

Flummoxed by Facebook or perplexed by Pinterest? **Donna Sloane** explains the importance of social media platforms in marketing your holiday let

SOCIAL CLIMBERS

Social media is a transformative component of modern life and offers a powerful, exciting marketing opportunity for even the smallest enterprise. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are widely used by big brands, but for a small business they also offer direct, informal personal engagement. This means that they can be used effectively by the owner of a single gîte or holiday let to promote business and engage effectively with holidaymakers and Francophiles.

Theory and practice

Small businesses can even beat the large players at this game. In recent years, travel industry awards for use of social media have highlighted an independent hotel in the Lake District, for example. The hotel created an active online community by posting consistently on Facebook with news and images around specific rooms, friendly chat, availability updates and competitions for small prizes. Enthusiasm and responsiveness were key.

In contrast, large organisations can get things wrong. SeaWorld in America launched a #AskSeaWorld Q&A session, aiming to encourage questions about the care of its killer whales. Instead it received a barrage of negative comments from animal rights campaigners. Q&As can work well – but not if there's a chance of negative kickback.

Amusing cat videos, on the other hand, are always popular. Diga was a rescue cat trained by her owner, who filmed and edited Diga's skateboarding tricks and skills. GoPro cameras seized the opportunity to give the owner a more sophisticated camera and engaged thousands of users on Instagram, the platform for images and video.

To use social media for your holiday let, post in the name of your property. For Facebook, it's best to have an account in your own name but a page for the property that you become an administrator of. Understand that the fundamentals are to be there with a consistent presence, to share images and video, and to engage through comments and conversation.

Key to conversation is informality. The idea is to treat followers like long lost pals; there should be no business-like language. In this way, owners can make it easy for holidaymakers to know about them and feel immediately connected, and hence to attract new interest and encourage word-of-mouth

recommendations as well as repeat business from their guests.

Which medium?

Instagram is a medium for telling stories through sharing photographs and video, and its audience includes families and people looking for travel ideas. Here you could give holidaymakers tips on where to go in your area to take the best photos, for instance. Some hotels are already posting a map of top photo spots for their visitors.

Twitter is based more on brief opinion comments but can be useful for announcing information. This would include local events, new facilities and special offers and, of course, you need to be succinct and specific.

Pinterest is described as 'the world's catalogue of ideas'. Ideas could include suggestions for visiting local destinations and French themes like markets and vineyards. These are likely to be searched for and discovered by other users.

For most owners, Facebook is the most useful social medium for general engagement, as it is so widely used by a general audience. It is also specifically used by people during and after a holiday – our research shows that over half of all travel and holiday related social conversations by consumers happen during and after their trip.

Using Facebook successfully involves regularly posting your own images and information. Aim to post a good mix of seasonal images like flowers in the garden, sunsets and great weather, along with local events, shops and markets, rural life, random happenings that typify French life, those loveable cats and, of course, news about your property, services, facilities and offers.

You should also publicise the fact that you are on Facebook and encourage holidaymakers to 'Like' and check in at your property's page. Encourage them to post good reviews, mentions and photographs on their own Facebook page with a link to yours, as this is a powerful tool. You will soon discover that it's possible to greatly expand awareness and make fascinating, unexpected connections. ■

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Mediterranean owner shares unique features

Bordebasse, a former farm now comprising one four-bedroom and one two-bedroom house, stands on a Mediterranean hillside in a superb location between Mirepoix and Castlenaudary in Aude. Owner Gill Masters and husband Jim have been using Facebook for eight years.

"We use our page to focus on photographs showing the themes of our unique selling points," says Gill, who is an artist. "These are our private lake for fishing, beautiful nature in which to relax and the chance to have studio time with my affordable art classes. We also show off photos of our newly renovated interiors."

The page reflects these themes with images of art students proudly showing their work, a guest who has just caught their first fish

in the lake, and pristine interiors with a chatty note to say the house is all scrubbed up ready for the next guests' arrival.

"Around these photographic themes I also post brief notes about availability such as summer weeks, last-minute cancellations and long winter lets – and we definitely get bookings through Facebook. It takes time to maintain momentum but it's a really beneficial extra to our adverts on listing websites."

Gill uses social media strategically. "We used to live in Berkhamsstead and still know a lot of people there so I post on the town's community page. Also, whenever I post on the Bordebasse page, I also share this on my own personal page to reach the maximum number of people."

"Often new guests come to us through previous guests' posts. If guests offer to send me photos after their holiday, I always suggest that instead of sending them direct to me, they post them on their Facebook page, so Bordebasse is tagged and I have the option to share the post."

Bordebasse is ID 5374 at frenchconnections.co.uk

Top tips for using Facebook to promote your holiday let

- Email customers to let them know you're on Facebook and send a link
- Promote your Facebook page in the property
 - Post consistently
- Your goals should be to educate, entertain or empower readers
- Engage with your Facebook community
 - Engage with other Facebook pages
 - Use engaging images or videos in your updates

Modern media shows off a period house

Rosalie Vicars-Harris and Malcolm Lewis run Le Couvent, a pretty three-bedroom holiday house in Lot. The building is a romantic old former convent schoolhouse and both house and garden are very photogenic. This is fortunate as Malcolm is a professional photographer and filmmaker, so is able to take high-quality photos for Le Couvent's recently created Facebook page.

"We were already active personally on Facebook," explains Rosalie. "Then we saw a webinar on using social media. This seemed to give us a chance to promote the house on more than listing sites, in order to get it noticed and reach a much wider audience."

The couple's main objective has been to build a brand for the long term and they are still becoming accustomed to the demands of social

media. "We need to be proactive so that people will follow all the time and find the information they need."

"We post seasonal photos and link to our special offers – and then we need to find new stories. For instance, if there's a special event in our village, we will photograph and post the event. If guests return many times, we might hold a party for them and share the celebration."

"We also plan to introduce subjects of interest from the surrounding area like vineyards, markets, *brocantes* and nearby museums. This is essential for it to work – and we are rising to the challenge of updating more regularly."

"I think it's also important to invite guests to post on a property's page, to make sure that they know about the page and comment. So far, we have had lots of 'Likes' and comments. This means that the posts go on to the personal page of each person responding and so the awareness spreads accordingly."

Le Couvent is ID 4092 at frenchconnections.co.uk

