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SALLIE BURNETT is president of the Colorado-headquartered **Customer Insight Group** - and fanatical about customer loyalty. Burnett tells [RCIVentures.com](#) why 2012 needs to be the year we focus on customer engagement and loyalty to capitalise on its many benefits...

Ask anyone in the hospitality industry if they've discovered the secret to retaining customers, and most everyone will shake their head and exclaim that their job would be a lot easier if they had. Customer loyalty, versus acquisition, remains a top initiative for 2012 and continues to be critical in driving sustainable growth. And while retention has always been top of mind, it begs even more of our attention now thanks to the steady rise of social media channels, and the need and opportunity to engage our customers, while we build long-term relationships.

The hospitality landscape is experiencing slow but steady growth and is enjoying lower vacancy rates than those seen in 2010. As we look at what we have in our marketing arsenal to build momentum and spur continued growth, a strategic loyalty initiative emerges as one of our star players to make something happen.

Consider this: According to the State of the Vacation Timeshare Industry (United States Study, 2011 Edition) conducted by Ernst & Young, 45 percent of timeshare sales are from those that already own a timeshare. That's a number not to be dismissed, but rather embraced. Be encouraged at how we can maximize that level of loyalty and drive it to be a key factor in our 2012 plans.

The benefits to dedicating your efforts to customer loyalty are numerous. It costs less to keep and grow a customer than to acquire a new one. Plus, these customers are already convinced of the value and experience you deliver. They are your most ardent advocates and can serve as your greatest referrals. Successful companies not only have a robust referral program, but also are leveraging the influencer factor inherent in social media to increase brand advocacy, engage customers and build momentum.

Social media will play a major role for the industry and will continue to evolve the way we talk with our customers. Currently 22 percent of the travel industry uses social media as a revenue-generating tool, with 27 percent planning to do so over the next five years. Facebook is now at 800 million users and Twitter adds one million users every 12 days. Now is the time to embrace this new medium and utilize its capability to positively impact our revenue generation and brand awareness.

Build your communication plan from the initial point of acquisition – that customer's first welcome – and incorporate every key milestone and touch point along the way. Keep both the rational and the emotional sides of fostering customer loyalty in balance by reinforcing the value of a timeshare alongside the emotional sense of community.

For example, these opportunities include:

- A customer's first stay
- Purchasing extra time
- Declining use of timeshare
- Post-stay communication
- Requests for feedback
- Call center contact

You can't leave customer loyalty up to chance. Just as companies employ a dedicated process to acquire a customer, so should you put in place the necessary strategic initiatives and communication strategy to build your customer retention and develop those ongoing customer relationships that can be the decisive factor for your success in coming years.

With over 20 years' experience in strategic marketing, sales management and customer relationship management, Customer Insight Group founder Sallie Burnett has built her vanguard reputation by crafting solid customer-centric strategies that drive bottom-line success for her clients. You can contact Sallie at sallie@customerinsightgroup.com.

