How Pinteresting! Pinterest for Tourism 101
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We know what you're thinking—*yet another social media site?* Pinterest, a relative newcomer in the social media realm, has been embraced the world over, and is now the third most-used social media site behind Facebook and Twitter. As of October 2012, statistics show that over 23 million unique visitors currently use the platform. Brands and travel organizations are also establishing Pinterest presences, with more than 450 destinations worldwide maintaining official Pinterest accounts as of October 2012.

So what is Pinterest, anyway?

Pinterest is a virtual pinboard that allows users to organize, curate and share their interests by pinning images and videos to boards (collections of pins grouped together by theme). Pinterest users have found many ways to use the site, including planning weddings, redecorating their homes, saving recipes and creating inspiration boards. Diverse brands—Whole Foods, BedandBreakfast.com and The Travel Channel, for example—have used Pinterest as a way to share their core personalities and values.

Pinterest becomes social when people interact by following users and boards to see what images are being pinned and repinning content. Users can also like and comment on pins.

Pinterest's unique demographics make it an ideal tool for Nebraska CVBs and attractions. The majority of Pinterest users are females aged 25-44 with children. Women are often the key decision-makers when it comes to planning (and paying for) family vacations. Approximately 28 percent of users have annual household incomes of $100,000 or higher. Pinterest's users primarily reside in the Eastern south-central (Mississippi, Alabama, Kentucky and Tennessee) and north-central (Nebraska, Iowa, South Dakota, North Dakota and Minnesota) regions of the U.S. The proximity of Nebraska to the majority of Pinterest users helps position the state as an attractive destination for potential travelers.

Pinterest for tourism

In the United States, there are approximately 317 CVBs and states using Pinterest, as of October 2012. Some of the most active users include VisitSavannah Georgia, Texas Tourism, Durango, Wyoming Tourism, and Colorado Tourism.

Pinterest can be used to show potential travelers what makes your destination, CVB, accommodation or attraction unique. VisitSavannah, for example, showcases all that the city has to offer through boards such as "Savannah I Do: Weddings," with pins of popular Savannah wedding venues along with all the trimmings needed for a perfect Southern wedding. The more straightforward "Savannah Dining" includes pins of the city's restaurants and popular menu items.

The No. 1 reason to use Pinterest is to drive traffic back to your website. In addition, linking through Pinterest improves search engine optimization (SEO) results, which leads to higher search results on sites such as Google and Bing.

OK, you're convinced. Now what?

Before embracing any new social media platform, it's important to develop a plan. Ask yourself the following questions: (1) What are our business objectives? (2) How can we measure our success? (3) Who will implement the plan?

An appropriate objective for Pinterest would be to engage your target audience and drive traffic to your website and Facebook page. Success can be measured by evaluating the content users like most, which will be discussed later. A plan for implementation is key for Pinterest, as content should be refreshed often to stay up-to-date, by creating boards, pinning new content, repinning, and interacting with users.

Step 1: Set up an account

Currently, Pinterest is invite only. You can request an invitation through the platform, which takes approximately 2-4 weeks. Or, if you'd like to join immediately, you may contact Shannon Peterson, Nebraska Tourism's media and public relations for an invitation. Once you receive your email invitation, sign up using either your organization's Facebook or Twitter page.

Step 2: Customize page and set up boards

Showcase your organization's brand by including an image or logo on your Pinterest page. In the "About" section, include a brief description of your organization and a link to your website.

Now comes one of the most important (and fun!) parts of Pinterest: setting up your boards. Think like a traveler to help you determine what content your target audience will be most interested in. Visit Nebraska has created boards with both short-term themes ("2012 Nebraska Passport") and long-term themes ("Fun Things to Do," "Nebraska Eats," and "Go Big Red"). Have fun with your boards, and don't be afraid to show off your personality.

Step 3: Upload images and pin

With your boards created, take a quick inventory of the images already on your website to determine their "pinnability." In addition to pinning images already embedded in your site, Pinterest allows users to upload and pin images and videos.

Because Pinterest emphasizes images over text, quality photos and videos are very important. Ask yourself these questions to help you decide which images to pin:

- Is it a high-quality and interesting image?

- Will the image inspire travelers to repin it?

Once you've found your favorite high-quality images, upload and pin them to your boards. Now write a description of your pinned image. Using SEO keywords such as "hunting in Nebraska" and a website URL (for example, www.visitnebraska.gov) will help drive traffic back to your organization's website. Finally, include a link that will take users to the URL of your choice. Note: Images on websites in Flash format cannot be pinned.

Step 4: Interact with brands and users

Now comes the real fun—pinning and repinning! Search Pinterest to find pins, boards and users that are pinning content similar to your destination. For example, Visit Nebraska could search for pins about Nebraska foods, Nebraska sunsets and more. Find something you like? Repin it to your own boards.

You can also pin an image from any website by installing Pinterest's "Pin It" tool in your Web browser. For example, see an amazing Nebraska photo on a website you're browsing? Pin it to your "Nebraska Scenery" board directly from your browser.

Once your boards are populated with images, interact with your followers. You can follow users who are pinning your content or search for others in your target audience. We also recommend following those whose brands are similar to your own, such as other CVBs, attractions and local businesses. See what they're pinning and repin their content if it makes sense for you.

You can also interact by commenting on pins, liking pins and commenting directly to specific users by using the @username.

Find more detailed instructions on setting up and using your Pinterest account here.

Step 5: Integrate

Now that you've set up a Pinterest page, created boards and pinned images, it's time to tell the world. The first step should be to download a free Pinterest "Follow" icon and link it to your homepage to direct travelers to your official Pinterest page. You can also include the "Pin it" button on specific pages within your website to enable users to pin content from those pages.

A blog post about your new page is an easy way to educate readers about Pinterest and how they can use it for travel planning. We also recommend adding the "Pin it" button to your blog to allow readers to pin their favorite blog posts.

Pinterest has powerful social tools that allow you to easily integrate it with your social networks. By linking your Pinterest account to your organization's Facebook or Twitter page, you can automatically broadcast updates every time you pin new images or create new boards.

Step 6: Evaluate

After you've been using Pinterest for a while, take a step back to evaluate what's been working. Is one board more popular than others? Great! Continue pinning images to that board and think about what makes it so popular. Is another board languishing in the digital ether because no one seems interested in the content? Go ahead and delete it.

Think about what images have been most popular with your followers and let that guide you as you continue to pin new images and create new boards. This is a great way to find out what else is important to your followers. For example, with just a few clicks, you might learn that a traveler who repinned your image of sandhill cranes may also have pinned images of their favorite Nebraska B&Bs. Think about how you can use this information to create new partnerships and opportunities.

To see what images are being pinned from your website, use http://www.pinterest.com/source/YOURWEBSITE.

Pinterest may seem daunting at first, but remember to have fun! Pinterest is just another tool you can use to engage travelers and show them what makes your destination interesting.