

Experts: Social media important, but it's not a money-maker

By Kathryn Reed

OLYMPIC VILLAGE – Don't expect to make money in social media.

That was the message delivered by a panel of tourism marketing officials April 18 during the 37th annual Mountain Travel Symposium at Resort at Squaw Creek.

Before joining three peers, Davy Ratchford, marketing director with Northstar ski resort, spoke with *Lake Tahoe News*.



Davy Ratchford, Andy Chapman, Dan Sherman and Christian Knapp talk April 18 about social media. Photo/Kathryn Reed

"The best investment in marketing is hiring the right social media guy," Ratchford said.

But validating what is going on in the world of social media is hard to quantify. Marketers say fans on Facebook and Twitter want to be a friend, not a customer, per se. That's

why sales pitches, even discounts, don't work well.

"They want an online conversation. But when it comes time to pulling the trigger, they'll think of you," explained Christian Knapp, vice president of marketing at Aspen-Snowmass.

(Rounding out the panel were Andy Chapman, chief marketing officer for North Lake Tahoe Resort Association, and Dan Sherman, managing director of Ski.com.)

Ratchford said no matrix exists to show that someone online read X and therefore that translates to Y.

At the end of the session Tony Lyle with Aramark's South Shore operations told *Lake Tahoe News*, "I'm not sure you can ever monetize social media. They are in that space to hang out."

Keeping up with technology is key, as well as using it in ways that are appropriate for specific businesses. Ratchford mentioned how Alaska Airlines allows people to upload where their friends live, and then the airline lets the person know how much it would cost to fly to see their friends.

But all those speaking on the topic recognize the importance of having the social media presence. Good content – via all online modes of communication was stressed.

Allowing people to easily share that content with friends is important – words, pictures and videos.

"We are working on when your vacation is booked, you can share it with your buddies," Ratchford said, and even invite them to join the fun.

Chapman said NLTRA is working on making items on the calendar of events page easier for people to share.

All pointed out that how many likes or fans a business has is not as important as having people of influence doing the

chatting. A person of influence is someone who has engaged friends or Tweeter followers. It's similar to one of the most basic forms of marketing – word of mouth.

“It's about influencing the influencers,” Knapp said. But he also admitted it can hurt when influentials have bad experiences.

Engaging people increases awareness of a company's product or destination.