



Travelocity.com Founder Terry Jones

Building Digital Relationships

BY LAUREN BOSTON

Travelocity.com founder Terry Jones unlocks the mystery of connecting with customers online.

When e-commerce pioneer Terry Jones founded Travelocity.com in 1996, the company was the first of its kind to not only give customers access to airline fare and schedule information, but to also allow them to reserve, book and purchase tickets without the help of a travel agent.

At the time, it was revolutionary. Today, it's a way of life.

Technology has evolved at a breakneck pace in the nearly 20 years since, and Jones says the businesses that lack an effective online relationship strategy to communicate with their customers are now being left behind.

Jones, former Chairman of the Board for Kayak.com, will be sharing his insights as a Thought Leader at the 2014 NAA Education Conference & Exposition, June 18-21 in Denver.

He spoke with *units* Magazine to offer a preview of his session.

units: How can an apartment management company build an effective online relationship strategy to connect with customers?

Jones: Today's customers are multi-channel animals. They're emailing you, calling you, texting you and coming in to see you in person. You can't predict what door they're going to come in, and you have to make sure all the doors work and all of them are open.

You have to examine the entire customer relationship. It's about mapping every piece of the relationship you've had with a resident or customer in the past and then re-mapping that to include digital touch points.

units: Most apartment communities and management companies have some sort of online presence, but what's your advice for an independent rental owner, for instance, who has a one- or two-man operation and wears many hats? Where do you even start?

Jones: The great thing about today's technology is that there are so many possibilities for website creation where templates already exist. You can build a simple website that is also mobile friendly. Building the website is probably the easy part. The hard part is that you need ratings and reviews and people need to be able to find you online.

One solution, which I see often in small, family-owned businesses everywhere, is owners hiring their kids. You may have trouble with certain technologies, but it is second nature for your kids. You could also team up with a local college or university and hire students to assist in your online efforts. Otherwise, you may have to step up and hire a professional design firm.

What's critical to realize is that the No. 1 place people search is online. You have to be there—and you have to be reviewed. If people find your business online but there aren't any reviews or ratings, they're going to assume you aren't any good. People always think their

business is different, but it's not. When you go to a restaurant, the first thing you do is look it up on Yelp. When you're looking for a hotel, the first thing you do is look it up on Kayak. People are not going to the Yellow Pages.

units: At a time when it often feels impossible to keep up with evolving technology, should we be focused on 'now' or 'next'? How do you master current technology while also looking ahead to the future?

Jones: I think mobile and social are the two key trends that you must pay attention to, and I think mobile is the more important of the two. If you don't have a website designed for a mobile device, half the people searching for you will be squinting trying to read your information. Half of all emails are read on mobile devices. The unfortunate thing for all businesses is that everyone's expectation for your website is based on the best website they've ever seen, regardless of the type of business you have or the manpower in your office.

When it comes to social, I think it largely depends on the demographic you're targeting. If you operate senior housing communities, an active social media presence may not be as necessary. But if you're marketing to young professionals, then you better be on social.

The other day I was speaking to a group from an electrical association and several attendees said they were afraid to get online. I said your customers are probably screaming anyway, so you better respond. In the airline business we always said, "Get the screamer out of the line." Upgrade their seats, do whatever, but don't let them upset all of the other customers. If you're getting trashed, you want to know about it.

[In thinking about] looking forward, five years ago I spoke to an apartment group and a guy told me he was working on an electronic leasing technology. I said do you really think someone will sign a lease without ever seeing the apartment in person?

He said "no," but once they've seen three different apartment communities and are ready to sign the lease, they're not going to want to come back to the office on a Sunday night to do so. Residents don't want to make a return trip to a leasing office to deal with more people. Those are the kind of forward-thinking products that may be worth looking at.

units: What is the best piece of social media advice?

Jones: It's a quote I read: "The conversation is happening with or without you." It's true—so you better get out there. People are talking about you right now. You want to be there.

I was staying in a hotel the other day and there was a jackhammer outside of my room. I tried to bring it to the attention of someone working at the front desk but the jackhammer kept

going. My daughter said why don't you just get on Twitter and complain about it. I did, and the chain of command called down to this particular hotel and the problem was fixed. People are paying attention to what's happening online.

units: How would you suggest apartment companies and owners deal with anonymous, negative online reviews and social media posts?

Jones: If you believe there is something wrong, then say that you appreciate the input, have or are correcting the issue and that you would be happy to talk directly about it. If you don't think it is true or did not happen, then say that you appreciate the input and don't believe the situation happened but that you'd be happy to speak with the customer directly. The key is not to have the confrontational reply online but to take it offline.

units: What's the biggest misconception surrounding online branding?

Jones: Online branding is just branding. Online is just another way to get it out there. We have to recognize the power of search. Kayak.com didn't do any advertising at all for the first five years—all of our branding was through search.

You have to tell your story online, and you have to do it through pictures. The No. 1 way people pick a hotel is through online images, and the same can be said for apartment communities. I've seen pictures of apartment communities and it's just the company's logo and a picture of the leasing office. Why do I care about that?

If I'm a resident, I'm probably hoping I'm never in that office to begin with. I want to know how I'll feel living there. You have to tell your story in an evocative way. Do I feel when I get to your website the way I'll feel when I get to your community? I hope so.

units: Can you recall a moment at Travelocity or Kayak when you experienced an online breakthrough?

Jones: Even though Travelocity and Kayak are online services, our customers are still multi-channel. We realized that a lot of people wanted to search for flights online, but then they wanted to call us on the phone. Maybe not for a flight to New York, but a trip to Paris, probably. The breakthrough for us was that this is a multi-channel animal. We went from a pure online presence to an online company with a phone sales team. We closed a lot of sales we wouldn't have otherwise closed by doing so.

The breakthrough for us was that we're not an online-only company or industry. Maybe the breakthrough for the apartment industry is that you're not an offline-only industry. ■■

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