



2010: The Year We Make Contact.

As an aging baby boomer, I have come to realize that the future is finally here. I grew up on TV sci-fi, from the silly *Lost in Space* to the cultish *Star Trek* and Saturday morning TV reruns of *Flash Gordon* and my cartoon hero, George Jetson! Even if my childhood vision of a 21st century filled with flying mini-space cars didn't exactly come true, the truth, is much of what I imagined (and a lot more of what I didn't even dream of) is very much a part of our collective daily life. Little details like being able to digitally record and watch my favorite TV shows on my laptop through a sling box gadget when I'm on road in a hotel room, thousands of miles away from home.

I sadly admit that I'm addicted to my BlackBerry, with access anytime to phone calls, e-mail or text messages, and the Internet at my fingertips to immediately answer any obscure query. I'd never find my car in the airport parking lot anymore without my BlackBerry memo notes showing where I parked it, and sometimes I wouldn't even find the airport, if not for the GPS in the rental car. Voice-mail prompts and metallic strips on the back of credit and affinity cards are my rudders, as I pass through my day like George Clooney's character, Ryan Bingham, in the movie, *Up in the Air*. And it is not just Ryan and I; it is the norm to see people talking on cell phones, jamming to iPods, or texting away on PDAs as they go about the day. We are never unconnected.

But with all this technology, something else has happened—something far more important than what I just described, for it fundamentally changed and empowered all forms of communication. It has changed the way people can comment on how pleased they are (or aren't) with a product or service. It gives every customer a proverbial megaphone to loudly share how they feel about an experience—megaphones with names like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, or one of the many blogs that offer unlimited space for the rants or raves of anyone who is an “expert” among the masses.

Today's consumers look to the opinions of others in their purchase decisions, believing that others with whom they identify will give an honest perspective of a product or service; this phenomenon now trumps rating systems, guide books, or expert critics. Your resort business is now in the hands of such customers and would-

be customers. We need to participate in these new communication platforms, both as an industry and as individual businesses. And ARDA can help focus this effort, as we develop the practices and necessary tools to best navigate new media. As you read this column, someone is Twittering, Facebooking, or blogging about their experience at a timeshare tour or vacation or resort experience. The dialogue is going to happen with or without us, which is all the more reason to become part of it. We'd never consider letting someone take control of our brand or company reputation in the world of old media, so why should we let that happen now?

At the Social Media Symposium that ARDA hosted in Orlando this past January, we were treated to an intense session on social media, highlighted by keynote speaker Sree Sreenivasan, Dean of Student Affairs at Columbia Journalism School. The sold-out crowd of resort developers and managers were given tips on how to join customers in this new dialogue. You can talk directly to owners about new programs and amenities through on-line communities. You can also capitalize on the passion of your timeshare owners and help them share stories (via Twitter or blog) about how owning this product has positively impacted their marriages, families, and lifestyles; happy owners can also post vacation videos on YouTube, too, as somewhat of a virtual yet organic salesroom.

Remember, too, that this means disgruntled and angry consumers/owners also have a platform. The old paradigm of “one in ten buy” may still hold true, but the nine who didn't buy now have the ability to share with the world *why* they

didn't. Social media is not a fad—it is an evolving communication platform that is here to stay.

The future is here, and it is far more virtual a reality than I ever imagined! **D**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'H.C. Nusbaum'.

Howard C. Nusbaum, RRP
President

ARDA & Social Media

For more info on this new media, attend the following Convention sessions:

- General Session-Opening keynote speaker, Andy Sernovitz, author, *Word of Mouth Marketing: How Smart Companies Get People Talking* (Monday, March 15, 4:00-5:00pm)
- Sales and Marketing Forum—“Branding and Selling through Electronic Media” (Monday, March 15, 2:30-5:00pm)
- New Business Models Forum (Monday, March 15, 1:00-3:30pm)
- Other social media educational sessions (check on-site program)