

# THE TIKTOKIFICATION OF TRAVEL MEDIA

How to Use Authentic Destination Storytelling to Connect with Millennial Audiences Across Off-Site Platforms



# WHY THIS GUIDE



Social media has become a significant factor in how people plan their vacations. A 2023 study by [Expedia Group](#) found that 77% of people use social media for travel inspiration. With short-form video platforms like Instagram and TikTok growing, travel media needs to adapt its content to reach a younger audience. It's crucial to distribute content beyond owned websites and understand the role of each platform in the audience journey.

As AI and automation evolve, understanding core audiences and diversifying brand awareness are vital. Content creators should focus on storytelling elements and narrative structure to adapt to future innovations and maintain their audience's interest in travel experiences.

## ABOUT

The author created this guide from academic and industry research and interviews with travel media experts while enrolled in the MADC program at UNC-Chapel Hill.

For questions or more information, contact the author at:

✉ [arrossi6@gmail.com](mailto:arrossi6@gmail.com)






👤 [linkedin.com/in/ashleyrossi/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/ashleyrossi/)

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# WHO THIS IS FOR

- Travel publications
- Travel brands with content marketing teams
- DMOs and agencies

# KEY

-  Insights
-  Deep dive
-  Closer look
-  Thought-starter
-  Brand exercise

# WHAT'S INSIDE

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# THE MILLENNIAL APPEAL

Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) are known for valuing experiences, connecting with others, and seeking affordability and nature experiences in their travels. Sustainability-focused is more of a Gen Z characteristic, but millennials are also very socially conscious and reflect these values in their travels. They're influenced by their peers on social media and often share their experiences online. Influencers and user-generated content also play a significant role in influencing travel choices, but credibility—another important element—can be a concern.

Collaborations between brands, media publishers, DMOs, and influencers are effective in reaching millennials, especially when the content is visually engaging, appeals to emotional and practical needs, and maintains authenticity. Short-form videos on social media are particularly engaging for this generation.

## AUTHENTICITY

- First person POV
- Credibility

## ORIGINALITY

- Brand authority
- Expertise

## UTILITY

- Usefulness
- Helpfulness

## FUN & ENTERTAINING

- Aspirational
- Humor

*Does your current content align with these millennial travel motivations?*

*Label your top-performing content with one or more of these elements and see if any trends emerge. Bonus if the content hits on more than one of these elements.*

# Core Millennial Travel Motivations

Understanding the core travel motivations and preferences of millennials is crucial for travel media and brands to create influential content and partnerships on social media platforms.

Here's how this translates to content creation:

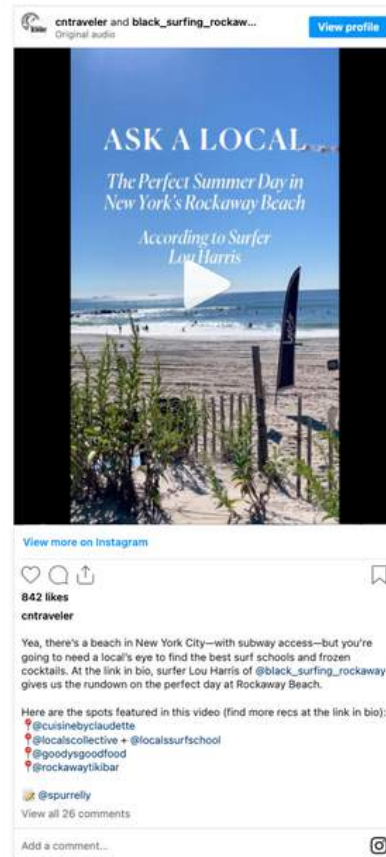
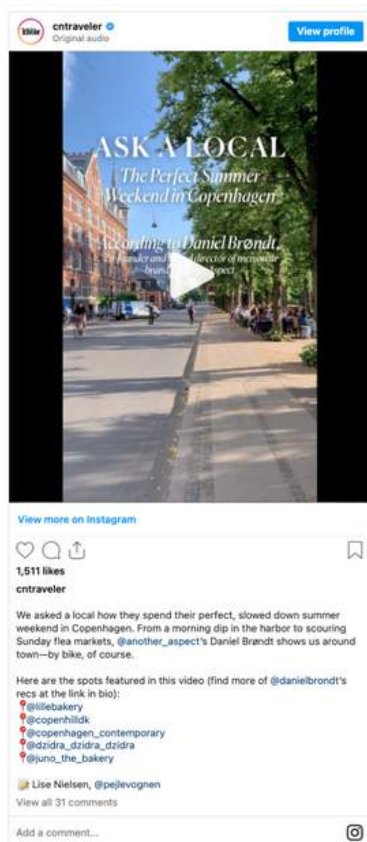
## 1 – Authenticity

Content should be authentic to the brand and destination, using a first-person perspective; showing credibility is also an important element that results from authenticity e.g. showing the people and culture of a destination.



Conde Nast Traveler's "Ask a Local" series uses a first-person perspective to show expertise about local knowledge.

This perspective also gives credibility to the recommendations and the caption gives utility by tagging the featured locations.



# Core Millennial Travel Motivations

## 2 – Originality

Content must be different from other brands and stand out by giving a unique point-of-view e.g. highlighting brand authority and expertise.



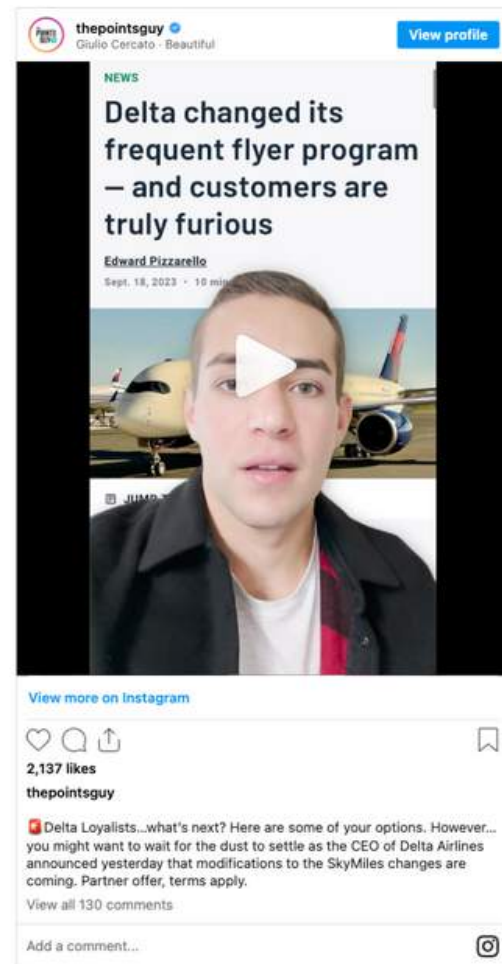
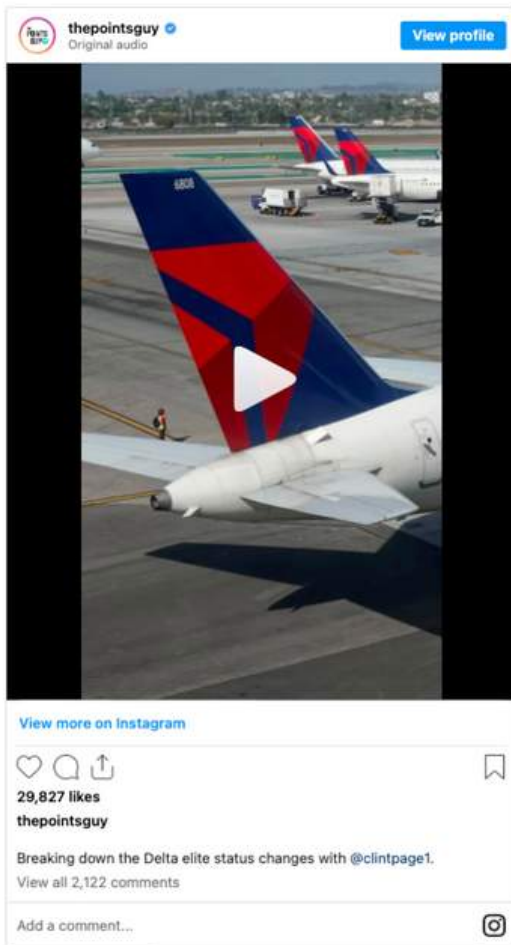
**Travel + Leisure** provides a unique perspective that only someone who experienced the activity or destination can provide. The brand also uses trending sounds and shows credibility by tagging the creator.

Millennial followers love the voyeuristic angle of luxurious travel experiences.

# Core Millennial Travel Motivations

## 3 – Utility

Content must be useful and provide helpful information for someone during their travel journey e.g. travel hacks or doing a deep dive on a relevant topic.



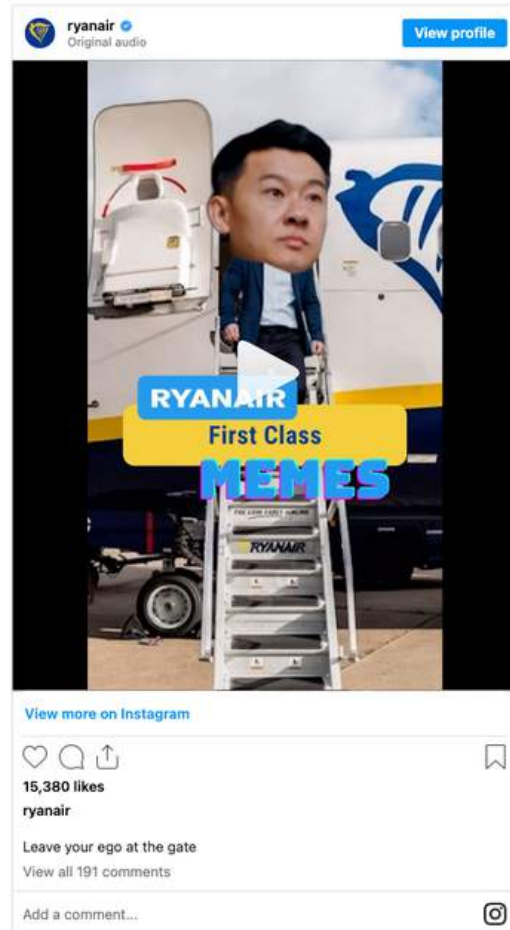
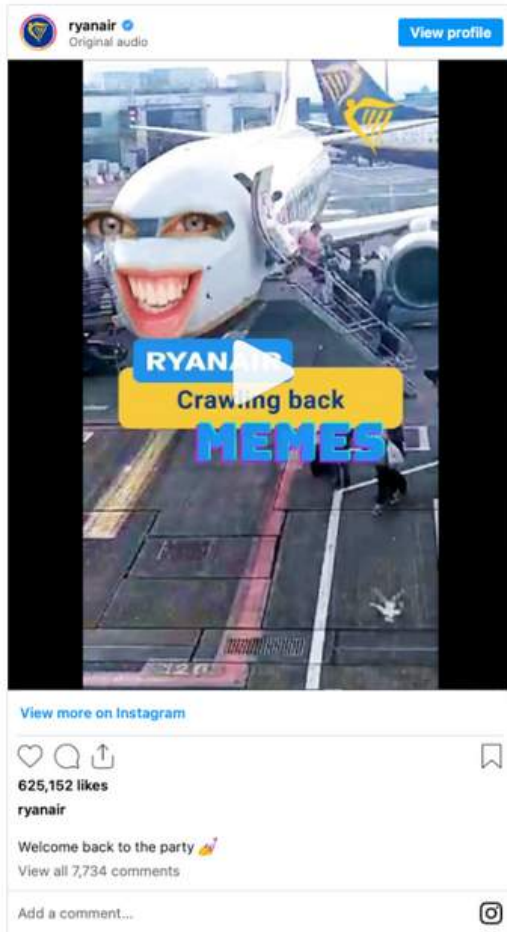
The Points Guy provides useful information to its audience on a popular and important topic for them.

The brand also shows originality and credibility by featuring on-staff editors and explaining how this topic will impact travelers.

# Core Millennial Travel Motivations

## 4 – Fun and Entertaining

Content needs to be light-hearted and aspirational when appropriate e.g. showing a behind-the-scenes point-of-view or the brand making fun of itself.



**Ryanair** uses social media trends to poke fun at itself in an attempt to entertain its audience. This works incredibly well for the brand as its reputation as a low-budget and stingy airline is a popular opinion in the travel industry.

\*This approach only works if there is brand alignment and is likely a better approach for brands that sell a product or service instead of publishers.



# A LOOK AT THE INDUSTRY

A look at the top U.S. travel publications' performance on TikTok and Instagram:



Brand	Instagram Followers	Instagram Engagement Rate (Compared to Avg.)	Most Engaging Content Themes (Instagram)	TikTok Followers	TikTok Engagement Rate (Compared to Avg.)	TikTok Video Likes	Most Engaging Content Themes (TikTok)	Strategy (Creator/Personality vs. Newsroom/Editorial)
MATADOR network	470k	131.88% (3.78%)	Unbelievable clips and adventure	2m	2.81% (4.33%)	87.4m	Unbelievable clips and adventure	Creator (UGC)
THE POINTS GUY	1m	0.23% (2.66%)	Air travel and news w/luxury angle	673.7k	3.29% (9.37%)	9.2m	Air travel and hotels w/luxury angle	Personality (with some newsroom)
TRAVEL+LEISURE	6.4m	0.06% (2.66%)	Luxury travel	358.8k	2.21% (9.37%)	3.6m	Luxury travel	Personality (with some editorial)
Traveler	3.3m	0.08% (2.66%)	Destination inspiration	34.6k	27.58% (13.72%)	923k	Celebrity	Editorial
lonely planet	3.3m	0.05% (2.66%)	Destination inspiration	141.5k	3.17% (9.37%)	1.9m	Budget travel	Editorial (with some personality)
Tripadvisor	2.9m	0.04% (2.66%)	Destination inspiration	3.7k	1.76% (35.45%)	11.4k	Destination slideshows/guides	Editorial (with some personality)
ONLY IN YOUR STATE	45.8k	1.35% (5.1%)	Destination inspiration	576	12.95% (34.54%)	3.7k	Things to do in lesser-known locations	Editorial
AFAR	276k	0.15% (3.78%)	Insider info	210	133.33% (34.54%)	11.2k	News	Editorial (with some personality)
culture trip	643k	0.02% (3.78%)	Destination/tour focused	360	3.9% (35.45%)	688	Destinations	Marketing
TRAVELLER	47.3m	0.04% (2.66%)	High-quality photography	No travel-specific account	No travel-specific account	No travel-specific account	No travel-specific account	Editorial
Atlas Obscura	468k	0.21% (3.78%)	Odd-ball attractions	1.4k	2.45% (34.54%)	68	Only posted two TikTok videos total	Editorial (with some personality)

Methodology: Brands were selected from [Muck Rack's current list of top 30 travel publications](#); performance was taken during the date range July 1 to September 30, 2023; and engagement rate was calculated using the [Phlanx Engagement Rate Calculator](#)

# Key Findings

- Most brands have a higher engagement rate on TikTok than on Instagram
- Short-form video is shared more by followers on Instagram than on TikTok
- Brands often post similar or the same short-form video content on both TikTok and Instagram
- Video lengths are typically less than 1 minute long on both TikTok and Instagram
- The most viewed video content for each brand is authentic to the brand and performs similarly on both TikTok and Instagram (when posted to both platforms)

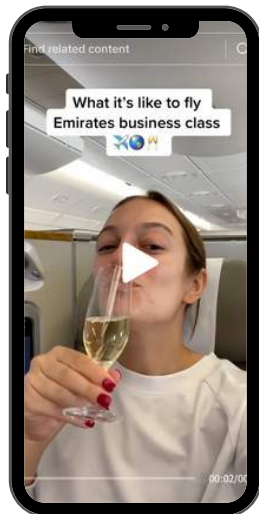


**Matador Network** has the highest engagement by far of all brands on Instagram in comparison to its audience size. It also has a high amount of TikTok followers and likes on its videos, however, this brand is an outlier because the majority of its posts are user-generated or creator videos.

@matadornetwork



@travelandleisuremag



For brands focusing on creating original content, there are some themes to consider from these brands' most engaging short-form videos:

- **Luxury travel**
- **First-person point-of-view**
- **Airline travel**

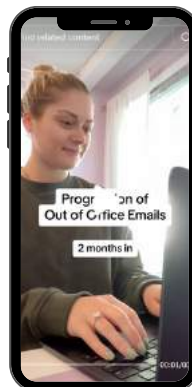
These topics appeal to many of the millennial traveler motivations discussed above. If your content can deliver on more than one of travelers' motivations, there's more potential for success in engagement.



**Tripadvisor** is the only brand that experiments with significantly different content between its short-form video platforms.

Overall the brand hasn't seen much success in terms of engagement on TikTok which could be because the content doesn't feel authentic to the brand.

@tripadvisor



# Personality vs. Editorial Content Strategies

Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2022) put forward case studies on how media publishers distribute news on TikTok and discovered two main approaches: creator and newsroom.

For travel media publishers, these strategies translate to personality and editorial as defined below:

Creator-led	Personality-led
Content that taps members outside of the organization for content and uses their point of view	Content that uses employees of the organization (i.e. editors) to provide a human point-of-view to the story

Newsroom-led	Editorial-led
Content that focuses on breaking news stories instead of more evergreen topics	Content that uses a polished voice from the brand's perspective



The most successful travel brands that post short-form videos use more personality- and creator-led approaches than fully editorial or newsroom.

Create the right balance for your brand and fine-tune minor formatting differences between TikTok and Instagram.



What approach does your brand take?  
Map your most successful recent content to these strategies and see if a theme emerges.

# TikTok Is “The Great Equalizer”

Industry leaders share their beliefs about TikTok’s impact on the travel industry:

## “TikTok has upended it [travel media] and democratized it

I don’t have to be affiliated with a fancy magazine to get the attention of somebody. I can be here on vacation and tell a damn good story and change the narrative around the destination. It’s democratizing to some extent who can be influencers...it’s going to hopefully open up who we see telling these stories and from where.”

– *an editor at a leading travel website*

## “TikTok is a travel medium that helps people get to experience these places

...and that’s important because I don’t think there should be gatekeeping. TikTok can make adventures more accessible, and if there’s a more socially conscious take on it too, even better.”

– *a freelance travel journalist*



## “In the most distinct way, it’s the great equalizer

It’s completely opened up the gates of under-the-radar destinations and financial literacy, which unlocks the world of travel.”

– *a senior marketing manager at a leading travel website*

# Changing Tides in Search

As Google experiments with artificial intelligence (AI) displaying in search results and algorithm changes, brands need to have more diversification with brand awareness. Distributing content to off-site platforms de-emphasizes the reliance on one-source discovery. This should make the popularity and mass adoption of the short-form video format appealing to brands.

**70%**

*of TikTok users discover new travel brands on the short-form video platform*

Source: [TikTok Survey](#)

**45%**

of U.S. millennials (aged 25 to 44) on TikTok have traveled to a new destination they saw on TikTok

Source: [MGH](#)


**40%**

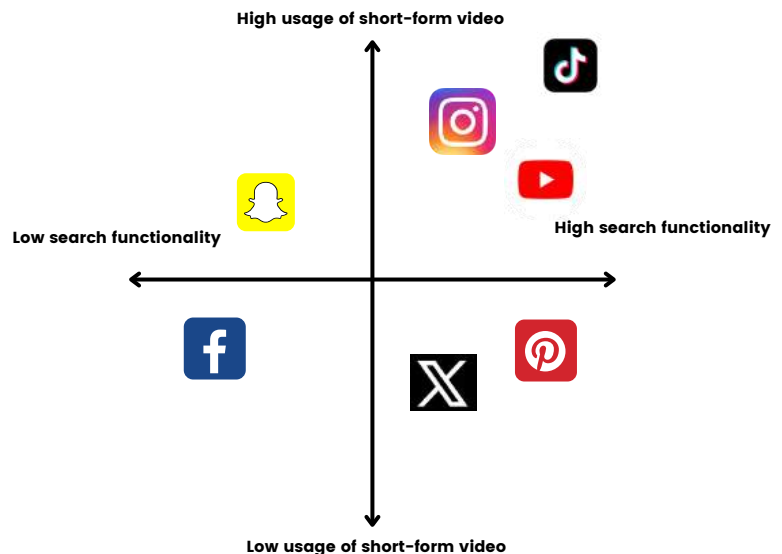
of young people use TikTok or Instagram instead of Google when searching for things like, "places to eat"

Source: [TechCrunch](#)

TikTok and YouTube are different from older social media platforms like Facebook because they work more like search engines and are less focused on social interactions. Due to the current media landscape, this guide focuses on platforms that are focused on short-form video, mainly Instagram and TikTok, but YouTube is also a platform to consider.

Here's how social media platforms fit into the current search landscape:

  
TikTok's unique algorithm doesn't prioritize follower count when showing content, which gives more opportunity for a video to go viral.





# Looking Ahead: The Good and Bad of AI

AI is positively impacting travel media in two ways:

## **Creating a paradigm shift in reporting:**

As AI and automation technologies evolve, there's a push to provide real, unfiltered experiences with content that AI can't create. This paradigm shift in reporting lends itself to authentic, first-person experiences which are elements that appeal to millennial travelers and perform well on short-form video platforms.

## **Making content creation more efficient:**

In addition to scaling content, here are some ways that brands are utilizing AI and automation technologies:

- Writing photo captions
  - Generating headline ideas for A/B tests
  - Transcribing interviews
  - Editing content for grammar and spelling
  - Generating closed captioning
  - Removing background noise in video content
- 

Industry experts have four main concerns when it comes to AI and automation technologies and content creation:

## **Negative impact on search results:**

Search engine results are displaying more generated AI answers which is predicted to negatively impact traffic and other key metrics for brands.

## **Contributing to disinformation:**

So far, there have been issues with AI-created articles and content providing false and inaccurate information. One example is the critiques that the media publisher BuzzFeed received on its experiment to write travel articles using AI. ([Source](#))

## **Low-quality content creation:**

There's concern about the lack of creativity for future generations due to the reliance on these technologies.

## **Plagiarism:**

Industry experts talked about examples of content-farming websites that regenerate content from existing websites and ranking on search engines higher than the original source.

# BEST PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BRANDS

Based on academic and industry research, as well as input from industry experts, there are five main takeaways for brands to consider when creating a content distribution strategy that focuses on a millennial audience.

## 1- Incorporate First-Person Point-of-View

### Find your brand's POV:

Ensure there's a personality or point of view associated with your brand on social media. People like to engage in two-way conversations with relatable figures, so having someone behind the product adds value to your content.

#### Why?

AI can't replace the human point-of-view, especially in travel where experiences matter. Millennials especially value personal recommendations and insights. Brands should emphasize real, authentic content over generic, SEO-focused material on social media and with short-form videos.

#### How?

Find a unique brand personality or voice that suits your audience. It doesn't always have to be a person's face; it can be a distinct point of view or tone. Personalize the brand's voice to engage effectively with your target audience.



## Combine personality and expertise:

Experiment with a blend of personality-driven content and industry expertise to keep your audience engaged. When hiring talent or creating content, make sure it aligns with your brand's identity and maintains authenticity.

### Why?

It gives your brand credibility and a more personal feel while tapping into your brand's distinct knowledge.

### How?

Consider hiring journalist-influencers who are willing to put their personality on display. People enjoy following individuals they feel they know, which can create stronger connections with your audience. Utilize your in-house talent in videos and tap into their expertise.

## 2– Use the “Whole Buffalo”

The term comes from the editor-in-chief at Vox Media, Ezra Klein, and is an analogy for getting the most out of a story idea. Use this analogy to help distribute your content to off-site platforms like email newsletters, podcasts, and social media platforms.

### Start with the hook:

First, define the core element of your story. This distilled angle is what you'll use to inform the content you post on each distribution channel.

Here's a list of thought starters adapted from [Axios](#) and industry experts to help you get started.

- **Cliffhanger clickbait:** A teaser for the most important information in the story
- **What's new:** The most important detail your readers need to know
- **Why it matters:** Context for readers on how the story impacts them
- **The big picture:** A broad or growing trend
- **By the numbers:** Key stats in a story
- **How it works:** The steps or instructions for something
- **Between the lines:** Offer insight and analysis
- **Yes, but:** Qualify a point or introduce a counterpoint
- **What to watch:** Developing trends or potential outcomes
- **What's next:** The next step in a story
- **The bottom line:** Punctuate the story with clarity



The key is you start with what the meal is for your audience: What is it that they need to know? What is it that they'll be excited about getting from you? Then deconstruct this for these different platforms.  
—a content strategist and author



## Appeal to your audience:

Identify your target audience and their preferences. Look at their behavior across platforms and at the types of questions they're asking. Different platforms attract different types of users, so don't assume that just because someone follows you on Instagram they also subscribe to your newsletter.



Keeping an eye on the zeitgeist in general about what feedback is and what our blind spots are, has been a big part [of how we generate content].  
—a digital editor at a leading travel publication

## Use appropriate storytelling elements:

Find distinctive aspects of your stories and explore different layers to engage with your audience.

Here's a list of storytelling elements that are proven to appeal to a millennial audience:

1. Easy to understand
2. Usefulness
3. Conciseness
4. Empathy (i.e. Shared experiences/connection)
5. Identity
6. Humor
7. Reversal
8. Authenticity
9. Originality
10. Surprising

## Adapt your content to each platform:

You can publish similar content on multiple platforms, but tailor it to suit each platform's unique format and audience. Pay attention to trending topics and edit content to match the platform's style.



Don't use social media to repurpose what's already been shared, but to add a dimension that maybe isn't talked about in the article.  
—a freelance travel journalist



## Have an Investment Bucket and Measure What Matters

Here are recommendations for brands on how to move to new off-site platforms and test content performance, as well as how to measure success effectively:

### Be open to new platforms:

Don't hesitate to try out new off-site platforms, especially those aligned with your brand's content and audience. Keep an eye on emerging trends and be willing to experiment.

### Cast everything as an experiment:

Set aside resources in an "investment bucket" for experimenting with new platforms and content ideas. Allocate budget and time to see if these experiments yield positive results. Do so in a way where you don't have to drastically shift resources and evaluate the business case after a month of testing.

### Collaborative decision-making:

Discuss new ideas with your team members, especially those with different perspectives and priorities. Align the perspectives to determine whether an idea is worth pursuing.

### Focus on your unique ROI:

Identify where you can see a return on investment, and remember that the definition of ROI may vary for different brands and platforms. Focus on fundamental principles that can be adapted to changing trends.

### Be patient and ready to pivot:

New content and platforms may require time for adjustment. Be patient and give your strategies time to evolve. Evaluate regularly based on your ROI and pivot when necessary, especially when something isn't working.



The lesson from TikTok has been now when those things come up, why not try it?

—*a digital editor at a leading travel publication*



I don't think with social media there can be a given strategy that would last you past a quarter...there are certain things that you can lay a groundwork for how you structure interacting with these platforms and keep yourself super flexible with it.

—*a content strategist and author*



## Quality engagement over vanity metrics:

Shift your focus towards quality engagement metrics, such as return visits, exit landing pages, and time spent on site. Measure how effectively your content holds the audience's attention and provides value.

## User behavior analysis:

Compare the behavior of engaged and unengaged readers to understand how people interact with your content across websites and social media. This helps gain insights into audience preferences and engagement.

## Encourage rich conversations:

Evaluate the quality of conversations around your content on off-site platforms. Measure the depth and richness of discussions, and pay attention to qualitative feedback from your audience.



It's not enough to have a big audience if that audience is disengaged or they're going through the motions, expected to click on something but you're not leaving a lasting impression.  
—*an editor at a leading travel website*











For short-form video platforms like TikTok and Instagram, monitor the number of saves and shares, as they indicate content value and audience advocacy.

Also track viewership, completion rate, and watch time to show how well your video content engages and retains viewers.

## Understand Your Audience's Needs and Motivations for Travel Decisions

Your audience is likely using different platforms throughout their travel journey. It's important to recognize where they might be during the travel process and how your content can help them. Use this travel journey path to map your content to motivations and platforms.

Expedia defines four phases in a traveler's path to purchase:

Inspiration	Research	Planning	Booking
<p> Travelers are first starting to think about a trip</p> <p> Social media use is highest during the inspiration phase usage declines in the following phases</p>	<p> Travelers are still browsing and narrowing down options</p> <p> Search peaks during the research phase and then declines, however, younger travelers are starting to use social media platforms like TikTok for search, so these platforms are also important during this phase</p>	<p> Travelers are about to book their trip and considering final options</p> <p> Comparison websites like online travel agencies and meta-travel websites are used the most during this shopping phase</p>	<p> Travelers make a flight, hotel, cruise, tour, etc. purchase</p> <p> Travelers use direct booking or booking websites to purchase travel</p>



*What phase of the travel journey is your audience typically in?*

*What phase of the travel journey does your content fit into?*







*Are these aligned?*

Here's how travel content can fit into this purchase path and appeal to millennial traveler motivations during each phase:

Inspiration	Research	Planning	Booking
<p>👤 Use TikTok, Instagram, SEO/search, and newsletters to provide fun/entertaining content; consider using a first-person POV</p> <p>💻 Behind-the-scenes content and the secret observer trope can be used during this phase</p>	<p>👤 Use TikTok, Instagram, SEO/search, and niche topic newsletters to show utility content about destinations and accommodations that travelers are searching for</p> <p>💻 A first-person POV can provide originality and credibility during this phase</p>	<p>👤 Use TikTok, Instagram, and SEO/search to provide local perspectives and in-depth experiences on popular, but niche topics</p> <p>💻 A deep dive into a topic could be used to attract someone during this phase</p>	<p>💻 If you're a booking platform or provider, use newsletters to help your customer along the post-booking journey</p>



Travelers also consume content during the three phases of their trip after booking:

Pre-Travel	Traveling	Post-Travel
<p>            During this phase, travelers are looking for information about their trip like the weather, restaurant recommendations, things to do, what to pack, etc.         </p> <p>            Brands can use TikTok, Instagram, newsletters, and SEO/search to provide this information in a unique and credible way; utility content in the form of travel hacks can be especially engaging         </p>	<p>            Travelers may look for last-minute things to do while on their trip, use maps to save locations, and apps for things like transportation, managing reservations, etc.; on trips, millennial travelers also look to share their vacation in real-time on social media         </p> <p>            Brands can use TikTok and Instagram to serve quick, searchable content relating to these topics; brand partnerships for media publishers can also come into play during this phase         </p>	<p>            Millennial travelers share their journey on social media platforms and may interact with brands if they had a positive experience         </p> <p>            Build a sense of community on social media so travelers will tag and interact with your brand         </p>

## 5– The Importance of Sounds and Visuals

Consider visual storytelling and sound when developing story ideas from the start.

Platforms like Instagram and TikTok are visual first, which lend themselves nicely to travel content which typically has appealing imagery. Develop strategies for sharing non-visual stories, such as turning them into graphic-text carousels or emphasizing sound when needed.

On TikTok especially, sound can be a significant driver of growth and audience engagement. Consider pairing your story idea with trending sounds and use subtitles when posting videos.



## Instagram vs. TikTok



In comparing TikTok and Instagram, the freelance travel journalist highlights a significant shift in content preferences. Instagram is like delivering a polished TED Talk, whereas TikTok is like a late-night conversation with friends at a slumber party, raw and unfiltered. The journalist believes that people are growing tired of overly perfected Instagram feeds with consistent filters on every photo.

This trend reflects a broader change in media consumption habits, where audiences now value content with a touch of imperfection. Brands should consider this shift toward unscripted and unpolished content as it aligns with millennials' travel interests and preferences in popular content formats across platforms.

# STORY “HOOK” DEVELOPMENT



Use this worksheet to turn a singular content idea into different formats across off-site platforms to better engage millennial travelers.

## Define your audience segment:

What part of the travel journey(s) are they on?

Inspiration   Booking   Post-Travel  
Research   Pre-Travel  
Planning   Travel

## Define the central story idea:

What point of view are you using?

Now for each distribution platform, fill out the following:

**Channel 1:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Define your core storytelling elements:

How are you using any of the below to further your story?

- Simplicity
- Usefulness
- Conciseness
- Empathy
- Identity
- Humor
- Reversal
- Authenticity
- Originality
- Surprising



# STORY “HOOK” DEVELOPMENT (CONT.)

Channel 1: \_\_\_\_\_

## Define your hook:

Pick the best approach based on the story and channel:

- Cliffhanger clickbait
- What's new
- Why it matters
- The big picture
- By the numbers
- Between the lines
- Yes, but
- What to watch
- What's next
- The bottom line

Channel 1: \_\_\_\_\_

## Additional considerations:

What audio elements do you need?

What visual elements do you need?

How will you measure success?

