
Editorial: Embedding social media into leisure and tourism marketing strategies

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The outgrowth of internet-based social media has added advantages to the manufacturing, marketing and services business companies to launch widespread communication with their stakeholder, business-to-business clients and customers across the geo-demographic segments. The leisure and tourism industry has been benefitted enormously by the use of social media that has developed a positive grapevine effect in the society about the attributes of the services of the leisure and tourism companies. The communications flowing through the social media is significantly magnified in the leisure and tourism business. It has become a hybrid element of the promotion-mix of leisure and tourism services. The social networks enable companies not only to converse with their customers but also to drive effective and sustainable referrals. The contents and frequency of conversations occurring between consumers within the social media deliver a fair perception about the quality of services, and the communications within the social networks are beyond the managers' control. Often the social networks like Trip Advisor spread varied perceptions about the quality of services of leisure and tourism companies that guide the prospective customers about buying the products. Thus, managers must learn to moderate consumer discussions to stay consistent with the organisation's mission and performance of services (Mangold and Faulds, 2009).

The growing popularity of social media with an extensive outreach of internet and mobile technologies has given consumers an easy access to the information on companies and their services. It is necessary to bridge the gap between the traditional and non-traditional communication by the companies understanding the process of adaptation of consumers to social media technology platforms. Such convergence strategy between

the tradition and contemporary social media would help companies to serve the diverse consumer groups. There are many differences perceived on using the social media platforms between the youth and adolescent consumers and influence their purchase decisions. These consumer segments track new products and services, promotions and reviews on Facebook, Twitter, Ticketmaster (online ticket information/purchase website) and several other e-communication channels featured frequently (Alonso and O'Shea, 2012).

In the 21st century, the social media space has become a corridor for consumer communication, networking and content sharing. Most services companies are leaning towards these platforms to explore marketing and business opportunities across the consumer segments. However, the users are polarised around some networks that give more space for consumer manifestation, while a large number of channels such as blogs, discussion forums and ethnic networks remain largely unexploited. Managers should meticulously analyse the social media impacts on financial, operational and corporate social performance in reference to generating adequate social capital to sustain their brand and enrich the corporate social networking to acquire new consumers. Some empirical tests of the popular social network channels such as Facebook and Twitter shows that 'followers' and 'likes' positively influence a firm's share value by attaining the critical mass of followers. These social media channels are more powerful tool to enhance business performance of services companies (Paniagua and Sapena, 2014).

Embedding social media into the marketing strategies of the leisure and tourism companies is changing the way of carrying out business in the competitive marketplace. Companies must embrace social media to provide a low-cost, highly accessible platform to build consumer brands and engage faster dissemination of brand attributes among peers, customers and public-in order to leverage relationships, develop brand association and corporate commitment. Embedding social media in development of marketing strategies gives firms an opportunity to learn from live information and feedback. However, companies must also consider the risks of maintaining a large number of connections and of sharing content online (Dutta, 2010). Recent advances in information technology have helped the companies to migrate customer relationship to a higher interactive level for building corporate brands. Fragmentation of mass media and consumer indifference to traditional marketing tools are forcing companies to use digital marketing in combination with the social networks. Services companies are leaning towards using the social networks within the framework of Web 2.0, the next generation of the internet, which allows user-generated content and social computing. The best practices of several companies have demonstrated that the use of blogs has emerged as an effective tool to better engage the customer in the creation, delivery and dissemination of marketing messages (Singh et al., 2008).

Listening to customers and improving the services quality, and delivery on their feedback makes good business sense. Services companies could gain more customer patronage from actively seeking and encouraging customer participation to provide constructive suggestions and share their ideas on improving the attributes, quality and delivery of services, particularly in the leisure and tourism industry. Despite several digital technology appliances such as mobile phones and other portable devices, and internet-based social networks, the word-of-mouth is still the only one type of voluntary behaviour in which customers are engaged spontaneously with emotions and verbal expressions. The word-of-mouth behaviour indicates in- and off-market talks of consumers about companies and their products on what customers may be looking for.

Companies upon analysing such word-of-mouth contents could develop sustainable competitive advantages and earn the customer loyalty. Both word-of-mouth (customer to customer) and customer-to-business interactions are associated with the customer perceptions evaluating the gap between what have been desired and what has been offered by the company. Such perceptions determine a customer's propensity to buy more of a company's products and services. Word-of-mouth may not influence all customers to turn as repeat buyers, but it would encourage their involvement in the products and services and drive them to provide feedback and suggestions to improve the business. Companies can also re-acquire the lost customers by rebuilding contacts with them and encouraging them to participate in social networks to give constructive feedback to enable the companies to adjust the quality and delivery of services. However, customer-to-business interaction is often more agile than customer-to-customer word-of-mouth and is within the control of management. It has been observed that customers engaged in sharing high word-of-mouth appear to be loyal and indulgent in the brand while customers, who stay alienated, usually stay indifferent to the brand irrespective of the spread of word of mouth-positive or negative (Merlo et al., 2014).

In this issue of the journal, there are six papers that address the significance of social media and internet in leisure and tourism marketing and consumer knowledge, operational efficiency of firms. The papers discuss contemporary research propositions and attempt to establish convergence between the role of consumers and companies in managing buying decisions in a competitive leisure and tourism marketplace. I hope the anthology of research papers appearing in this issue will enrich the existing literature on the topic and stimulate future research.

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