extends our marketing reach to incorporate Qui's food-centric followers.

Our partnership with IGers of Newport, the official Instagram community of Newport, gives us direct access to social media-savvy photographers and their followers. We had the group in last winter to showcase off-season in Newport. The photos were so incredible and the response was so overwhelming, we invited them back in the spring. A natural progression of our relationship with IGers of Newport would be to expand the portal to showcase photos submitted by our guests.

Another successful partnership involves developing relationships with local wedding photographers to showcase Hotel Viking's on-site, non-ecumenical chapel. Participating photographers benefit from the exposure on our website while the hotel garners interest among couples shopping for a wedding site. Expanding on the wedding theme, we recently partnered with Marc Allen [http://marcalleninc.com] to stage our non-ecumenical chapel. The high-end clothier is providing a custom men's suit to set the stage for couples considering the venue as their wedding site. Additionally, Marc Allen is making its “Style Van” available to hotel guests interested in a unique, on-site shopping experience.

Pursuing strategic partnership opportunities with local sporting and cultural events that appeal to Millennials is a good bet. While the generation continues to support mainstream professional sports including football, baseball, basketball and hockey, Millennials are showing a growing interest in next-generation sports; games long popular on

an international level are gaining traction in the United States. Among them, lacrosse, soccer, rugby and polo. With the Newport Polo Club [<http://www.nptpolo.com>] headquartered in Hotel Viking's back yard, it was an easy decision to implement a strategic partnership. Our sponsorship agreement includes tickets we can use for social media promotions and exclusive meet-and-greet opportunities with athletes. We can also arrange individual and group lessons for guests interested in a more up-close-and-personal experience — the kind of first-person and unique-to-place experiences Millennials love to share via social media.

Word of advice: Don't forsake the most obvious partnership opportunities in your community. The annual Newport Jazz Festival debuted in 1954 as the First Annual American Jazz Festival. Sixty-two years later, it's bigger and better than ever; a true Newport institution. Hotel Viking initiated its partnership with the festival in its early days, serving as festival headquarters in 1958. Last year, the festival commissioned musical works by emerging artists through the support of the George Wein/Doris Duke Artistic Programming Fund. In addition to supporting emerging talent, the annual festival is a showcase for world-renowned jazz artists. The 2016 roster includes performances by 22-time Grammy-winning jazz composer Chick Corea; the New Orleans' seminal funk band Galactic; vocalist Tierney Sutton; the brass quartet The Westerlies; The Hot Sardines; the supergroup Potter, Holland, Loueke & Harland; and pianists Rossano Sportiello, Kris Davis and Terry Waldo. Cross-promotion at this level, with its inherent social-media share, is like hitting the jackpot in terms of Millennial engagement.

The Bottom Line:

Millennials seek authentic travel experiences and routinely share their personal observations via social media channels. They are market-savvy travelers who blanch at in-your-face advertising. Trust is first-and-foremost. Earn their trust by partnering with like-minded organizations, businesses and causes. The results will be exponential.

As Director of Sales & Marketing for Hotel Viking in Newport, Rhode Island, Keith Chouinard is responsible for the hotel's sales and marketing efforts including promotions, strategic partnerships, and new business development. Mr. Chouinard joined Hotel Viking in December 2015, one month prior to the historic hotel's renovations and six months before the hotel celebrates its 90th anniversary. Since joining the team, Mr. Chouinard has developed strategic partnerships with local sporting events including the Newport International Polo Series; retail outlets such as Marc Allen Clothiers; and welcomed more than 20 online, print and broadcast media guests to the landmark hotel. Mr. Chouinard can be contacted at 401-847-3300 or kchouinard@hotelviking.com

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