

## USTOA Digital Marketing Academy Offers Clues to Understanding Change

by [David Cogswell](#) / January 30, 2020



*There was one fact they all experts at the USTOA Digital Marketing Academy agreed on: The smartphone has radically changed the way we live and has become central to our lives. Photo: Shutterstock.com.*

The U.S. Tour Operators Association gave its members plenty to think about in its third Digital Marketing Academy at the Stewart Hotel in New York City on Wednesday, Jan. 22. In an all-day series of lectures and presentations, authorities from various backgrounds led the attendees through various aspects the rapidly evolving field of marketing through digital resources.

The program brought together insights from experts from diverse enterprises including American Airlines, Facebook, Intrepid Travel, Redpoint and MMGY/Myriad Global. The event attracted more than 100 of USTOA's tour operator and associate supplier members.

The digital marketing field is so fluid and dynamic that no one can claim total mastery. Even the experts who contributed their knowledge to the curriculum at the Digital Marketing Academy confessed that they were learning from each other's presentations.

There was one fact they all agreed on: The smartphone has radically changed the way we live and has become central to our lives.

Jason Dailey, agency development lead, at Facebook, talked about a phrase that would have had no meaning 20 years ago: Mobile engagement.

“The rise of the mobile is one of the most under-hyped things in recent history,” he said, “because it really has completely changed and transformed the way we live, the way we connect, the way we create. It has created an on-the-go, on-demand, always-checking-in kind of lifestyle. Mobile engagement accelerates and amplifies everything that we do.”

He used the metaphor of the phone as a lover. “For most of us, it’s the first thing we look at in the morning, the last thing at night.” And by a show of hands of the people in the room he proved he was right.

### **Mobile phone world**

If you feel you have been swept into a brave new world in which you know something is happening but you don’t know what it is, don’t feel alone. The supremacy of the mobile phone was not predicted by anyone until it happened. Even Steve Jobs, the mastermind behind the iPhone, did not see it coming.

In the bestselling book, “Digital Minimalism,” author Cal Newport explains how even the most innovative titans of the digital world were broadsided by the sudden takeover of the world by the smartphone.

When Jobs introduced the iPhone in 2007, he called it “the best iPod we have made ...” He didn’t even get around to explaining the iPhone’s online capabilities until 33 minutes into his presentation.

One member of the iPhone’s development team, Andy Grignon, told Newport: “This was supposed to be an iPod that made phone calls. Our core mission was playing music and making phone calls.” According to Grignon, Jobs was “initially dismissive of the idea that it could become a general-purpose mobile computer running a variety of different third-party applications.”

While Apple was developing its iPod/phone combination, other developments were taking place separately that would shift the dynamics radically and fuel the rise of the smartphone to its present dominance.

Mark Zuckerberg started Facebook in 2004 for Harvard students, then opened it to other colleges, and on September 2006 opened it to everyone. Zuckerberg developed the application for desktop and laptop computers, unaware of what Apple was doing with the iPhone.

When social media met the iPhone, the world was changed forever. The synergies between the smartphone and social media were far beyond what anyone could have predicted. And here we are in the world ruled by the mobile phone. We just live here.

### **Shifting goalposts**

John Gustafson, vice president digital customer experience, for American Airlines, shared insights from inside one of the world’s largest airlines. American Airlines operates 6,800 flights a day serving more than half a million passengers every day. The airline has 2.5 million digital interactions a day and 45% are booked through a digital channel.

Facebook has 2.45 billion users, Gustafson said. The internet has 4.5 billion users, 60 % of the world population of 7.7 billion.

"Customers prefer digital," he said, so the company is working to make booking and check-in by mobile phone as "smooth, effortless and easy" as possible.

"The mobile has changed how we live our lives," said Gustafson, explaining that 67% of check-ins are now done digitally, and the phone app is catching up to the site for check-ins. But the mobile user experience is very different than the desktop experience, so American is working fast to improve the experience on the small screen.

American Airlines is using Design Thinking developed at Stanford to break down problems and discover the pain points for the customer. The research includes tracking the eye movements of users.

The new frontier of research and development in this field, said Gustafson, is voice activation.

American Airlines' research has led to three major insights: 1) Mobile and digital technology is at critical mass; 2) to understand customers, we have to understand how they use devices; and 3) user comprehension is critical.

When developing user interfaces, it's important to realize they will be used on devices you don't yet know about, so they have to be adaptable to new technologies.

### **Influencers**

Jess Tran, senior brand partnerships manager, at Intrepid Travel, talked about influencer marketing and said that everyone is an influencer and that cultivating influencers is the fastest growing customer acquisition method.

Marketers need to figure out who they are trying to reach, said Tran, and who is their audience. Engagement is better than reach, micro versus macro.

### **The science of hashtags**

Christina Miranda, principal at Redpoint, gave a tutorial on the use of hashtags in social media. Miranda showed how to create "an effective hashtag cocktail" and how to use hashtag logistics strategically.

A hashtag puts a tracer on certain words so that people can find what they are looking for, follow topics of interest. They are used for planning trips, getting information on things that are trending, or doing research on a given subject.

As a marketer, you want to use hashtags to make sure that your prospective customers can find you. As marketing tools, hashtags can be used to lead people to your posts, develop community and draw in followers.

Examples of community hashtags are #foodporn, #craftbeer, #londonnightlife and #beforeyou die.



## **Surveying the landscape of travel**

Julie Averay Cuesta, executive vice president and managing director, Myriad/MMGY Global, presented an overview of MMGY's research project, "Portrait of American International Travelers," which it conducted in partnership with USTOA. The study looked at families with a household income of \$100,000 that have taken at least one trip outside North America in the last 12 months.

The study found that consumer sentiment about travel is still very robust, with 42 million people having traveled internationally in 2018. There is a shift upward in the average number of nights per hotel stay from 1.9 to 2.1.

"That's up a little," said Cuesta, "and with all that's going on in the world, this is good news. People are still interested in travel." Spending per trip has also increased from \$10,583 to \$11,966.

The research has shown that Millennials are more interested in guided vacations than Gen Xers or Boomers. Millennials are also using travel agents, which runs counter to some predictions from 20 years ago. Millennials, apparently, believe their time is money and prefer getting expert guidance rather than always being do-it-yourselfers.

Sixty-four percent of American travelers say climate change will affect destinations they want to see in next 10 years. And overtourism is an increasing concern, with 41% saying they avoid popular destinations that they think are too crowded.

Fifty percent of those surveyed are concerned about the social responsibility of companies they buy from. Sustainability is now a strong factor in purchasing decisions of a large part of the market.

Even though 2020 is an election year, 56% said they would travel the same amount as before, and 37% said they would travel more. Only 7% said they would travel less.

## **Marketing with podcasts**

Jacob Bozarth, president and CEO, and Jon Street, operations manager, of Resonate Recordings talked about the explosion in the use of podcasts for marketing. Bozarth founded the company in 2017, and its business has mushroomed.

"A few years ago, podcasts were not known to many," said Bozarth. "The industry has exploded in the last couple of years. We have 600 podcasters we have worked with."

While podcasting is on the rise, Bozarth said, social media is not, that is specifically Facebook. According to Edison research, there were 15 million fewer Facebook users in early 2019 than two years previously.

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“People expect on-demand media resources now,” said Street. “Streaming has become a multibillion-dollar industry. Digital streaming is the way people consume music, movies and TV.”

Podcasts are easily accessible, and the Los Angeles Times recently reported that people are spending more time on phones than TV. For marketing, podcasts provide an excellent alternative medium that has a low barrier of entry.

“All you need is a creative idea and a small investment in technology,” he said.

### **Incremental transformation**

Peter Ladka, CEO of Geekhive, a marketing technology consultancy, told the audience that today’s marketers must digitally mature; digitally transform their operations; and change the way they acquire prospects, convert to sales, and retain customers through business marketing technology.

In a hotly competitive business environment, companies have to improve their operations efficiency, insight, agility, organizational alignment, value creation and competitive advantage. In a dizzyingly fast-moving playing field, the task can be daunting.

“Transformation must be made one small change at a time,” he said, with each step being measurable in order to identify successes.”

To illustrate he quoted an old Indian proverb: “How do you eat an elephant?” he asked. “One spoonful at a time. Make the change incrementally.”

<https://www.travelmarketreport.com/articles/USTOA-Digital-Marketing-Academy-Offers-Clues-to-Understanding-Change>