

# The role of social media in tourism marketing



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## Managing and Marketing Tourism

1. Discuss the role and significance of social media in tourism marketing. You must consider the broader context of ICTs, new channels including smartphones, and the implications for the tourism industry and consumer experience.

“ Innovation needs to be part of your culture. Consumers are transforming faster than we are, and if we don’t catch up, we’re in trouble.” -Ian Schafer.

The whole world is totally dependent on novelties, and in modern world it is necessary always to be up-to-date. However just the awareness of the new trends on its own is not enough. Apart from it, it is essential to be able to get adjusted to them in an appropriate way. That is exactly what is happening in the tourism industry: there has been a comparatively recent breakthrough in technologies, and while the service providers seek to find best solutions of restructuring their marketing strategies and destination management systems, consumers are trying to gain more monetary and experiential benefits. The technologies that are tremendously important for tourism industry in this particular case gave a rise to social media. Social media comprises of a huge variety of tools that make it possible for Internet users to share, exchange or post media files and other types of information using various channels onto web. Basically, the growth in ICTs has already resulted into vast shifts from in consumer and provider sides. Consumers became more sophisticated in terms of searching for the most rational options in accommodation, flights and other issues. With the use of new ICTs (SM platforms such as TripAdvisor, social networks like YouTube and web blogs like Twitter) customers are able to share feedbacks, photos and videos, find

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what millions of other Internet users' opinions are. All of the users have an easy access to ratings on the places they are interested in. According to Zhou (2004), travelers prefer to rely on their peers' feedback rather than on advertisements or opinions of experts. They stick to the belief that their peers have no incentives to be dishonest. The decision making process of customers has become more complicated, and their travel can be split into three phases, with an intensive contribution of social media in each phase. Due to the enlarged ICT use, service providers are forced to offer more elastic and personalised deals to tourists. Tourism industry has become very information-rich, therefore it is a big challenge for destinations to create or maintain their brand. However, with the suitable marketing strategy, social media can turn into an advantage.

The significance of social media in modern tourism industry is very hard to overestimate. Social media are shaping the whole way companies and governments manage their products and services in tourism. First of all, social media open numerous opportunities to service providers. Through social media it became possible to contact a huge audience, which can exchange information with each other. It means that with the right use of social media the message can be spread very quickly and widely. Good associations with the brand can create added PR and extremely wide brand recognition. These methods of advertising are much cheaper than traditional ones. Another positive feature of social media for tourism is that it makes easier for both supply and demand sides to communicate with each other in order to build strong relationships, enhance cooperation and create efficient integrated marketing strategy. It also helps to avoid unnecessary payments

to intermediaries in many cases. Apparently, travel agents are still demanded in the market; however the need of them is decreasing constantly.

The survey shows that just 48 per cent of people stick on their initial plan after searching for some details concerning their trip using SM (WTM, 2014). As demonstrated before, social media in recent decades has gained a huge influence on tourists' decision-making process and the tourism industry as a whole. Therefore the development of new, efficient Information and Communication Technologies and applications for social media is seemed as a necessity. New technologies allow users to have wide range of opportunities necessary to organize their trips. With the use of User Generated Content (UGC) and Web 2. 0 there was created an application TripAdvisor which has been downloaded by different users worldwide on various devices more than 82 million times. It has 69 mil attendances every month; the number of trip reviews and feedback exceeds sixty million; less than 10 per cent of issues placed online are not responded in first 24 hours. Applications such as TripAdvisor make the process of planning the travel more conscious, convenient and rational for customers. In terms of the suppliers, they are also able to get benefits of ICTs: social media applications allow service providers to collect data about the customers. It becomes easier to find the target audience and make appropriate offers according to their preferences and expectations. The new technologies even offer virtual travels to some destinations. Usually such trips are free and their purpose is to show the clients a piece of emotions they can experience during the real trip. Moreover, the emergence of new technologies has created a possibility

for tourists not only to visit very common places of interest, but also quite special destinations, which they would never be aware of without ICTs (Giaoutzi and Nijkamp, 2006).

Buhalis, D. and Law, R. (2008) suggest that there are three phases of travel, and during each of them tourism used to intensively communicate through social media. During pre-travel phase the consumer is being relatively passive while looking for some information rather than posting anything. However, it is not a rare case when people post several specified questions concerning their further trip in order to receive a respond from other users who might probably have a bigger experience or knowledge in the questioned area. Before the travel users commonly review accommodation opportunities, flight options and other less important details such as climate and culture. As mentioned earlier, the opinion of other users plays a vital role in decision making at the first phase. The majority of travelers strongly rely on the recommendations of their peers even if they did not know them before. The second phase happening during the trip is called travel phase. Social media are still extremely useful when the trip has already started. Travelers typically use social media at this phase to find some very specific information on the destination they stay at. Such information includes the materials about upcoming events, places of sightseeing, restaurants, clubs, bars, most visited places and so on. TripAdvisor has numerous advices of where to go in every part of the world; therefore it is possible to be aware of all the trends in the destination without any preparation. In order to improve travelers' experience, they can also find the e-guide applications which will show them the directions to chosen places. While enjoying the travel most of

the tourists tend to share some media files and instant feedback about the place they are visiting. 40 per cent of tourists post reviews on catering places, while 55 per cent 'like' posts on Facebook concerning travelling (WTM, 2014). Before the era of social media, travelers used to share their experiences only to a limited group of people. However, now it became possible to post everything online. As soon as the information posted in the web, there is no control over it, so it can be discovered by millions of other users. People when coming after vacations post taken photos, videos, feedback and other information which can influence the view of millions of other people. According to The World Travel Market (2014), 76 per cent of people post vacation photos in the Internet, while 46 per cent post feedback on their accommodation.

Social media has a tremendous effect on the tourism industry, and in some cases it may seem to be contradictory. Along with new opportunities the development of ICTs forced the supply side of tourism to adapt for the changes. Therefore Destination Management Organisations have become very important determinants of success of the strategies. One of the main functions of DMOs is to maintain the sustainability of destinations with a special reference to SMTEs (Sigala, 2009). DMOs have created numerous Internet portals in order to provide tourists with pursued data. Consumers are offered to use the dynamic packaging, which is the mixture of various tourism modules, put together and priced online, as a response to travelers' application (Cardoso, 2005). Malta is a great example of a destination which has developed an extremely successful Destination Management System ([www.visitmalta.com](http://www.visitmalta.com)) that allows tourists to book flights and buy tickets in

the Internet. There is also an application for Apple devices that comprises of electronic guide system around Malta, including data, specific details, roads, virtual trips and so on.

With the growing opportunities, the number of players in tourism industry has increased as well. The entry barriers have become much weaker, whereas the volume of the market has grown. Consequently, the emergence of a highly competitive environment seems very logical. In such conditions, the sustainability has become a very significant aspect, which cannot be ignored. The existing business environment implied that in order to be successful it is necessary to maintain brand identity (Vatanasombut, B., Stylianou, A. & Igbaria, M., 2004). Competitive advantage that is one of the objectives for all destinations could be reached by creating and maintaining customer loyalty (Gurau, C., Ranchhod, A. & Hackney, R., 2003). However, self-service environment is contradicting with being loyal to one brand. Hence the autonomy of consumers is both a requirement and a threat.

Social media's effect on the consumers' experience and decision-making is astonishing imagination. Its influence even though is complicated, it can be obviously demonstrated. As The World Travel Market (2014) investigations show, 33 per cent of the travelers altered their accommodation due to the use of social media, 10 per cent changed resorts, 10 per cent switched the intermediary, 7 per cent decided to spend the vacations in another country, 5 per cent changed airlines. This numerical data shows that customers' decisions are very elastic and their experience can be shaped easily. A huge advantage for the service providers is that nowadays they have the possibility to manage consumer expectations and their experience. Joseph

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Pine and James Gilmore claim that experience economy is the new stage of economy following the service economy. They argue that organizations have to create extraordinary, memorable experiences for consumers to be satisfied. In this sense, it becomes easier for destinations to prepare some personalized plan for each customer, or at least each type of customer. They now can anticipate the expectations of their clients and try to exceed their expectations what will eventually lead to exciting experience and satisfaction of consumer.

75 % of companies consider that customer relationship management applications they have chosen to be fiascos since the issues they focused on do not improve consumer satisfaction rate or influence adequately the sales (Feinberg, R. and Kadam, R., 2002). The experience shows that developing Destination Management Systems is not always an easy task to perform. There are numerous cases when the DMOs seem to be useless in terms of improvement of customer satisfaction. One of the good examples is the case of India. Tourism there is currently at the development phase, and it has huge opportunities due to the plenty of tourist attractions, cheap flight tickets and large numbers of travelers arriving from all around the world. Nowadays, India is ranked as 61st most attractive destination in the world (UNWTO, 2015), and it is ready to become more and more competitive. However, India is experiencing problems with tourists' dissatisfaction of ICTs development across the country. The major complaint include: no access to mobile versions of online portals, employees are not trained to offer ICT services, too much reliance on traditional methods, many companies cannot



be reviewed through the Internet, the Internet access is in a huge deficit and others.

Although there are several problems in implementing certain strategies such as the openness of information (competitors can easily access and copy each other's strategies), it is still possible to find effective ways to gain and maintain customer loyalty. One of excellent scenarios is presented by Australian GMO and is based on inspiration of discussions around Australia using a variety of websites and applications such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and Google. The Facebook account is constantly posting information about new trends and the photos of the most picturesque views in Australia. They differentiate themselves by taking into consideration the content send privately by visitors and posting the best of it on the Facebook page. Every Friday there are posted best pictures of the week and also added to the guest album. The ongoing conversation is constantly maintained and apparently most of the issues discussed are positive. The Instagram account of Tourism Australia has over 1 million followers and it is also posting the visitors' experiences which are later being commented on. Accounts on Twitter and Google post more information rather than media content; however they are also very popular since they include unique facts and news about Australia.

Other, more individual methods to gain consumer loyalty include emotional influence, sustainable tourism and philanthropic concerns. First of all, the emotional connection of customers sometimes can be manipulated to become very strong. For example, there is a real life story about a young boy who was strolling next to the barber shop every day for several weeks. After <https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-social-media-in-tourism-marketing/>

a while, the owner of the barber shop noticed the child and invited him to his shop with the words: "there will be more benefit from you inside than outside". Few years later the boy grown up, he learned everything about barber shop and became one of the leading hairdressers. Every time he met a new client he was telling him his story, and people experienced extremely strong emotional connection to that barber shop. Moreover, they were spreading the voice about that boy's story, what consequently brought the barber shop a huge popularity and success. Secondly, it is important for most of the customers to be sure that their service provider is ethical. Therefore, it is important to keep the business "green", promote charity and other vastly important concerns. "Product Red" (2008) is a good example of a campaign of selling goods colored in red and donate part of the profits to the fond. Dedicated money goes for AIDS treatment development, illnesses in African countries and diseases counted as epidemic.

The discussions around SM are widely spread, however not many organizations can exploit all the offered opportunities. In the real life, the way normal people use social media use quite simple and clear: we exchange information, we often ask for advices to improve something we are not satisfied with. That is what organizations should pay attention to. They should ask questions from users in order to keep improving in the right directions. It is vital not only to ask for people's recommendations but also to make sure that their ideas if suitable are implemented in reality. The potential of such cooperation supply side with demand side is very big. It is also important for consumers to express themselves; it brings them the sense of belonging. Their ideas might be unique and very useful. When

companies receive exceptionally good feedback, they can be lost in their development strategies. Constructive critics of different aspects can become a very valuable piece of recommendations.

The emergence of ICTs and social media has dramatically reformed the organization and priorities distribution in tourism industry. Customers are the ones to gain more than other players of the industry because their bargaining power has become much higher. Nowadays it is dependent on the opportunities that consumers have to go to web and get all the necessary information or discuss anything with service providers, at the same time gaining advantage from saving money. Social media has led to fierce competition between service providers and presented many improvements to the industry. The constant connection of travelers to Internet made it possible to exchange information in the real time and resulted into introduction of new channels of communication which make the processes of distribution more convenient. Internet portals and websites have a bigger and bigger influence on travels. The improvements in social media will be sustained by the launching of fresh ICTs. The existence of new effective technologies will encourage service providers to increase their rationality and take a full advantage of ICTs by restructuring their Destination Management Systems. Although the cases of unsuccessful DMS implementation are happening worldwide, they can be avoided by creating appropriate strategies for dealing with online customers and bloggers. It is essential to gain benefits from the cooperation with the demand side and taking some of the proposed ideas into consideration.

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