

Social Media and Destination Marketing: Today Advancements for Tourism Future

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Abstract: *The development of information and communication technology has a significant impact on marketing strategies implemented by economic operators and decision makers . Tourists may change their way of accessing information, planning holidays or/and their tourism consumption patterns, but they can influence the behaviour of other consumers by sharing experiences. Social media platforms allow them to communicate these experiences. Based on this information, the travel planning process is facilitated. This paper presents features of the social media channels, and the importance of social media in the tourism industry is underlined.*

Keywords: *social media, tourism, destination marketing*

JEL Classification: *L83, L86*

1. Introduction

Social media has greatly influenced the activity of the enterprises, offering the possibility to maintain direct contact with customers at a relatively low cost, thus allowing the development of long-term relationships. By using social media, customers can actively contribute to content creation and can communicate freely with businesses.

Web 2.0 refers to the possibility to interact and collaborate on web pages, also known as the "social web". Globally, web 2.0 has an important and visible place, and the implementation of social technology is now a must-have and must-do by all businesses, regardless of the operating sector, but even more in the hospitality and tourism industry. Companies build their presence in the social environment and need to manage very carefully their image, knowing the long-term impact that social media actions have or may have on their development.

2. Features of the social media channels

Businesses are facing more and more challenges, such as social media marketing, involving social media tools that may be successfully used to improve customer communication, brand awareness, interact with customers, get feedback to improve the quality of products and services, transparency in decision-making, etc.

Baruah (2012) considers that the term "social media" refers to the use of web and mobile technologies to transform communication into an interactive dialogue. Social media takes different forms, including magazines, Internet forums, social blogs, microblogging, wiki, podcasts, photos or pictures,

video, rating and social bookmarking. The specific tools, such as Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, Skype, etc. are widely used for communication purposes. Nowadays, people are addicted to different social media tools to keep in touch with each other.

Organizations use different social media (such as websites, blogs, message boards, podcasts, microblogs, bookmarks, social networks, communities, wikis and vlogs, online encyclopaedias) to reach their marketing and business objectives.

Social media refers to the content created and consumed by various people. These include comments on posts, photos uploaded to sites, conversations between friends in a social network. Thus, all individuals may become publishers and content referees simultaneously (Singh, 2010).

Another definition describes social media as a collaborator, created by online users (Roberts and Kraynak, 2008). According to other authors, social media consists of a group of Internet-based applications, allowing the creation and change of user-developed content based on the technological and ideological foundations of the Internet (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

Ellison and Boyd (2013) specifically distinguish social networking sites as communication platforms that provide users with unique profiles, public connections, and the ability to create and consume user-generated content. Other researchers underline the difference between social media and narrower terms such as social networks or social sites (Treem et al, 2016).

Several classifications of social media tools have been identified in the literature. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) identify six types of social media sites, namely: collaborative

projects; blogs and micro blogs; content (creative) communities; social networks; virtual worlds of games and virtual communities. Razmerita et al (2014) classifies social media services based on their usage, respectively for: social networking sites; wiki - online collaboration and crowd-sourced content; blogs; microblogging (Twittering); content communities (Ccom). Beer (2008) considers categories of wikis, folksonomies, mashups, and social sites as distinct types of applications within the broader web 2.0 framework that can function as an umbrella concept, including a broader set of online applications that facilitates expression and interaction.

In the literature, social media tools have been categorized as follows: social networking sites (Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, Friendster, Orkut, Tribe, Hi5, Ning, Classmates, Flixster, Dribbble), blogs (Wordpress, Blogger, LiveJournal, Tumblr), content communities (e.g. YouTube, Flickr, Scribd, Slideshare, Instagram, Photobucket, Pinterest, Snapchat), collaborative projects (Wikipedia, Wikitravel), virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life), virtual games (e.g. World of Warcraft). However, there are other types of social media, such as microblogs (Twitter, Digg, Reddit), review sites, votes, user recommendations (e.g. TripAdvisor, Epinions), forums and announcements (ThornTree, Fodor's Travel Talk, Softpedia, Olx, Tocmai) (Živković et al., 2014).

Social network sites (SNS) provide web platforms for building social relationships between individuals, for example, having common interests or activities (Baruah, 2012). SNS offer the means of interacting on the Internet, email, and even using mobile phones (Baruah, 2012). This allows a user to create profiles or personal pages online and

to establish a social network. Site apps enable the user to invite others to join the site, to access other users' profiles, to share information instantly. The site owner controls the site access and online group discussions (Dao, 2015). Actions in a SNS remain strongly socially driven by the desire to communicate better with colleagues and build a social and professional identity, as well as a reputation. The most popular social network sites are currently MySpace, LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter (Baruah, 2012). Facebook, Ning, LinkedIn and MySpace are considered the most common SNS. These are called social network sites because they are social communication sites (Dao, 2015).

Blogs are online journals and are considered personal webpages where people can communicate with each other, through various information (Dao, 2015). Blogs can be dedicated to politics or news, tourism, sharing opinions or technical developments. Most blogs are primarily textual, although there are other forms of blogs (e.g., photo blogs, video blogs and MP3 blogs for music collections) (Baruah, 2012). The blog or forum owner can upload information, while other users can view, download, and post comments on messages. Some of the blogs and forums are Wordpress.com, Blogger.com and Yahoo! Groups (Dao, 2015). An important feature of the blogs is the possibility for readers to leave comments, allowing the author to engage in an interaction with his audience. Blogging offers people an opportunity to develop an online identity that they may promote in a wider "social" space (blogosphere) (Baruah, 2012). Microblogs (like Twitter.com) enable users to share information such as short sentences, images or videos (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010), with a

maximum of 140 characters per message, to communicate about their daily activities, to advertise events and / or to share information. Microblogging can play a key role in rapid dissemination of ideas within the social network through viral marketing mechanisms (Huberman et al, 2008). Blogs, microblogs and internet forums are considered the oldest forms of social media sites (Dao, 2015).

Content communities (content generation and sharing sites) include a strong social dimension and they are based on user-generated content (Chiu et al, 2006). The distribution of media content is done by sending a link to other people (Baruah, 2012, Dao, 2015). Examples of content communities are: BookCrossing (text), Youtube (for videos), Flickr, picasaweb.google.com (for photos), Audiobase (audio), Slideshare (for PowerPoint presentations), docstoc.com (document sharing site) (Baruah, 2012, Dao, 2015). Content communities allow users to share different types of resources, ideas, and opinions from an individual perspective, to share experiences and best practices, and to discuss issues with others. Communities may be classified as interest, relationship, transaction, and fantasy communities for knowledge sharing, brainstorming, friendship, or trade management (Hagel and Armstrong, 1997).

Collaborative projects (multi-user projects). This category includes online encyclopaedias. A Wiki is a typical example of a collaborative project site (e.g. Wikipedia) (Dao, 2015). Wikis allow several participants to collaborate in the same project (e.g., research analysis, writing a dictionary or a group project). Project participants can edit the entire content of the project anytime and anywhere (Dao, 2015). Wikipedia is the most popular wiki application, this type

of user-generated content being known as crowd-sourcing (Baruah, 2012).

Virtual games are online platforms where users may participate with avatars; there are virtual worlds. Individuals may interact with others as in the real world. Virtual social worlds allow Internet users to choose personalized avatars, their behaviour, their lives, and their activities in the virtual lives that are similar to the real life. Users can meet in a certain place in the virtual world to do things together, as in real life (Dao, 2015).

Review sites, votes, and user recommendations serve as platforms for evaluating various products and services (e.g., websites such as www.mouthshut.com or www.pagal-guy.com). The information on these sites may influence the consumer's decision regarding the products or services they intend to buy (Baruah, 2012).

The use of social media becomes widespread and the number of users increases. According to Sahin and Sengün (2015), the number of Internet users is 2.5 billion, and 1.8 billion of them have an account on social media networks. Among the most popular social media platforms are Facebook (1.2 billion), Whatsapp (400 million), LinkedIn (259 million), Twitter (232 million), and Tumblr (230 million).

3.The importance of social media in the tourism industry

In the area of marketing, a considerable number of organizations, from companies, non-profit organizations and government agencies, use social media in specific communication activities, always keeping in touch with customers and other stakeholders. In the pursuit of raising awareness, and

developing messages that become viral, the organizations are actively involved in the development of web 2.0 tools and the social web. The latter changes the rules of the game, and companies build social media campaigns, but also pay attention to traditional marketing campaigns (Evans and McKee, 2010).

According to Zouganeli et al (2011), "Travel 2.0" is related to the term "web 2.0" and promotes a many-to-many communication model. Within the context of the expansion of social media use in tourism, the professionals have to recognize and use the specific tools, for enhancing the promotion strategies. Marketing through social media requires a shift in concentration, a reallocation of resources, and the development of new strategies. Research shows that two-thirds of travellers using the Internet are present on Facebook, reaching 90% in the 18-24 age group and retaining an important presence in almost all age groups (Nielsen, 2009).

The marketing of tourism services is very important. Tourism businesses should use social media effectively to create official accounts and hire staff to manage these accounts (Sahin and Sengün, 2015). Because the social media is overcrowded and overloaded with information, it is very difficult to draw attention (Kiráľová and Pavlíčeka, 2015).

Tourists need to know, from trustworthy sources, what to expect of the new tourism destinations or experiences, in order to reduce uncertainty associated with the provision of tourist services and to have enough information for making the right travel decision in respect to the future travel destination. Modern tourists have more confidence in the opinion of other travellers, using social media rather than the advice given by official

marketing experts. As social media becomes more and more expressive, the consumers may increasingly influence more consumers with their own opinions and experiences (Živković et al, 2014).

Destinations may use social media as an important tool in communicating with tourists. Social media has a special significance for the marketing activities of a destination. Marketers may use social media to inform tourists about the facilities available at a particular destination, but also after a holiday, to help them recall their pleasant moments at that destination.

Kiráľová and Pavlíčeka (2015) believe that new media offer a less costly marketing approach at destination level, as well as numerous opportunities to involve visitors in attracting other individuals. Until now, visitors had no confidence in advertising focused on the benefits and special features of destinations. Visitors needed a personal, intelligent, creative, and interactive communication and message approach, including empathy and emotions. They want to participate in the creation of tourist products and want to buy based on that relationship. Social media may help destinations to remain competitive if they have interesting content, use creativity and support, and motivate interactive communication.

Companies use social media in marketing and management actions because of their potential for engaging and collaboration with consumers (Živković et al, 2014). Social media is highly effective if it is used as a marketing tool and has many functions, such as: supporting consumers to obtain information on goods and services, increase awareness, communicate their opinions, the behaviour, online purchasing decisions, and the

assessment of the purchases. For institutions, social media is a tool used to market products, brand consolidation, and customer relationship development (Sahin and Sengün, 2015).

Social media influences both the demand and supply of tourism services. These platforms offer opportunities for tourists to share experiences that other tourists can use in travel planning. A recommendation of a tourist about a destination can have a significant impact on holiday planning of other.

Social media offers tourism businesses opportunities to gain new customers, to maintain the existing ones, to understand the market reaction to their offers, and may use this information for their own development. Tourism companies can use social media to get a better position on the market.

In the tourism industry, social media enables tour operators and destinations to directly interact with visitors on different platforms, to monitor and react to visitors' opinions and assessments in terms of quality of services (Királová and Pavlíčeka, 2015). In addition, social media represents an important tool for analysing the attitudes of tourists and this is confirmed by the increase in the number of purchases and recommendations to other users. Building a successful tourism brand means that each offer should contain a unique value proposition, based on customer experience (Živković et al, 2014).

Social media plays an important role in customer communication. Tourism activity is influenced by the message sent by tourists about a destination, by opinions and recommendations made on social media platforms.

Using social media channels, tourism businesses are focusing on increasing their online presence, thus becoming much closer

to their own consumers, with a positive influence on the business.

Businesses can use social media as an important advertising tool, as there is a high potential, thanks to positive reviews. Organizations gain an important advantage over their competitors when using social networking sites for marketing purposes (Mangold and Faulds, 2009, Sahin and Sengün, 2015). Social media allows destinations to contact visitors with relatively low costs and higher levels of efficiency compared to those that can be obtained through traditional communication tools (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

Using social media may have a major impact on marketing activity, especially as companies/organizations can develop marketing strategies tailored to different social platforms, in order to better reach target consumers.

More and more destinations are changing their traditional communication strategy, based on radio, television, the print media and others, to internet and social media, because of the reduction of marketing budgets. According to Királová and Pavlíčeka (2015), the most commonly supported social media campaigns objectives at tourist destinations can be summarized as follows: creating / increasing awareness of the destination; global advertising; encouraging visitors to plan their trip; enhance the destination image as a preferred destination; targeting a new / specific market; increasing the number of visitors; increasing the number of subscribers by email; increasing the number of Facebook fans; improving the visitors' perception regarding the destination's features; regaining a higher place in consumer preferences.

4. Conclusions

Social media is an effective marketing tool that may be used to increase brand awareness, brand loyalty, service quality, and sales. It can help organisations to present a business brand/identity to millions of people around the world. As social media continues to grow, so will be the importance of using it as a marketing tool for all industries. The tourism industry is prepared to take advantage of the social media because it was largely based on the reputation of the destination, the consumer's opinion, the dissemination of information and positive mouth-to-mouth advertising (Gohil, 2015).

Social media allows other consumers to be influenced by online ratings, their experience with the products or services being relevant, as well as the degree of their improvement because of the assessments received. The ratings of consumers on social media platforms influence the company's market situation, its performance, but also opinions and comments of future consumers.

One of the most important benefits of using social media is the online exchange of knowledge and information between different groups of people. This online sharing of information promotes the growth of communication skills among people. Social media has the potential to change the character of our social life, both at interpersonal and community level (Baruah, 2012).

With social media platforms, businesses can get feedback from customers instantly. Customer reviews may represent an important source of information for companies, based on which services and products offered can be constantly improved.

Social media may contribute to boosting brand awareness and access to a wider

audience. Companies are increasingly acting in this sphere, trying to understand and analyse customer information on the services and products offered, and to take action accordingly.

Many companies have realized that there are high opportunities offered by social media and social media presence, and started to implement measures to improve the strategic use of it. Tourism companies may actively participate in social media to engage tourists by developing exciting content, providing appropriate information and timely responses to their concerns and questions. Such approaches may require adopting new business models to reach customers, and an adequate selection of the social media applications to be used, depending on the desired impact, target groups, and message to be communicated.

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