

International Conference on Strategic Innovative Marketing, IC-SIM 2014, September 1-4, 2014,
Madrid, Spain

Development of Social Media Strategies in Tourism Destination

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Abstract

Social media play a significant role both on the demand and on the supply side of tourism allowing destinations to interact directly with visitors via various internet platforms and monitor and react on visitors' opinions and evaluations of services. The paper defines the tourism destinations; characterizes the social media and communications in tourism. It summarizes the main characteristics of social media with implication to destination communication strategy and it deals with changes in visitors' behaviour affecting the destination marketing. The main objective of the paper is to show that strategies aligned with social media can help destinations to remain competitive. Selected best practices of social media campaigns are presented, and key elements of successful social media strategy are identified.

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Peer-review under responsibility of I-DAS- Institute for the Dissemination of Arts and Science.

Keywords: Social media; tourism; destination; marketing; strategy; communication

1. Introduction

Tourism destination is a natural entity which has in terms of tourism unique conditions and properties different from other destinations. Visitors develop an image about a destination as well as a set of expectations based on previous experience, word of mouth, press reports, advertising, and common beliefs, before visiting a destination (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Chon, 1992). They form a mental picture of the destination through their reasoned and emotional interpretation (Konecnik, 2004; Kavoura and Bitsani, 2013). An attractive destination reflects the visitors' feelings and opinions about the destination's ability to satisfy their needs and deliver individual benefits (Mayo & Jarvis, 1981). Today's visitors have a large selection of destinations to choose from, but less time to make a buying

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decision. In order to be successfully promoted in the targeted markets, a destination must be favourably differentiated from its competitors. The development of information and communication technologies and their increasing use has radically changed the relationship between the destinations and their visitors. The growing role of social media in tourism is undeniable; leveraging off social media to market destinations has proven to be an excellent strategy. The main objective of this paper is to show that adoption of strategies aligned with social media can increase the destinations' success in the tourism market.

2. Theory

The internet has revolutionized the tourism destinations' business both as a source of information and as a sales channel. Visitors' reviews, photographs, videos, stories and recommendations, online marketing are bringing destinations closer to the potential visitors regardless of where in the world they are located.

3.1 *Tourism Destination*

Destinations are traditionally defined as territories, geographical areas, such as a country, an island or town (Davidson & Maitland, 2000), with political and legislative framework for tourism marketing and planning. Destinations are places towards which people travel and where they choose to stay for a certain period (Leiper, 1995) and can be recognized as a perceptual concept, interpreted subjectively by visitors, where a combination of all products, services and experiences are provided locally (Buhalis, 2000). Destinations are also considered as geographical region understood by visitors as a unique entity where facilities and services are designed to meet the needs of the visitors (Cooper, Fletcher, Gilbert, Shepherd & Wanhill, 1998). Tourism products are purchased in advance prior to their use and away from the point of consumption. Visitors, therefore, must rely on descriptions provided by destinations. From this point of view is timely and accurate information, relevant to visitors needs (Buhalis, 1998) crucial to visitors' satisfaction and destination's competitiveness. Destinations offer an integrated experience to the visitor; the purchase of the tourism product is accompanied by increased levels of emotional and irrational factors, emphasis on the word of mouth advertising, and increased demands on its uniqueness. Destinations' visitors, therefore, trust the opinions of family and friends more than others and are more cautious to approaches of traditional mass advertising market (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). Potential visitors have a choice of many competing destinations and are not willing thoroughly extract information and waste time by shopping. On the other hand they are often willing to pay more for a quality product when it is easily accessible. Social media created a great opportunity to develop and maintain relationships with busy customers (Yadav & Arora, 2012). Globalisation and changes of visitors' needs and attitudes have increased the volume of information that destinations have to analyse in order to stay competitive in a continuously changing tourism market. Social media as a tool of tourism marketing can greatly enhance the destination's reputation and more and more convince destinations' marketers that they are an integral part of the marketing strategies. Werthner and Ricci (2004) state that tourism is an industry that is at the forefront of internet use and online transactions. Social media have taken tourism and travel booking experiences to a new level. They enable to visitors communicate with not only the destinations but also with visitors who have recently experienced the destination they are considering to visit. Using social media visitors can gather information first-hand from other visitors and make decisions about the destination or the experience. Information gathering is possible through blogging, experience sharing; story writing that can be published on personal internet site of visitors, the destination's site, or a networked site. The content of blogs, stories, etc. is generated mainly by visitors who have experienced the destination, so that the information is based on opinion and perceived authentic experience. Recommendation platforms specializing on tourism such as gogobot.com, trippy.com, wanderfly.com, tripit.com, tripwolf.com, tripadvisor.com, and online content is one of the most important sources of information in tourism.

3.2 *Social Media Strategy*

Social media allow destinations to contact visitors at relatively low cost and higher levels of efficiency that can be achieved with more traditional communication tools (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). If the destination wants to enforce on the highly competitive global tourism market, it must be distinguishable from the competition (Porter,

1996). The destination will be successfully discernible with a well-developed communications strategy with the focus on social media. Since the social media are overcrowded and oversaturated with information, it is very difficult to attract attention – however some schemes seems to work better than others: novelty, chance to win, celebrity involvement, uniqueness, unexpectedness, competition, consonance or interesting graphical design. Graham (2005) states that social media are anything where users can participate, create, and share content. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) distinguish the following social media: blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds. Social media also include forums, ratings, reviews, social networking sites, micro-blogging sites, pod-casts and video-casts and photo sharing sites (FPRM, 2009). In the last years, social media functionality was commonly incorporated into mobile applications. It is not the unique function of web anymore; Smartphones are becoming the most important social media devices. The benefit of social media and their effectiveness to destinations can be seen especially in an increase in brand awareness, brand engagement, word of mouth, friends/liking, trust and social validation (Pergolino, Rothman, Miller & Miller, 2012; Királová, 2014). The success of a destination in terms of visitor satisfaction is a function of several interdependent components; this underscores the need for strategic and integrated planning, together with the selective use of specific tools and techniques. The development of a strategic tourism plan for a destination is an articulation of the strategic priorities and direction that have been identified by stakeholders for the planning, development, management and marketing of a destination and is essential for the long-term success and sustainability. Basic purpose of the strategy is to increase destination competitiveness. The increased use and changes in technology hand in hand with the decrease of marketing budgets are forcing destinations to innovate their communications strategies as well. More and more destinations shift their traditional communications strategy based on radio, television, printed media and others towards internet and social media. The communications strategy is designed to help to destination communicate effectively. It can help destination increase awareness of the destination, achieve global publicity, strengthen the destination image as a favourite destination, target specific market, ensure understanding of what the destination does, change behaviour and perceptions where necessary, support the brand, increase the visitation numbers in social media channels, website and digital communication, engage effectively with stakeholders, and demonstrate destination's success.

3. Methodology

The paper combines theoretical background of social media and destinations with the practical observations. Grounded in the theoretical background, destinations' social media campaigns were studied. The research was focused on the aim and the form of campaigns; the used social media; the way, how the campaigns were executed; the benefits to participants and to particular destination. The results are summed up in the conclusion.

4. Calculation

The number of social media users around the globe has risen by 18% in 2013 (SMT, 2013). Nearly 25 % of people in the world now use social media. By 2017, the number of social media users should rise to 2.33 billion (Statista, 2014). Sticky Media (2014) found that in 2013 eighty-two million people have downloaded a TripAdvisor application, 2.800 new topics were posted every day to the TripAdvisor forums. TripAdvisor shows more than 150 million reviews from over 60 million members worldwide and has 1.23 billion monthly active users as of December 2013. Facebook states 945 million monthly users of mobile products and total 300 million photos uploads per day. According Nielsen's Global Survey of Trust in Advertising (Nielsen, 2013) 68% of global respondents indicated that they trusted consumer opinions posted online, 84% of respondents say they trust word-of-mouth recommendations from friends and family. The second most-trusted advertising source in 2013 was content and messaging on brand websites with 69% of global respondents. More than half (56%) of respondents trusted consumer-consented email messages, 48% of respondents trusted ads in search engine results, online video ads and ads on social networks, 42% say they trust online banner ads. Forty-five percent of respondents in Nielsen's survey believed display ads on mobile phones were credible, and 37 percent trusted text ads on mobile phones. According to Nielsen, 55% of respondents said they were willing to take action at least some of the time based on social network ads, 52 % based on online video ads, 50% based on online banner ads, 49% based on display ads on mobile devices, and 45% based on text ads on mobile phones. Online content drives significant business supporting

49% of all tourist arrivals in Europe, including research and booking. Online content provides benefits to new unknown as well as well-known brands.

As stated by PhoCusWright's Social Media in Travel 2012: Social Networks and Traveller Reviews (Juman, 2012), more than 75% of travellers use social networks to find shopping-related deal, while 30% specifically seek out travel-related deals. Fifty-two percent of Facebook users said their travel plans were affected by seeing pictures of trips posted by friends. Fifty-two percent of travellers who had already made travel plans changed some part of their plan after checking out what was being said on social media channels – 33% changed their hotel, 10% changed their resort, 7% changed their destinations, and 5% changed their airlines. According to the study, travellers are looking for tips and inspiration on social media. Mobile devices are visitor's most important device; the number of mobile subscriptions jumped by 173 million in 2013, and the number of active mobile subscriptions around the world now equates to roughly 93% of the world's population (SDMW, 2014). Fifty-two percent of Facebook users said their friend's photos inspired their holiday plans. Forty percent of visitors post restaurant reviews on social media, 46% post hotel reviews. Seventy six-percent visitors post post-vacation photos and 55% of all Facebook users like pages specific to vacations. According to research from Sticky Media (2014), visitors are relying on social media more than ever to decide where to go for holidays and what to visit. Forty percent of online visitors visit social networking sites to influence destination selection, 70% of visitors trust online recommendations while only 14% trust advertisers. Facebook has the greatest influence on 24-34 year olds' holiday choices, and the greatest influence over men, TripAdvisor had the greatest impact on female booking habits.

Destinations have used social media as a promotional tool for interactive marketing purposes, but the constant rise of visitors that use social media applications creates new challenges for all industry (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008). Information is a competitive advantage in the global tourism market, but only the destination that can provide information faster, with greater emotional appeal and lower cost can enjoy this advantage. Technological development and globalization of media create new possibilities for information sharing among visitors in tourism through web blogs, websites or destinations' assessment sites (such as www.tripadvisor.com, www.booking.com). Destinations need creative and powerful social media marketing strategies to reach these potential visitors. The following social media campaigns demonstrate how destinations can take advantage of new technologies and new media. The State of Colorado launched the campaign "Snow at First Sight" in 2009 with the aim to raise awareness to Colorado as a winter sport destination. The search of three people who have never experienced snow started as a competition. Potential participants were asked to submit a minute-long video to www.snowatsight.com and explain why they've never had a "snow rendezvous", and why they are most deserving of such a unique first-time experience. They were encouraged to use their social media channels, such as Facebook and Twitter, to spread the word about their entry - the winners were selected based upon audience voting. They have been asked to write about their experiences and took pictures and video to share on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and the rest. The prize included winter season experience in Colorado from January to March, 2010 ski, snowboard, and snowshoe courses, exciting après ski nightlife, pampering, and spas. The media coverage the campaign has drawn is worth \$2.9 million in advertising dollars, and has generated 300 million media impressions (CTO, 2010). The Canada Tourism Commission launched a website and application for iPhone or Android Smartphones "Explore Canada Like a Local" in 2011. The idea of this social media trip planner was based on the insight that visitors inherently want to exchange travel information with other visitors. The aim of the campaign was to enhance the Canadian experience by sharing insider information on spots of interest, by enabling visitors to plan their journey, and serving as a comprehensive guide during their trip. Visitors shared travel tips, photos, videos, and new venues that were not featured anywhere. A shared list of destinations that visitors liked to visit the most was created. The content submitted by visitors was supplemented with data from Foursquare, Yelp and Gowalla, including both positive and negative user reviews and check-ins to help inspire visitors. Explore Canada Like a Local was announced by Forbes as one of the 10 Best Apps for Travelling Like a Local in 2011 (Greenstein, 2011), the campaign was awarded by HSMIAI Adrian Awards (Digital Campaign – Silver), New York Times Feature, and Webby Awards Tourism as a People's Voice Nominee (CTC, 2011; Greenstein, 2011).

Visit Florida, the Florida State's official tourism marketing corporation, launched its integrated social media summer marketing campaign "Sunshine Moments" in 2011. The campaign's focused on reaching families through geo-targeted digital advertising on Facebook, AOL, Yahoo and several other key social media. The exclusive Facebook campaign targeted families in 16 of Florida's key drive markets. The competition encouraged participants to upload their favourite Florida vacation images to Visit Florida's Facebook page, where followers could vote for their favourite photo, determining one grand prize winner who received a Florida vacation, a Mazda CX-7 and a

Kodak PlayTouch video camera. The second component of the campaign involved eight websites, including Yahoo, AOL, iVillage and Parents.com, that reached family decision makers. Visitors to the website were greeted by Florida Insiders offering tips, videos, blog posts, Twitter feeds, fishing reports, interactive maps and a host of other useful travel planning content. This same content was available in a mobile version, accessible directly from smart phones and other mobile devices without needing to download an application. The campaign showed a 10-point increase in intent to visit Florida and a significantly improved opinion among the state's key demographic of 25-34 year olds. The \$1.1 million, five-week social media-driven campaign resulted in more than 279 million Facebook Ad impressions, and 18,481 people submitted photos in the sweepstakes (Aboutourism, 2012). Tourism and Events Queensland aimed to grow Tourism Queensland's email subscribers, the Facebook fan base and drive competition entries in 2012 by giving away the ultimate Great Barrier Reef experiences. The campaign "Meet the Reef" personified the great barrier reef in a fun, interesting and new way. Visitors were asked to choose an avatar and create their ultimate reef experience to win a Great Barrier Reef experience worth \$10,000. Over the competition period, the Facebook page received 162,237 new likes; the page reached nearly 50 million users, and 51,086 unique competition entries from 135 countries was received (Reborn, 2012). The Singapore Tourism Board wanted to change the position of Singapore as a stopover city in the mind of Chinese visitors to a vacation hotspot. The "Your Singapore" interactive campaign focused on the three elements that were found to be the most important to Chinese visitors: glamour, relaxation and fun. Visitors were encouraged to interact online with official Singapore Ambassador on Sina Weibo, and offered winners the chance to meet the Ambassador. During the second stage, celebrities and online influencers were involved to draw visitors to attractions, experiences and tourism hotspots. The visitors were also asked to design their own travel plans and upload Singapore shopping experiences and travelogues to www.yoursingapore.com. Testimonials collected during each phase of the campaign were compiled into a book that was shared with influencers, visitors and traditional media outlets as a public relations outreach effort. An iPhone application was created to showcase user-generated content in the form of a travel guidebook. The campaign drove 1.1 million Chinese tourists to Singapore by the end of 2010. The campaign reached 12 million online impressions, 437,000-plus online interactions, 180,000-plus social media fans, and 86 articles across leading national, regional and lifestyle media. It also won the top honour of Best Social Media Campaign in the 2012 PR Daily Awards (MSLGROUP & STB, 2013).

In 2012, Cape Town Tourism launched the „Send Us Your Facebook Profiles” competition. The campaign asked visitors to send their profiles for a virtual tour of Cape Town's least explored areas. After sending their Facebook profiles, participants could create their own five-day Cape Town holiday, and watch their profiles explore the hidden gems of the city. After over 150 Point of View videos, 400-first-person Facebook status updates, and 10,000-holiday photos, the campaign registered 5,800 page impressions and 41,000 monthly page visits. Through the campaign, tourist numbers in Cape Town rose by 4-% and the Table Mountain received its highest volumes in 83 years. The competition also helped Cape Town Tourism win the Best Overall Use of Social Media Award (Convention and Visitors Bureau) at the 2013 Travel + Leisure Social Media Awards (Athenkosi, 2014). In 2011, VisitSweden launched the Twitter campaigns „Curators of Sweden.“ The aim of the campaign was to hand over the reins of the tourist board's official Twitter account, @Sweden, to a different Swede each week. The tweets were uncensored; the idea being to provide an eclectic, entertaining insight into the country, resulted in more holiday bookings. VisitSweden's campaign has won 28 awards, attracted over 65,000 followers from 120 countries, and started thousands of conversations. The campaign has been featured on international television, newspapers, magazines, radio stations and blogs, generating a public relations value of more than \$40 million, more than 400 times the investment (Volontaire, 2012). In 2012, the Swedish tourism officials have launched a new initiative to help visitors and expats alike meet real Swedes "Visit a Swede", in what they are billing as an extension of their successful campaign Curators of Sweden. The campaign worked hand-in-hand with local directories, as well as couchsurfing.org and Facebook to find events and to allow visitors the chance quite literally to visit a Swede. A visitor could log into the official website and selected activity. Over 10,000 Swedes signed up to be hosts. With a peer-based review system, users could choose both who they want to meet and what they want to do in making a cultural connection with a Swede – opening the door to limitless opportunities (Gee, 2012). The Hamilton Island Resort's (Australia) "Ultimate Instameet" campaign had the aim to create a buzz around the island by mass meeting between Instagram users from across the globe on the island in 2012. The campaign generated over 640 images and reached over 8 million visitors through social media, including 815,000 of their direct Instagram followers alone. The photos received over 850,000 'likes,' 17,500 comments and 4,280 shares. The campaign gained mainstream media attention generating AUS\$2.3 million and 65 million media impressions. A global conversation started about

Australia's Hamilton Island, and thousands of picture perfect postcards were created and sent around the world on Instagram. Hamilton Island witnessed \$2million room revenue growth over the campaign period, compared to the same time in 2011. Nine per cent increase in room bookings, confirming the direct effect social media has on people's desire to travel (Hamilton Island, 2012). Based on the success of the 2012's Instameet, the 2013's "Return2Paradise" Instameet attracted participants from around Australia, the United Kingdom and China. Hamilton Island and Tencent Weibo announced a landmark partnership which enabled Tencent, China's largest online community with over 780 million active users to broadcast Hamilton Island to the booming China market. Chinese influencers including supermodel Li Ya Hong, made 106 original content posts attracting over 11million views and generating more than 31million engaged conversations all relating to Hamilton Island and Li Ya Hong's experience. The 'Return2Paradise' directly reached over 10.8million people through the social media accounts of the Island's ambassadors and competition winners; a 20 per cent increase on inaugural Instameet. Seventy three images made Instagram's 'Popular' page appearing on all 100million active users' feeds. The Return2Paradise campaign also hit a home run in terms of ROI, with the public relations value 27 times the budget. The Instameet received mainstream national and international coverage in traditional, broadcast and online media, including a spot on the TODAY Show, news articles on every major news website in Australia, as well as The Huffington Post website, Instagram NYC and USA's Social Media Monthly magazine (Reef Magazine, 2013).

5. Results and Discussion

It can be stated, based on the studied campaigns that to remain competitive destinations should use social media. The most frequently claimed objectives of the social media campaigns can be summed up as follows: (1) creating/increasing awareness of the destination; (2) reaching global publicity; (3) encouraging visitors to plan their journey; (4) strengthening the destination image as a favourite destination; (5) targeting new/specific market; (6) increasing number of visitors; (7) creating buzz around the destination; (8) increasing the number of email subscribers; (9) increasing the number of Facebook fan base; (10) changing the position of destination in the mind of visitors; (11) bringing back the destination as a favourite one for visitors. The most frequently used form of the studied social media campaigns (and their combinations) is (1) competition; (2) interactive campaign (involving celebrities and online influencers); (3) PC games; (4) trip planner. The most used social media are Facebook; Youtube; Google; Google Street View; Instagram; Twitter; Flickr; Tencent Weibo; Sina Weibo; Bolgs; Foursquare; Yelp; Gowala (location-based social network launched in 2007 and closed in 2012); Android applications; Smartphone applications. Most of the studied campaigns were interactive, involving participants' creativity. Participants were encouraged to use geolocation tools, create augmented reality, play internet games, create quizzes, write guide books, blogs, articles, and stories, create postcards, photos, videos, travel and shopping plans. Emotions play an important role in most of the studied campaigns. They were used especially: (1) to strengthen the romantic factor of the destination; (2) to make visitors love the destination; (3) to make visitors need the destination; (4) increase holiday bookings. The emotions were connected to destinations by: (1) stories; (2) rendezvous; (3) romance; (4) customized, cute characters (avatars); (5) positive and negative referrals; (6) handing over the official tourist board channel to public; (7) helping visitors to meet real destinations' residents. As most of the social media campaigns include a kind of competition, they also offer a prize to the winner/winners: (1) a dream vacation/vacation packages; (2) a dream job; (3) remake; (4) publicity. The benefits for the destinations can be summed up as follows: (1) ROI; (2) increase of the number of visitors; (3) increase of positive awareness; (4) increase of destination preference; (5) awards; (6) publicity; (7) rise of website hits; (8) increase of number of website and Facebook referrals; (9) increase of number of Facebook fans; (10) user generated content; (11) acquisition of new ambassadors for the destination; (12) public relations. Although launching a successful social media campaign in tourism seems easy, in fact, it is a complicated task. The high number of likes on Facebook does not necessarily mean high number of visitors. Though the revenue generation is only one benefit of social media campaign, the campaign impact on destinations revenue should be also measured. Destinations should be able to compare their social media growth to the arrival, the overnight stays, or both numbers and look for correlation. Multivariate testing that enable destinations to compare one group of visitors exposed to social media content with another that was exposed to different or no content can be also used for measuring (Etlinger, Owyang & Jones, 2012). Based on the studied campaigns, the success factors of the destination's social media campaign can be summarized as follows: (1) in-depth understanding of social media; (2) allocation of resources for planning, production and promotion; (3) clear identification of goals based on analysis; (4) timing; (5) online and offline

promotion of the campaign including advertising and strong public relations; (6) innovation (focus on alternative social media channels); (7) creativity (e. g. web buzz, virality, augmented reality, PC game, competition, mobile applications); (8) focus on emotions; (9) novel approach that uses a different tone of voice; (10) benefits to participants (e. g. prizes, publicity); (11) provision of relevant information on the destination in all stages of visitor's decision making process (before, during and after visit); (12) visitor relationship and support services; (13) identification of destination's ambassadors; (14) continuous monitoring and assessment of all components of the campaign; (15) implementation of corrections if needed.

6. Conclusion

Globalization and concentration of supply increases the level of competition that already requires new strategies of internet communications. In terms of the demands on financial resources and know-how are entry barriers of destinations via the internet relatively low. New business environment and new ways of doing business are the results of the availability and relatively low cost of internet. During its brief history, the internet transformed itself from static tool for digital publishing (one-to-many communication tool) to a fully interactive platform for collaboration (a tool to support many-to-many communication). Tourism is an important source of revenue to many destinations, but budget cuts and changes in use of media and technology requires changes in destinations' communications strategy and the way they promote themselves in the global market. Implementation of new media and technologies are crucial for survival. New media provides a less expensive approach to marketing for destinations and offers many opportunities for visitors' involvement in attracting potential visitors to destinations. Social media as a tool of tourism marketing more and more convince destinations' marketers that they are an integral part of the marketing campaigns. By now, visitors do not trust advertising that focuses on the advantages and special features of the destinations. Visitors require a personal approach, intelligent, creative, interactive, communication and messages including empathy and emotions. They want to participate in the creation of tourism products and want to buy based on relationship. Social media can help destinations to remain competitive if they present interesting content, use creativity and support and motivate interactive communication. Modelling strategic management for the development of competitive advantage of firms and organizations in different sectors may employ new technologies and social media in their marketing strategies (Vlachvei and Notta, 2014; Chatzithomas et al., 2014; Stavrianea and Kavoura, 2014; Yasa Özeltürkay and Mucan, 2014; Királová, and Malachovský, 2014; Sakas et al., 2014; Kavoura and Stavrianea, 2014; Amaral et al., 2014); the creation of networks and synergies may also enhance firms', companies' and organizations' communication (Kavoura, 2014). Implementing new software systems or applications in organizations can be a difficult task; nonetheless, efforts are worthwhile for branding (Stalidis and Karapistolis, 2014; Greve, 2014; Schmidt and Baumgarth, 2014).

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