
Facebook Status? In Town and Wondering What to Do

Contributed by Khushboo Shrivastava

Business travelers, whether they are government workers, small-business owners, entrepreneurs or professionals, need to tap into specific and timely intelligence as well. They are increasingly doing so through social networks like Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and Yelp, using the expertise and wisdom of the residents of places they visit to help them find their way around.

Whether they are heading to Bangor or Bangkok in search of an obscure boutique hotel, a vegan restaurant or professional contacts, business travelers say social networking offers benefits that no travel agent, tourist Web site or guidebook can match.

"I find social media invaluable," said Ruth Clark, who designs and sews custom clothing for wheelchair users and runs her business from Kamloops, British Columbia. "It enables me to meet people from around the world who have an interest in my work."

Thanks to social networking, on a trip to California she found out about an evening lecture at Stanford University and through online contacts was invited to the program and the dinner beforehand.

While attending a conference in Charlotte, N.C., for six days, Ms. Clark stayed with three hosts she had met through the Web site

CouchSurfing.com and said she planned to do business with two of them.

Mr. Benham, who has more than 300 connections on LinkedIn, said social media had given him "a good way to stay in touch with them and know what's going on with them."

I try to treat every person I meet as someone who can have an impact on my life, even in a 10-minute airport conversation. Because I've kept up with them through social media, they become good friends or good business relationships."

Kelly Fallis of Toronto, who runs an interior design business and also stages homes for the real estate market, says she constantly uses social media. "I have two companies that exist virtually, one with 10 people, the other with 40," she said, referring to employees who work outside the office. Social-networking sites are important to her because her clients send her photos of their homes, and she offers advice over the Internet.

"Social media sites enable me to have a presence to clients, accounts and staff alike," she said. "It doesn't matter where I am, but they know I'm there and they are connected to me via these sites."

Social networking can also take some of the loneliness out of business travel by fostering spontaneous gatherings. "Sites like Twitter and Facebook are genius for people who don't like business travel," Ms. Fallis said, "as suddenly you've gone from sitting in a hotel bar alone after work to having an engaging dinner with an old friend or potential client."

You can start with your Facebook status line, which lets the world know what you're doing. "Beyond arranging plans, if you need an answer to something or are looking for a person who does X, changing your status to a question is incredibly helpful," Ms. Fallis said.

For instance, if you're in New York and ask on your status line how to find a retail store that sells carpet, "suddenly you'll have 10 fans/followers write back and say, 'Check out X,'" Ms. Fallis said. "You can have three on-the-spot meetings that you couldn't possibly have set up that quickly if you tried."

"We live in a world where new products and services are created daily, so it's next to impossible to have your finger on every pulse."

Sarah Browne, a networking strategist based in Carmel, Calif., who travels often on business, said social media had made her "look smarter" to her clients.

"Staying relevant and delivering relevant information to my clients is a huge part of my success on the road," she said. On an overnight trip to Denver, for example, Ms. Browne used Twitter to gather information from locals before she arrived. "People are shooting you links that can steer you to something you might never find," she said..

Albert Ko, 24, who runs CheapCheapCheap.com, a Web site for bargain hunters, relies heavily on Twitter, gathering helpful business intelligence from, and setting up meetings with, his 2,000 contacts. "I use it a lot to form tweetups," or meetings where fellow Twitter users spontaneously gather, he said. He also uses his network to re-tweet, or spread his message through his users' individual networks, thereby creating local viral campaigns wherever he is visiting.

"By meeting just one person, you can reach thousands of people," he said. "Even one re-tweet can be really powerful."