# Chapter 43
# Social Media as a Channel of Constructive Dialogue for Tourism Businesses

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## ABSTRACT

*The main aim of this chapter is to examine and suggest the ways in which tourism businesses could take advantage of social media (SM) as a channel of interactive communication and constructive dialogue with customers. More specifically, it examines the potential contribution and possible uses of SM by tourism providers in acquiring customer feedback. It is based on extensive reviews of literature and business reports. It takes a strategic and operational marketing perspective to analyze the potential contribution of SM from the point of view of tourism providers. SM are regarded as a source of, and medium for, interactive communication with customers.*

## INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are having a major impact on tourism in general. Ongoing developments in ICTs have significant changes in the way tourism-related information is distributed and on consumer behavior. The major impacts of the "digital revolution" on tourism have come through Social Media (SM) and mobile devices. According to the latest estimations the worldwide audience of SM has surpassed two billion users in 2015 (eMarketer, 2015). SM allow tourists to interact and share their views and experiences with potentially unrestricted virtual communities (Gretzel & Yoo, 2013; Leung et al., 2013; Sigala et al., 2012). This approach to meeting and communicating with people globally has revolutionized communications and consequently the marketing of tourism businesses (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014).

SM or Web 2.0 platforms include social networks (e.g. Facebook), blogs (e.g. Blogger), microblogs (e.g. Twitter), wikis (e.g. Wikipedia), content sharing platforms (e.g. AssociateContent.com) and text/audio/video sharing platforms (e.g. Flickr and YouTube). SM are presenting a host of new challenges as well as opportunities for tourism providers. One of their main functions is to establish an interactive channel of communication, which is mutually beneficial to both parties involved: it offers a medium for tourists to express their requirements, and gives tourism providers a tool to acquire customer feedback (Bilgihan et al., 2016). Whilst this represents a real challenge for tourism businesses, it also opens new channels of communication. It is therefore imperative for tourism businesses to consider how SM is shaping business-to-consumer marketing communications and how may exploit their full potential (Benckendorff et al., 2014; Law et al., 2014; Sotiriadis & Van Zyl, 2013).

Within this context, the present article takes a marketing perspective to analyze the potential contribution of SM. The main aim is to examine and suggest the ways in which tourism businesses could take advantage of SM as a channel of constructive dialogue with customers. In sum, the paper suggests ways to take full advantage of SM in order to enhance listening to, and understanding of, their current and potential customers.

## BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The Internet has become the first-choice place for consumers to search for information on tourism destinations, as well as being the most important venue for marketing of tourism services (Benckendorff et al., 2014; Gretzel & Yoo, 2013; Law et al., 2014). The challenges and opportunities for tourism-related industries that arise from the digital environment are obvious in everyday business practice (Leung et al., 2013; Sigala et al., 2012).

During the last two decades scholars have shown an increasing interest in the growing role of SM in the tourism field (Law et al., 2014; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). The dominant topic investigated is the effectiveness of different digital marketing strategies and tools including SM (Law et al., 2014). The reason for this is that SM play a significant role in many aspects of tourism, especially in decision-making behavior, tourism promotion and interaction with consumers (Bilgihan et al., 2016; Gretzel & Yoo, 2013; Law et al., 2014; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014).

User-generated content (UGC) is one of the main activities of tourists on SM. They share their experiences, views and evaluations through online reviews. Examples of this behavior include posts, wikis, discussion forums, chats, tweets, podcasting, pins, and sharing of digital images, video and audio files (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). The issue of implications of UGC has been examined by Ayeh et al. (2013), Boley et al. (2013), Wilson et al. (2012), Xiang and Gretzel (2010), and Ye et al. (2011). The topic of factors motivating tourists' involvement in SM was examined by Bronner and de Hoog (2011), and Munar and Jacobsen (2014). The study by Bilgihan et al (2016) explored the factors motivating consumers to share tourism information via SM. The study results show that the main factors of intention to share knowledge are belief in integrity and perceived ease of use. The issue of influence of SM on tourist behavior was examined by Parra-López et al. (2011) and Sotiriadis and Van Zyl (2013).

The present study is focusing on the impact of SM in the field of tourism business marketing and management. As argued by scholars, the changes of tourist behavior influence the approaches and tools that tourism businesses have to adopt and use in managing and marketing their offerings in the digital environment (Leung et al., 2013; Sigala, 2012; Sigala et al., 2012). Kim et al. (2015) suggested that

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