SOCIAL MEDIA : A RELEVANT TOOL FOR TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY MARKETING

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Abstract

Tourism is an industry which is heavily dependent on marketing. Mouth to mouth communication has played a major role in shaping a number of destinations. This is particularly true in the modern parlance. Communication of ideas and thoughts has found a new medium for achieving its objectives. This is the social networking phenomenon which is fast spreading over the internet. Many sites offer the visitors a lot of freedom to express their views. Promotion of a destination nowadays depends a lot on conversations and exchange of information over these social networks. This paper analyses the social networking sites their contribution to marketing tourism and hospitality. The negative impacts phenomena are also analysed.

Keywords*: Social networking, twitter, facebook, Youtube, online travel, social media*

Introduction

A new global survey commissioned by global workspace solutions provider, *Regus*, says that social networking has become a mainstream business tool in India with 52% of businesses having successfully used social networks to win new business. Businesses are now putting faith in the social networking medium and the fact is evident with the revelation that well over a quarter of businesses world-wide (27%) have set aside a proportion of marketing budget - hard cash - specifically devoted to social networking activities, the survey says. A study by *Gammet Interactive* reveals that *Michigan* takes the top spot (amongst the 50 official *US* tourism office Web sites in the use of social media) for the use of popular social media outlets including *Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube* and others. The analytics

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firm *comScore* underscores the increasing prominence of social media sites in the Internet landscape and broadening acceptance of the sites by brand advertisers. Leading companies such as Unilever, Xerox, P&G, Virgin, Toyota, JP Morgan, CISCO, IBM, Burger King and Honda had successfully utilised social networking websites (Razzaque, 2008). Social media advertising is projected to climb 68% to $7.5 billion this year (2010) and jump to $38 billion by 2015.

Tourism Boards across India say that social networking web sites *Facebook, Orkut, Twitter* and others are fast catching their attention. They agree that these sites widen the reach for promotion of destinations, and that too at minimal marketing cost. With low costs and unlimited Internet space sky is the limit when it comes to dissemination of information and networking with potential visitors. The kind of volume of information that can be spread through social networking websites is phenomenal. Social media brings an interaction between the person who experienced a particular destination and the potential visitor. There is more credibility and authenticity to an information when an experience is shared through videos and pictures by a person who undergone it. Nothing can beat this consumer-generated promotion. Social media allow tourism sector to get the pure message out to potential visitors of destinations. Nothing can beat these consumer-generated promotions. Social media allow tourism sector to get the pure message out to potential visitors of destinations.

The aim of this paper is to critically analyse the actual and potential role of social media in tourism and hospitality sector and how they can be used in order to bring improvements to the tourism market. Firstly, we are going to refer to the definition of social media networking and its importance in tourism sector. Secondly, we will analyse how it will be an effective marketing tool for tourism sector. Thirdly, examples of successful companies (tourism related) and tourism boards that already use social media will be discussed. Lastly, the criticisms and the suggestions to improve usage of social media for tourism marketing.

Definition of Social Media Networking

Social media networking is the process of interacting with other individuals through the specific social media tool or community. For example, one can talk to people with similar interests in a forum or communicate with them through a more fragmented platform like Twitter. The common characteristics of social media include interactive communication and sharing of ideas. Main examples of social media are: forums, ratings, reviews, social networking sites, micro blogging sites, pod and video casts and photo sharing sites. Social media, unlike traditional media channels, represent a unique way of transmitting information in all directions, not just "one-way" and "top-down". So people generate and share their own content, which is very vital for **marketing in tourism industry.** Perhaps *Facebook, Twitter*, and *YouTube* are the best-known and effective social media **networks for marketing in tourism and hospitality industry.**

According to Thraenhart, J. (2009), the benefits of well-executed Social Media Campaign are:

- Higher search engine rankings for their top keywords.

- More rankings of additional keywords or "long tail" keyword phrases.

- More link popularity from sites linking on their own accord.

- More link popularity from social media sites.

- More activity on their blogs, such as more commenting and interaction.

- Direct traffic from incoming links on social media sites

- Significant traffic increases and steady growth in unique visitors month after month.

- An increase in subscribers and sales. Social traffic, properly acquired, is very receptive to your message and products.

Relevance of Social Media in Tourism Marketing

We usually examine the performance of a social media marketing campaign using specific metrics like traffic, links or comments. Some measure relevance of social media in a more abstract way, by monitoring the amount of buzz or conversation in a community and the opinions of the public. Social media is a convenient, inexpensive marketing tool, which does not require great planning. The following are the relevant benefits for tourism and hospitality marketing through social media campaign. They are: (a) Cost-efficiency, (b) Credibility and Authenticity, (c) Impact, (d) Interaction, and (e) Conversion.

(a) Cost-efficiency:

The online social media is proving to be a more cost-efficient tool compared to the high outdoor marketing costs in India and they also have a much more "enormous" impact. The two major motivators behind the increasing use of social networks as marketing tools are the cost efficiency and the potential benefits that can be derived from the consumer empowerment (Razzaque, 2008). Social media applications have become targeted and cost-efficient marketing tools that companies use in order to identify and analyse consumers' conversations online (Brooks 2009). *Jeff Hackett* of *comScore* says that the top social media sites can deliver high reach and frequency against target segments at a low cost; it appears that some advertisers are eager to use social networking sites as a new advertising delivery vehicle. It is told that the price of placing ads on social media is significantly less than on a web portal such as Yahoo! or AOL. Williamson (2006) says that due to the attractive costs involved, spending on marketing through social media will grow exponentially. *Mahindra Homestays* says that their target are young, mobile and "evolved" traveler and

hence considers the *Facebook* as an ideal fit. *Mahindra Homestays* offers *Facebook* members a 15 per cent discount on its properties once they become a "fan" of a 'page' managed by the company on *Facebook.* A great example for cost effective social media in tourism marketing is *TheAdventureTeam.co.uk*, a tourism business that started last year. Since using Social Media, their revenue has way exceeded their expectations. Over 40% of their business now comes directly through social media channels. Now that they see the potential, they will inevitably invest more time and energy in this area as it's proved itself as a very cost effective way of promoting and increasing their business.

(b) Credibility and Authenticity:

Customers have become creative and active participants of Web 2.0 world by expressing their opinions and thoughts about the products they consume (Thackeray *et al.* 2008). The persuasive power of marketing communications is enhanced when it originates from a credible source such as a friend, family member, etc. (Slater and Rounier, 1996). Incongruity between the source (the messenger) and the message (the content) can lead to a negative evaluation of the message instead of a positive one as originally intended (Sussan et. al., 2006). Social media has the potential to undertake some of the functions of film and television in raising awareness and creating emotional engagement with a place. The social media blurs the traditional media role of authoritative informer, with the trustworthy personal contact, falling somewhere between the two. But perhaps, most significantly it also blurs the anticipation, experience and reminiscence stages of the tourist experience – as anyone who posts their images to *Flickr* while still on holiday will know! (www.blog. highland businessresearch.com).

(c) Impact:

With Social Media, it's easy to share one's life and experiences with hundreds of his/ her friends – all at once. Contrary to this, a few years ago, if a guest enjoyed a vacation with a hotel, he/she told only his/her friends at workplace. But, today, if someone enjoys their trip, they can post a note, picture or video that all of their friends can see. Many of these notes, images and conversations will remain viewable for several years to come. *Taj Hotels* manages a *Facebook Page* where it is able to share updates with customers, gain insights, and enable people to engage with their brand. Satisfied patrons are empowered to become 'ambassadors' for *Taj Hotels* via the company's *Facebook Page.* Chris Chambers, Director of Digital Marketing for *Queensland Tourism, Australia*, presented a case study of his integrated marketing campaign which relied heavily on social media, to market the *Great Barrier Reef* ('The Best Job In The World' campaign) internationally at the 2009 *PhoCusWright* Conference in *Orlando, Florida, U.S.* **The following are what Queensland had achieved as RoI within eight months as of October 31, 20092:**

Marketing Measures:

- 8.4 million site visitors, from every country
- 8 minute average time on site
- 34,680 job applications
- $390 Million AUD of publicity
- 34,000 video entries from 200 countries
- Won a coveted *Grand Prix* at 2009's *Cannes Lions International* Advertising Awards.

Business measures:
- Australia tourism down, but *Queensland Tourism* up 20%
- 50% of *Australia* trips now include a *Queensland* component

That's why *Queensland Tourism's "The Best Job in The World"* campaign is lauded as one of the most successful tourism campaigns ever.

(d) Interaction:

Evans (2009) says that digitally recorded and shared experiences can directly impact the marketing efforts. Social media can be described as "online technologies and practices that people use to share content, opinions, insights, experiences, perspectives, and media. It can take many different forms, including text, images, audio, and video". Examples that are particularly significant to the tourism industry include video sharing site *YouTube* and *Flickr*, the photo-sharing site. It is the user comments that are a major difference between traditional passive media and social media – critically; with social media there is a two-way exchange of information. It is in the viewer's comments that the value of the two-way flow of information is really exposed.

(e) Conversion:

Social media create "curiosity and demand" among potential customers about the destination. It definitely expands the reach of awareness campaigns about the destination. So, maybe not everyone who visits web site would go to that destination immediately, but the fact that he/she has spent time gathering information, would mean he/she might in a year or two. Research says that four out of 10 of all the people researching online actually travel, and that is a lot of people. Social media campaign must be a part of integrated and deal driven campaigns to drive the conversion. Social Media spaces may seem pretty daunting, but they are mostly very simple and the rewards for the efforts could be amazing.

Social Media Initiatives in Tourism Marketing at International Levels

Tourism boards of *Switzerland and France* have hired professionals to create digital presence for them. *Switzerland Tourism*, though has a global *Facebook* page, is in the process of crystallising its *India* centric plans in the online media space. The board will go live with an India Web page in October 2010. *France Tourism Development Agency* in India, while the board has not been active on networking sites yet, it has hired an agent for developing its Web site and relations with networking Web sites. So, realising the impact of online social media, the tourism boards in *India* that have not yet made their presence felt there, are also fast turning towards it. Tourism Boards can use these sites to keep a tab on the number of potential visitors. The *Tourism Authority of Thailand* (TAT) is taking steps to reach the younger demographic of travelers using social media, such as an *Amazing Thailand* video channel on *YouTube* featuring short documentaries, more use of E-Books and E-Brochures, an iThai application to get Thai tourism updates on iPhone, and an Internet call center that visitors can contact via computer. It will also build on the member network of the Thailand Fan Club that has already been established in their Europe and Middle East markets.

Hawaii has used a variety of assets such as *Facebook* pages, Twitter, and even created a Pandora station, in the past, *Hawaii* has catered to a group of bloggers who spread the word to their readers on a blogger tour. *Michigan* also does similarly. Visitors can enjoy all the photos from the *Pure Michigan* (Michigan's Official Travel and Tourism Site) Photo Contest on *Flickr*, or watch all of the *Pure Michigan* commercials on *YouTube*. There is a *"Pure Michigan Fan Page"* on *Facebook* to stay up-to-date on all the latest events in Michigan and talk to others with the same love for Michigan. The fan page is another great resource for planning a trip.

The *South African Tourist Board* has launched a microsite in 2008 in conjunction with the *Daily Telegraph*. Site visitors are encouraged to share their experiences based around seven key themes. Each theme is accompanied by a video of a past visitor talking about their experiences. Each theme page is going to become quite long as more experiences are added.

Australians have proven their enthusiasm for promoting their country by uploading nearly 30,000 stories and images to *www.nothinglikeaustralia.com*. The entries from the promotion are used to create an interactive map of *Australia* launched on 31 May at the *Australian Tourism Exchange* (ATE) in *Adelaide*. *Andrew McEvoy*, Managing Director, *Tourism Australia*, says that "the response really demonstrates the value of social networking to gather authentic travel stories and powerful word of mouth endorsement of *Australia* from everyday Australians. This adds to the more than 400,000 global fans of the *Tourism Australia Facebook* page and the more than 6,500 followers on *Twitter*."

www.Quepasa.com, one of the world's fastest-growing Latino social networks, announced on 03 November 2009 that it will be collaborating with *Mexico's Tourism Board* - officially known as the Consejo de Promocion Turistica de Mexico, SA de CA — with regards to an online initiative aimed at promoting tourism to *Mexico.* As part of this program, Quepasa will promote Mexico's beautiful tourist destinations via online communities, which will index content related to specific destination and facilitate user interaction via blogs and viral tools. At the same time, Quepasa and Mexico's Tourism Board will be approaching online travel agencies, hotels and airlines with regards to sponsoring a broader viral campaign using the Quepasa Distributed Social Media platform.

Canadian Tourism Commission (CTC) has started using the social media as a key factor in engaging and entertaining existing and new audiences. Three recent examples across *Canada* highlight industry innovation perfectly. *Halifax, Nova Scotia,* launched a new online community platform in March 2010. *Halifax Sociable!* captures Nova Scotian hospitality, then allows visitors to distil it through becoming a fan on *Facebook;* viewing or uploading photos on the Haligonia Flickr photo pool; joining the conversation on *Twitter;* watching the latest Halifax videos on *YouTube;* reading the blog or entering contests. At the same time, the *Destination Halifax* website took on a new look that includes a nifty itinerary builder to help visitors better plan their trips (www.destinationhalifax.com). *Travel Manitoba* has been busy, too. Its media relations team introduced the world in March(2010) to its new *Facebook* fan page, *Twitter* profile and *YouTube* channel. Media looking to keep abreast of Manitoba news and special events can also search on *Twitter* using the #wildman204 hash tag (www.travelmanitoba.com). And while the snow continues to cascade from the heavens in *Whistler, BC,* five young bloggers are keeping fans up to date. *Victoria, Grant, Meg, Sam* and *Beric* are revelling in the non-stop supply of fresh powder—and having just as much fun relaying those stories at w*histlerblackcomb.com/blogs* (www.whistler blackcomb.com).

Criticisms

The following are some of the criticisms against use of social media in tourism marketing:

- Unfortunately, most who decide to use social media for marketing tourism and travel forgo necessary goal setting and strategy. This typically leads them to wonder what they are doing wrong on sites like *Facebook* and *Twitter* when they don't have as many followers or fans as they would desire (Swink, 2010).

- Many feel that 'Social Online' can't beat the 'Social Offline' as consumers, especially in group travel where people seek togetherness and companionship, look to find real friends, real experiences, in the real world. Online experience may give experience but not belonging (Mishra, 2008).

- Leisure, entertainment, food and beverage, etc. are identity products. These identity products may be promoted more effectively through cultural branding rather than through Social online.

- Tourism industry may face the challenge of building and maintaining consumer loyalty due to this online competitive environment.

- It is a challenge for both producers and consumers as the number of people using the social media applications for travel and tourism and the willingness of customers to share their experience are growing. There will be too much content and too many visitors also.

- Many hoteliers and travel suppliers are not aware of their standing on travel review and social sites. They don't take advantage of the review sites, either as a way to gauge the competition or have a better understanding of the sentiment related to their brand (McDougall, 2009).

- Blogging has become one of the most popular social media and networking tools. The Travel and Tourism Industry today is faced with consequences that blogs have not only positive impacts but also negative ones, if not managed properly.

- Rural tourism business owners view the internet and social media as both a blessing and a curse because it offers a more direct way to reach the customers. It may make them to feel that enough has been done and may make them complacent.

Technology Growth and Social Media

Growing wireless connections, broadband subscribers and mobile social networking application compels the Indian tourism firms to leverage the social networking sites. According to a study by web analytics firm *comScore*, about 14 million people aged 15 and older visited travel sites in *India* from a home or work location in April 2010, representing 37 per cent of the country's total online population and an increase of 50 per cent from the previous year. *Indian Railways* ranked as the most-visited travel site with 7.7 million visitors, up 46 per cent versus year ago. Travel-booking site *MakeMyTrip* ranked second with 2.4 million visitors (up 39 per cent) followed by *Yatra Online* with 1.9 million visitors (up 60 per cent). Several sites experienced triple-digit growth including *Travelocity* (up 134 per cent to 812,000 visitors), *IndiaRailInfo.com* (up 340 per cent to 647,000 visitors) and *eRail.in* (up 160 per cent to 464,000 visitors).

Apple predicts that their sales of *iPhones* will double in 2010. Analysts are also expecting the *Android* powered smartphones will likely morph into a full-blown tsunami in 2010. This means that more people will be more mobile in their accessing of social networking sites. Social networking will become more fully integrated in our daily life through the upcoming year and in some forms start to trade places with traditional emails received throughout the

day. Also it is told that w**omen will be the Queens of Social Networking** as the demographics and advertisers choose to target the fastest growing groups. *Facebook* reports that for 2009 there were more females (55.7%) than males (42.2%). The fastest growing segment on *Facebook* is 55-65 year-old females. A new study by the *Center for Media Research* found that 56% of media buyers in U.S. plan to buy ads on social networks next year (2011), ranking just below those that will buy ads on e-mail marketing platforms (57%). This shows that the social media will play a crucial role in tourism marketing.

Suggestions

The following are some of the suggestions for effective use of social media in tourism and travel marketing:

- One of the productive strategies should be **'strategic planning** for **launching social media campaigns'**, which have to be part of the overall public relations, marketing and advertising plan for the business (Ramirez, 2009). Tourism firms have to devote real marketing budgets for social media.

- Online social networking and social media marketing should be effectively used, not only for growing the brand of an organisation in the hospitality sector, but also for advancing the reputations and the careers of executives, owners, managers and employees, improving at the same time both internal and proximate (external) environment of the enterprise (Ramirez, 2009).

- The staff that is responsible for taking care of the interactive web pages has to assess and critically decide which reviews are really trustworthy, reliable and helpful for the organisation. Hospitality managers and marketers have to set objectives on how to use social media if they want to reach their aims directly and to respond effectively and efficiently to their customers' feedback (*Tsigkakos, E., 2010).*

- Social media must be used for de-commoditisation approaach. Weintraub (2008) says that social media initiatives are a crucial part of the de-commoditisation strategy of a hotel.

- According to a survey by *comScore* in 2009, mobile social networking is responsible for growth of mobile internet in Europe. Women comprise 48 per cent of the audience accessing only social media through mobile internet. So, mobile social networking must be leveraged.

Conclusion

Social media is critical for travel and hospitality industry due to the fact that it is almost the same a word-of-mouth advertising. It is now an established fact that social media

plays a vital role in tourism marketing. Travel and tourism firms are increasingly realizing the importance of tapping into social media where they can listen, learn and harness the power of personal recommendations and become part of the conversations online that influence the decisions people make. Social media, which cuts across barriers of demography, is a boon to travel companies' solutions to travelers. While the success of this media is difficult to measure, one cannot ignore the following it has among Web-users. We can't put a price on the visitors who arrived at social networking websites, but put a value, instead. Tourism is the world's largest industry. Social media is also big, so these two are a match made in heaven.

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