

Tourism bureaus use social sites to promote sights

October 25 2010, By KATHY McCORMACK , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Dog sledding without snow? Karen Tolin knew the concept was a little hard to understand, but she believed a Facebook promotion for her White Mountains dog-sledding business through the state tourism division would help clear it up - and draw some customers during the off season.

She was right.

Visitors mentioned the August offer when they booked a "rolling" dog sledding tour - when dogs pull passengers in a wheeled cart, something more common in the West. Tolin combined an excursion discount with a whitewater rafting trip called "Paws and Paddles."

State [tourism](#) bureaus, including New Hampshire's, have been aggressively using social networks to promote business and attract visitors with travel packages, itineraries and tips from travelers themselves. Tolin's Muddy Paw Sled Dog Kennel is among those reaping the benefits.

"No one Googles 'dog sledding,'" said Tolin, of Gorham, "so taking advantage of social media in addition to traditional advertising has been a big deal and has gotten the word out, and has increased our business in a big way."

Indiana has partnered with Foursquare, a smart-phone application that reveals the user's location, to provide discounts at museums, restaurants

and other places through its Leaf Cam foliage-viewing site. Virginia recently won a national award for using Twitter to promote wine tourism. Nearly three-quarters of Michigan's [Facebook](#) fans learned from fellow travelers about unfamiliar places and activities.

"We're starting to see more and more organizations see the value of blogging," said David Serino, a Michigan-based travel industry consultant who tracks and ranks social media use among state tourism sites.

"We're generating content that's keyword-rich and the content we're generating is very search engine-friendly," he said. "The content is extremely beneficial to the traveler. With blogging, you really get the insider information or the insider's take."

New Hampshire's Division of Travel and Tourism Development started its Facebook page in July 2009 and connected it to its VisitNH.gov website. When it began offering promotions in November, it had about 1,400 fans, said Tai Freligh, a spokesman for the division. Today, it has nearly 20,000.

The state selects monthly partners for "fan benefits" exclusive to Facebook and [Twitter](#) users. The discounts come as printable coupons or promotional codes. There's no cost to the partner for the promotion - which also is advertised to state, regional and national media outlets - and an e-mail database of 126,000.

Participation in the promotions lets businesses that don't use social media gain exposure without the risk or commitment of setting up and maintaining their own page. But those that do have a social media page, like Muddy Paw, have noticed a boost in fans.

Tolin's business also has received exposure through a separate visitor

information website and [social media](#) network for northern New Hampshire businesses run through a nonprofit economic development group, an effort called NH Grand.

About 40 people took a Muddy Paw ride over Columbus Day weekend, Tolin said, compared with very few a year ago.

Not all businesses say they have benefited from the monthly exclusives. The Great Northern Moose Lodge, a bed-and-breakfast in Dummer, was part of the August promotion. Owner Richard Tessier said he got some calls but no takers.

"We went into it with the understanding that even if we didn't get anything out of it, it was worth the exposure," he said.

The Radisson Hotel in Nashua made \$30,000 in new sales from a December promotion letting visitors stay free a second night. The state's very first promotion - 50 percent off midweek accommodations at the Inns and Spa at Mill Falls - generated only about \$1,400 with eight room reservations, but a lot of hits.

The travel division is marking the first anniversary of its fan benefits with a promotion at the Inns and Spa that combines accommodations with shopping and dining.

"The dollar amount wasn't huge," said Inns and Spa marketer Michelle Brown, "but I think the recognition and teaming up with the state was important."

More information: <http://www.visitnh.gov>
<http://www.nhgrand.com>

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