

CRUISE LINES

Royal Caribbean launching own social network

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BY BRIDGET CAREY
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Cruises are often social vacations, and Royal Caribbean wants to tap into that community energy by creating an online social network for its customers.

Called RoyalConnect, the social network is a way for previous Royal Caribbean customers to get in touch with company staff and other cruisers with similar interests. Cruising enthusiasts already dive into chat message boards and blogs, but this is the first time a cruise line is creating a private social network just for its customers.

The site's first users will be members of the company's Crown & Anchor Society — a free benefit

program where membership requires having been on one Royal Caribbean cruise. About 70 executives, captains, cruise directors and other select ship staff will be among the first employees to create profiles so that customers can engage with them.

With users talking to each other about cruising experiences, "you begin the cruise vacation from the moment you think about taking the cruise," said Bill Hayden, assistant vice president of marketing plan-

ning and strategy for Royal Caribbean.

And it goes without saying that the company hopes this site encourages these loyal cruisers to book more vacations in the future — especially in a time of an economic downturn. Royal Caribbean soft-launched the site for testing

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CRUISE LINES

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last week, alongside news that the company has lowered its profit expectations due to fuel costs.

Online cruise-topic networks for reviews and tips already exist, such as Cruise Critic (cruisecritic.com), but RoyalConnect is different.

"We didn't want to create Cruise Critic again," Hayden said. "We don't want to try to steal people from a community that they already find value in."

When looking for answers and advice about cruising, many people use search engines to find online forums or communities about the topic in question.

But the idea with RoyalConnect is that you can see which users are most like you based on how well their profile matches yours. Then you can get answers and tips from like-minded cruisers, thus finding the conversations more useful.

So why open it only to Crown & Anchor members?

"We decided when it came down to it, we wanted people with a significant affinity to our brand," Hayden said. "They love Royal Caribbean."

Hayden said there are about two million active members of the society, and about one million cruised within the previous year. Some cruisers tend to get attached to particular members of the staff, so this is also a tool for people to keep in touch with their favorite crew members.

Royal Caribbean is not ruling out the idea that it could expand to users outside the society, Hayden said. Now it's more about testing the waters of this social network with previous customers. And those that have beta tested it so far have "took like a moth to a flame to social networking," he said.

Royal Caribbean's rival, Carnival Corp., has an online tool, CarnivalConnections.com, where anyone can post reviews of Carnival experiences or create digital scrapbooks by uploading trip photos. The site launched in February 2007 and is still in beta release.

The idea with RoyalConnect is that you can see which users are most like you based on how well their profile matches yours.

"There are a lot of companies that hear the buzz around social networks and they feel they have to get on it," said social media and Web development consultant Brian Oberkirch. He's in support of companies embracing social media, as long as it serves a need.

But RoyalConnect is not serving the need of the outsider who is considering taking a trip and has never been with Royal Caribbean before.

"They're not putting users' larger Web behaviors into this mix," and could be missing out a chance to be an extremely useful vacation site, Oberkirch said.

"There probably are a sliver of people who are fanatical about Royal Caribbean."

And a challenge the site faces is if people want to keep coming back and interact with the site.

"It's at the point of anticipated purchase that I start to immerse myself in the community," Oberkirch said.

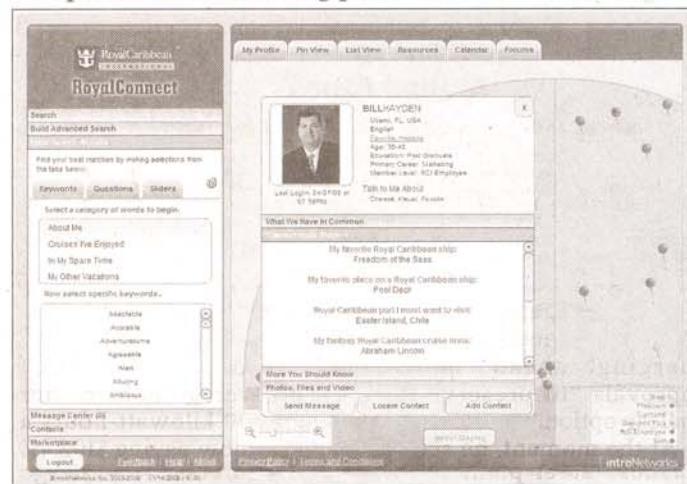
"It's a limited interaction. At the moment you're really useful to me. But it's not like I need to friend you or subscribe to your profile."

However, sometimes a hyper-niche network around a particular interest group — like loyal Crown & Anchor members — can be a good thing.

"It's probably not bad to invest in a sandbox for them, because they are your best customers," he said.

Hayden of Royal Caribbean realizes all too well that the number of users sticking with the site is vital to whether his team's year-long project will be successful.

"It's really about the value of what else is in there that you want to connect with," Hayden said. "It'll sink or swim based on that."



NEW SITE: Royal Caribbean's new social networking site was launched for testing last week. The company hopes it will encourage business.

Social network anchors customers in RCL community

BY BRIDGET CAREY
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California-based IntroNetworks has been working with Royal Caribbean to create the social network RoyalConnect.

IntroNetworks is among several companies offering templates of social network tools that companies can brand and customize to work with their needs. The company has created more than 200 communities so far — and they are very closed communities, such as corporate employee networks or learning communities.

Royal Caribbean did not disclose how much it cost to develop the site, but Mark Sylvester, chief executive of IntroNetworks, said the company's starting price for building, hosting and supporting a basic network is \$675 a month.

The features of RoyalConnect:

- You need to be a member of Royal Caribbean's Crown & Anchor Society to join the social network.

- Users are presented a collection of words to describe themselves, what ships they have sailed on and what cruise activities they enjoy. Users rank the words

in order of importance and the answers are used to compare similar interests with other network members.

- On the main page, the community is on one big circle, and you are in the center. Other users are push pins on the circle, and how close they are to the center shows how similar they are to your interests and personality.

- You can search community members that have a certain phrase in their profile using various filters. For example, you can tell it only show people who have been on the ship Freedom of the Seas.

- You can send messages to other members via their profiles. E-mail addresses are not revealed, but if you receive a message, a notification will be sent to your personal e-mail account. You can also send video messages to other members.

- There is a community message board. Royal Caribbean has control over the main categories of discussion, but users are free to post what they want.

- The last tab in the menu is for a section on news and special deals for Royal Caribbean vacations.