the

SOCIAL TRAVEL SUMMIT

Think Tank Report

2019

Ravenna
Emilia-Romagna
Italy

» Contents

» About The Social Travel Summit

The Social Travel Summit (STS) is an exclusive annual two-day gathering of travel & tourism professionals, leading travel bloggers & online influencers from around the world. Its purpose is to promote and curate high-level discussions about the future of online travel marketing.

Every year since the Social Travel Summit started, the event has attracted a high-calibre audience and leading speakers in their field to enjoy two days of networking, valuable educational sessions and an outstanding social programme.

The bloggers and influencers who attend the Social Travel Summit are specially selected based on the high quality of the content

The Social Travel Summit is an initiative of iambassador in collaboration with Travel Dudes and Reiseblogger Kollektiv.

produced, online reach and track record in working with the tourism industry. The summit provides a unique opportunity for industry professionals to connect with them and build mutually beneficial relationships.

This year we celebrated the sixth edition of the Social Travel Summit for the first time in Italy, in the beautiful town of Ravenna in the region of Emilia Romagna.

Social Travel Summit History

1	2014 Leipzig, Germany	114 delegates
2	2015 Hamburg, Germany	136 delegates
3	2016 Inverness, UK	118 delegates
4	2017 Kitzbühel, Austria	148 delegates
5	2018 Belfast, UK	142 delegates
6	2019 Ravenna, Italy	114 delegates

"WE'RE EXPLORING HOW WE CAN IMPROVE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRAVEL BLOGGERS, CONTENT CREATORS AND THE GLOBAL TRAVEL INDUSTRY"

» ABOUT THE THINK TANK

Background

The Social Travel Summit has become established as a leader in its field, attracting high-calibre attendees. Many of the travel industry representatives who attend have extensive experience in working with bloggers, while the bloggers themselves have travelled (literally) to the ends of the earth, working in an immense variety of destinations and cultural contexts. The Social Travel Summit seeks to capitalise on this collective experience for the benefit of the attendees and the wider travel industry by debating the hottest topics in travel and marketing today in a structured way, and releasing these insights in a report.

How it works

Prior to the event, all delegates were informed about this year's chosen Think Tank topics and invited to register for their preferred topic, the topics having been recommended by the high-level Social Travel Forum which took place in Graz, in May 2019. The Think Tanks have proven so popular in previous years that at this year's Social Travel Summit, for the first time all delegates were invited to join a group of their choice. A total of eight groups were formed, each composed of a mix of 10-15 travel influencers and industry representatives, notably DMOs.

At the start of the Summit, Peter Jordan, the Think Tank facilitator gave a presentation to introduce all the topics and set the scene for the discussions. Later that day, the delegates divided into their groups and discussed the questions put to them by their Topic Leader. Six groups discussed defined topics, while two each carried out a surprise activity on the theme of the blogger-industry relationship.

MONEY
AND
BUDGETS

INTERNAL
STRUCTURES
OF DMOS

HOW TO
CHOOSE
BLOGGERS

TRANS-
PARENCY
AND
ETHICS

THE VALUE
OF
BLOGGERS
BEYOND
STATS

WORKING
WITH LOCAL
BUSINESSES

IMPROVING
CLIENT
BLOGGER
COMMUNI-
CATION

TACKLING
OVER-
TOURISM

THE FUTURE
OF TRAVEL
BLOGGING

BLOGGING
AND POST
CRISIS
RECOVERY

PLANNING
THE PERFECT
BLOGGER
VISIT

WHEN
BLOGGERS
MOVE INTO
CONSULTING

CONTENT
AUTHEN-
TICITY AND
ETHICS

THE ROLE OF
CONTENT IN
VISITOR
DISPERSAL

» Previous
editions of
the Think
Tank

The Think Tank seeks to address the major issues in travel and marketing today. Delegates with all levels of experience participate in the Think Tank, bringing ideas and recommendations from around the world. The above titles are just a small selection of the topics debated in previous years.

» The Think Tank Reports

Every year, the ideas and recommendations on the topics outlined above are summarised in a report for the benefit the wider travel industry.

Download all STS Think Tank Reports free of charge at:
www.thesocialtravelsummit.com/think-tank

» STS Think Tank 2019 - Context

As an outward-looking, premier event with a strong sense of responsibility, each year the Social Travel Summit aims to explore issues which are front-of-mind for the travel industry.

In this respect, it is clear that the theme of 'responsibility'; of destinations, tourism providers, bloggers and travellers themselves is absolutely paramount, and only increasing in importance.

As individuals, consumers and, ultimately, as travellers, we're all becoming more acutely aware of our impact on the environment and society around us. As a result, the travel industry as a whole is quickly having to adapt to this mass shift in consumer values. This is occurring at a time when globally, demand for travel continues to rise. As a result, this situation is posing considerable challenges, especially in already-popular destinations.

What does all this mean for those responsible for promoting destinations? As this year's Social Travel Forum found, DMOs are under increasing pressure to demonstrate the impact of their work for the wider economy, and to ensure that they are preserving the quality of life and the environment for local residents. As organisations, their role is gradually shifting from direct promotion, towards helping local

businesses to do this themselves. In certain circumstances, they're also having to take a stronger role in destination management; ensuring that the impact of visitor spending is spread more widely and does not harm local residents' quality of life. Another increasingly important theme for consumers is that of diversity; historically, the travel industry has lagged behind when it has come to representing people of colour, the LGBTQ community, travellers with disabilities and other groups of consumers who don't always identify with travel marketing content.

In this year's STS Think Tanks, we wanted to explore how these issues can be addressed in a practical way in order to generate useful recommendations for the wider travel industry. These findings have been collected and set out under three broad themes:

1 With influence, comes responsibility

2 The way we work

3 Going further: reflecting our readers

» 1. With influence, comes responsibility

The concept of sustainable tourism is nothing new; it has been in use for many decades. However during that time these terms have been used to refer to a variety of different concepts, and conflated with others.

To recap using the definition set out by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), sustainable tourism is "Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities." Far from being a concept only used in the context of developing countries or remote areas, the Organization also notes that "Sustainable tourism development guidelines and management practices are applicable to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations".

Whereas traditional media sources have been relatively late to address these issues, many bloggers were among the first to embrace 'sustainable tourism' in its broadest sense from an early stage, putting it at the heart of their content and drawing attention to controversial situations as they travelled. In recent years, a broader shift in consumer culture has occurred, as people have paid more attention to the impact of tourism on the environment and local communities, especially in destinations which are starting to suffer from overtourism.

Indeed, one of the frustrations highlighted in STS Think Tanks in recent years is that DMOs at some of these destinations have been slow to respond to this, sending bloggers on the same itineraries to the same popular attractions and not being consistent in their approach to dispersing visitors as they say they'd like to do.

Meanwhile, content creation has gone mass market. As the Social Travel Forum observed, today inspirational content is no longer limited to travel blogs or glossy magazines. Thanks to social media (especially Instagram), everyone's doing it, often resulting in content saturation. This raises serious questions about how authentically destinations are represented online. Concerns have also been raised about the way that some travellers behave when they're on a quest to grab attention with their posts

by trespassing on private property, standing in dangerous places or dressing disrespectfully in sensitive cultural locations. Situations such as these can cause local communities to turn against visitors, meaning that the behaviour of a small group affects the reputations of many.

For this reason, in this year's Social Travel Summit Think Tanks, we posed the questions "How to influence the influencers?" and "What does responsible behaviour by DMOs and travel bloggers look like?". It has also led us to update the Code of Ethics for Professional Travel Bloggers, published in 2014 to address modern challenges such as those outlined above. As a result, a new Charter of Ethics will be published separately.

To receive news about the Charter of Ethics sign up to the iambassador newsletter:

www.iambassador.net/subscribe

» Our responsibility - recommendations

Education starts with us

When it comes to raising awareness of ethical or environmental issues among our audiences, it's clear that bloggers are transitioning from curious reporters to become educators too. Consumers are taking their responsibility increasingly seriously, so it's becoming more important for bloggers to do their own research on ethical issues and widely-respected codes of conduct (and to understand what 'sustainability' means so that they use the term in the right way), so that they can speak to their audience with confidence and authority. There are vast amounts of resources on these issues online for bloggers to use and share.

### Set a good example, make a personal pledge

"Do the right thing and don't be afraid to shout about it". It's time to be more explicit about our responsibility, and to set a good example to our audiences in the way we travel. Our participants agreed that everyone has different values and circumstances, so it makes sense to share a personal pledge, for example: "This year I pledge to reduce my impact in the following ways…", and to keep this messaging consistent and check back on progress throughout the year.

Content as a solution

Our participants agreed that it's time to cut down on hollow or vague content, and for both DMOs and bloggers to ensure that the content they produce is more explicitly aligned with the DMO's strategy; especially when it relates to dispersing visitors, encouraging low-season visits, etc. This even comes down to making it clear to readers why a blogger is visiting a destination: "This week I'm in city X because they're really keen for people to know there's way more to see than just the city centre.."

Beat the algorithms

By definition, listicles like "The top 10 things to do in…" encourage bucket list tourism and crowding. Unfortunately, search engines are primed for this kind of search, and so are consumers. But it doesn't have to be this way. One destination explained how it had banned listicles and instead asked bloggers to list specific attractions as 'recommendations', and invested in the SEO to match.
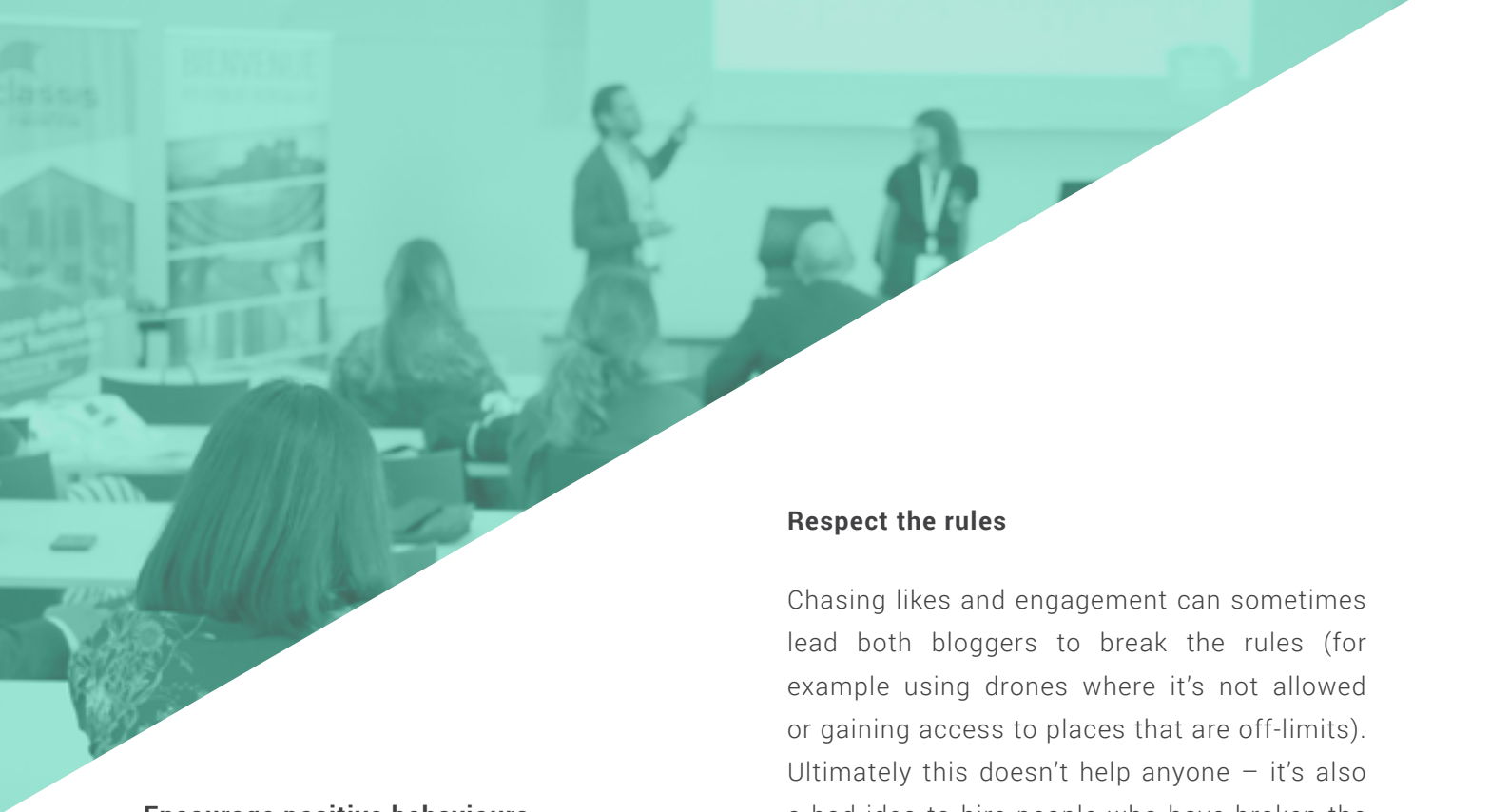
Encourage positive behaviours

Content can be primed to encourage positive behaviour, for example introducing positive hashtags or highlighting sustainable practices. Our participants agreed that DMOs could do a lot more to provide their own resources on "'How to visit our destination responsibly" or "How to make your visit as green as possible" with information on public transport, bike hire, recycling, etc.. that bloggers can use and share.

Making unethical activities uncool and responsibility sexy

In an era of vanity and validation, one of the most effective ways to end unethical behaviour can be to start a movement that makes it uncool. Elephant rides are a good example of this; where once they were fun to post on social media, thanks to increased awareness of elephant welfare and poor treatment by the tourism industry, social media users have quickly become uncomfortable with the sight of tourists taking rides. Where DMOs are experiencing this kind of problem, they should explore creative solutions with bloggers on how to start such a movement.

Respect the rules

Chasing likes and engagement can sometimes lead both bloggers to break the rules (for example using drones where it's not allowed or gaining access to places that are off-limits). Ultimately this doesn't help anyone – it's also a bad idea to hire people who have broken the rules elsewhere or set a bad example in the content that they post.

Flag bad behaviour with courtesy and respect

These days, it doesn't take much to make people angry online and to start a war of words. However, we should set the right example by being discreet and polite when flagging behaviour, for example by sending a private message rather than a public post, or saying that an issue "needs more discussion" rather than saying that someone is wrong or behaving badly.

Be authentic

It's clear that challenges such as climate change and tourism's occasional negative impact on communities are here to stay. That's why our response cannot be just piecemeal or one-off posts. It's important that responsible travel practices are increasingly integrated into the content that we produce and that our approach is consistent throughout the year.

» 2. The way we work

Shifts in consumer behaviour and pressure from reduced public funding is driving considerable changes, both in terms of a DMO's general role, and in terms of their relationship with travel bloggers and content creators. As the Social Travel Forum found, DMOs are gradually becoming more savvy in working with travel bloggers in order to meet their objectives, and how to get the best from the relationship. Where once bloggers were hired with few questions asked (and thus disappointment about the results), more dialogue has resulted in a better understanding of expectations.

More generally, the Social Travel Forum observed that DMOs are under pressure to:

» Focus more on the 'quality' of visitors, instead of the quantity.

» Do more work with fewer resources, often taking on additional roles such as attracting meetings and conferences (CVB) or managing cultural events and public spaces.

» Allow more local commercial business partners and members to have a stake in the DMOs' management, and its strategic direction.

» Justify how the money they spend is aligned with their overall strategy and long-term goals for the destination such as local economic development or reducing seasonality.

» Engage in educating and coaching local businesses to help them improve their knowledge of the global tourism marketplace, consumer trends, marketing and other business management skills.

» Demonstrate project results (for example, from an influencer marketing campaign), with hard data, that shows continual improvement.

In this year's Social Travel Summit we sought to look more closely at the final two points in this list; asking 'How is the role of the DMO changing and what can travel bloggers do to support this?', and "How can DMOs and bloggers beat the numbers game, and how can success be measured more broadly?' The outcomes are summarised on the following two pages.

"HOW CAN DMOs AND BLOGGERS BEAT THE NUMBERS GAME, AND HOW CAN SUCCESS BE MEASURED MORE BROADLY?"

» The changing role of the DMO - recommendations

Getting the fundamentals right

While it's true that DMOs are undergoing some fundamental shifts in terms of their role and objectives, our participants agreed that there is still much more that bloggers and DMOs can do to improve the way they work together. Practical recommendations on this can be found in all of the Think Tank Reports from previous editions of the Social Travel Summit. In particular our group wanted to underline the importance of good communication, especially at the start of any campaign or project.

Outline the broader goals

This is an issue that has been raised at every Social Travel Summit, but as budgets become constrained and destination management issues rise up the agenda, it's becoming ever more important for DMOs to discuss their strategic goals with the bloggers they work with at the start of a project. For example, these could include the need to encourage more low-season visits, change negative perceptions about a place, focus on food and drink or getting more visitors to use public transport instead of their car. It's also important for DMOs to be honest about the wider issues they're facing in the

destination; working with bloggers often forms only a small part of a DMO's yearly activities.

Find new routes for cooperation

As discussed in previous editions of STS, it's important that DMOs value bloggers' creativity and know-how by finding other ways to cooperate; for example by involving them in workshops for local partners, or bringing them to trade fairs to meet clients and give joint presentations. Good DMOs are becoming a valuable educational and networking resource for their local business community. Bloggers can help in this process too. For more information about bloggers moving into new roles, please see the Think Tank report from Kitzbuehel, 2017.

Be an agent of positive change

Together, DMOs and bloggers can give visibility to local projects, businesses and practices that have a positive impact on the environment and local community. Together, they can help destinations where they need it most: supporting sustainable practices, education and training, sparking innovation, improving product quality or recovering from crises.

» Measuring success - recommendations

Using the tools we've got

While there are many more ways to measure a blogger's success for a destination than the traditional indicators, it's still important for both bloggers and DMOs to get a good understanding of the tools for measurement that exist, and to use them properly; after all, it's a blogger's unique selling point versus traditional media channels such as newspapers and TV! For example, Google Analytics is still a highly effective yet underused tool that can be widely understood by all users. Bloggers should also bear in mind that the process of educating is a continual one; it's useful if they provide a glossary of terms used, when submitting a post-campaign report.

Communicate project aims clearly

If the strategic aims of a campaign or project are not made clear at the start, how will we know if we've succeeded when we've arrived at the end? It's important for DMOs and bloggers to agree on both strategic and specific goals, so that expectations can be managed, and so that both partners will know if the collaboration has been successful.

Find new ways to measure quality over quantity

For DMOs it's worth spending time looking at the quality of engagement that posts have received (e.g. quantity and quality of comments received), as well as evaluating how well a post reflects the destination's values. Of course, it is important to make this clear to bloggers when starting on a project.

Measure success over a longer period

Some posts continue to be highly popular long after a campaign has ended. That's why it's important to measure the success of a post over the period of a whole year or longer; not just once a campaign or a trip is complete.

Take time to compare and contrast

It's especially important for DMOs to take the time to compare posts over a long period of time in order to learn what works and what consumers appear to be looking for, as well as to discuss what works with other destinations.

» 3.Going further: Reflecting our readers

Every year at the Social Travel Summit, the Think Tanks aim to explore an entirely new topic for the travel blogging community, usually one with an ethical dimension, or which will ultimately benefit destinations and travellers in a meaningful way. This year we addressed a long-overdue question: 'How can travel bloggers and destinations better reflect the diversity of our readers?'

If we are to make a brutally honest appraisal of the world of travel blogging and content creation, it must be recognised that bloggers are predominantly white, cis-gendered and from relatively affluent backgrounds. Yet does this caricature represent the real diversity of the travelling public today? If we are honest, we must admit that this caricature doesn't properly represent the mature outbound markets (such as the US, UK, France, Germany), let alone those that are rapidly emerging in importance (such as Brazil, China or Mexico).

Surely, one of the great strengths of travel blogging is that the barriers to entry are relatively low, and that they can enable many individuals to find their voice and tell a story from their perspective? In this respect, giving visibility to those who want to tell their story is essential, and social media has helped to promote this where once the traditional media filtered them out or acted as powerful gatekeepers in deciding which stories would be told and which would not.

» Reflecting our readers

The Think Tank group that discussed this topic defined 'diversity' as representing travellers for whom the following aspects influence their values, ability to travel, or may require them to seek specialist information about their destinations:

- » Religious beliefs

- » Age

- » Disability, both visible and invisible

- » Ethnicity

- » Life situations (e.g. economically disadvantaged, or suffering long-term illness)

- » Gender identity

- » Sexual orientation

- » Passport privilege (i.e. the ease of travel to countries with no visa or a visa upon arrival)

- » Plus-size travel

- » Those who consider themselves a traveller rather than a tourist

- » Those who suffer from assumptions about their background/needs according to their appearance

Our group agreed that the travel industry has often lagged behind, when it comes to representing, among others, people of colour, elderly people, or same-sex couples in advertising. Yet it doesn't have to be this way; DMOs and the wider travel industry have a huge potential to affect change by actively choosing to work with bloggers from diverse backgrounds. In doing so, they stand the best chance of attracting the most diverse range of visitors, helping to support their long-term economic competitiveness.

The topic leader, Kerwin McKenzie has written extensively about this topic. His input, together with that of the Think Tank group is summarised on the following pages.

» Reflecting our readers - recommendations

Encourage greater visibility of diverse traveller groups

DMOs and bloggers alike can take a significant step by displaying diverse travellers in advertising/marketing campaigns; including billboards, stanchions, brochures, print advertising, TV advertising, social media. This helps to drive the process of understanding and acceptance, as well as greater levels of engagement with these groups.

Reject stereotypes and tokenism

The commitment to increasing diversity within travel content should be sincere and consistent. It is vitally important to represent real people and not fall back on lazy stereotypes; take the time to consult with local community groups (outside of the travel industry) to see what they would recommend, seek out people who'd like to assist with campaigns and hire diversity consultants who can help to craft a proper diversity policy.

Education starts at home

Arrange training for colleagues within DMOs and local businesses that will help them understand where the organisation's 'blind spots' lie when it comes to questions of diversity. Unconscious bias training can help in identifying where more education is needed. It's also useful to start following more diverse bloggers from other ethnic groups and social backgrounds in order to better understand the issues that they face when travelling.

Promote diversity across your channels

It's not just the consumer-facing channels that matter; it's important that DMOs are clear about their approach at industry events too and to ensure that local industry partners are on board with it. When organising local workshops and industry events, don't be afraid to bring in new speakers from diverse backgrounds who can share their personal experience and help the audience to understand the travel experience from their perspective.

Monitor and share data

When targeting a specific audience, for example travellers with disabilities, or people of colour, share research data and industry resources that show the spending power of the different underrepresented groups in order to help educate local businesses about the value of taking this approach.

Support bloggers from minority backgrounds

Both DMOs and bloggers can welcome guest posts by bloggers from minority backgrounds so that their stories receive greater visibility, and when setting up campaigns or proposals, they can include bloggers from diverse backgrounds too. They can also be better supported in order to attend industry conferences and tap into the networks that more experienced bloggers are able to enjoy. When running blogger trips for bloggers from diverse backgrounds, ensure that local businesses are well informed and prepared (for example, when welcoming a visitor with visual impairment or reduced mobility)

Add accessibility information to destination guides

Simple guidance for disabled travellers, integrated into destination guides costs nothing to add and can be extremely useful.

» Closing words

The sixth edition of the Social Travel Summit was held in Ravenna, Emilia Romagna, Italy, in September 2019. This year, we welcomed 114 delegates from 17 countries, including 50 travel influencers from around the world. I'm especially proud and grateful to have worked with Emilia Romagna Tourism and Ravenna Tourism to bring STS to Italy for the first time!

As the Organiser of the Summit, I see our role as a facilitator who creates the right framework and conditions in which all delegates feel like friends (or family) and where they can be honest in their opinions and feel free to share. Barely a day into STS, several delegates mentioned how welcomed they felt and how easy it was to join a discussion and share their views and knowledge. It was an amazing experience for me to witness the thought-provoking discussions and insightful presentations, and see the issues and recommendations expertly summed up in this report.

Since its inception in 2014, the Social Travel Summit has established itself as the platform where travel influencers and industry gather to learn and help shape the future of digital marketing. I'm proud of this achievement and the excellent work of the STS Organising Team,

the iambassador Management Team and our partner networks. A special thank you goes to the STS Team: Janice Waugh, Tracey Nesbitt, Melvin Boecher and Nicholas Montemaggi. I would also like to thank our partners: Emilia Romagna Tourism, Ravenna Tourism, Austrian National Tourist Office, Hamburg Tourism and Skyscanner - STS Ravenna would not have been possible without you! Another special thank you goes to Peter Jordan for his exceptional work in leading the Think Tanks and compiling this report. Last but not least, I would like to thank all the influencers and delegates for helping to make STS Ravenna a great success!

See you in 2020!

Keith Jenkins
CEO, iambassador
Head of the STS Organising Team

THANK YOU!

» Acknowledgements

» About the author

Peter Jordan is a consultant, researcher and strategist, specialised in the curation and interpretation of travel trends for diverse clients from inside and outside the tourism industry. With a background in industry education, as well as marketing and communications at various tourism industry associations, he has gained a panoramic view of global travel helping him to focus on translating diverse insights into practical solutions. His professional background involves working with the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in Madrid as well as the Pacific Asia Travel Association in Bangkok.

Today he is based in Amsterdam, and pilots a number of research and strategy projects in consumer trends and destination management. He has also become established as a global thought leader in the field of LGBT tourism.

» Social Travel Summit 2019 Partners

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to the following partners of the Social Travel Summit 2019:
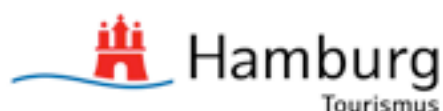
Find out moore about The Social Travel Summit

Leipzig 2014: https://youtu.be/JQch_6zXIH8

Hamburg 2015: https://youtu.be/WRt39AZ9A4c

Inverness 2016: https://youtu.be/Q0Mhqa6qFLg

Kitzbuehel 2017: https://youtu.be/pQ2aqPXhUoE

Belfast 2018: https://youtu.be/cl4GXGIIu8Q

Ravenna 2019: https://youtu.be/a2HATur6gOw

For STS updates, follow:

https://twitter.com/i_ambassador

https://www.facebook.com/iambassadornet/

the
**SOCIAL
TRAVEL
SUMMIT**