

The Effect of Social Media Networking in the Travel Industry

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INTRODUCTION

Many travelers have at least one account in one of the popular social media networking websites or applications (Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Instagram). Airlines and travel agencies often encourage their customers to use their personal profile to: (a) either interact with the company directly and (b) participate in online discussions with other users about that company. The use of social-media for the purpose of interacting with travel industry companies and other travelers has created multiple online communities. The travel industry is using these online communities as a new advertising and communication channel to reach customers, thus serving both as a customer service and innovative marketing tool.

The multidisciplinary nature of this chapter identifies under-researched areas and sheds new light in the way that connected passengers search for travel-related information. The authors aim in exploring ways that connected passengers develop a sense of belonging in social-media networking websites.

The use of new technologies and new methods of communications in the travel industry has reinforced the need for dialogue among providers (airlines, travel agencies and so on) and users (passengers). Online communities serve as a networking platform that brings together positive and negative comments.

BACKGROUND OF RESEARCH: DEFINING SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media are Internet tools where people interact by creating user-generated content. This is an asynchronous channel of communication. There is perceived interactivity since interaction may not be necessary nor interpersonal. Communication may take place either via web-based technology or via mobile device applications (Carr & Hayes, 2015). Facebook users post comments and like other people's posts in order to communicate. In addition, Facebook users play online games, share personal experiences and interact by following other people's updates. This makes users feel a sense of belonging by sharing moments and keeping in touch with friends and relatives.

Flickr is a 'photo sharing community'. It consists of a user-generated online social network where users tell stories or share moments using photographs. The personal perspective of the user gets shared with the entire Internet community. This photo-sharing creates experiences that can be understood by larger groups of people (Dotan & Zaphiris, 2010). Photographs are used as a form of a visual vocabulary used along with hashtags. These are user-generated metadata, which organize the uploaded photos using hashtag as a means of coding. On Flickr a relationship exists between social affiliation (contacts) and hashtag vocabulary formation (Dotan & Zaphiris, 2010).

According to the Annual Report of Facebook, the global advertising revenue in 2015 is expected to reach 14.27 billion US dollars (“Facebook’s Advertising Revenue”, 2015). This demonstrates the tremendous advertising growth and a great opportunity. An increasing number of people spend more time online and less time using other digital media. The greater use of social media networks as part of marketing communications has the potential to outnumber traditional channels (Hutter, Hautz, Severin Dennhardt, & Füller, 2013). The success of social media marketing lays on the interactivity of the medium. This offers interaction among users and companies with the scope of increasing a company’s brand awareness.

There has been little research on the importance of interactivity between companies and consumers using new technologies. In particular ways that firms can communicate with their customers, learn from feedback received and engage with users in an interactive way.

THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

Social sensitivities need to be taken into consideration when online social networks and online communities are created. Customs, social norms and traditions sometimes dictate what is socially acceptable or not in an online community. Community is best understood as a sense of (or belief in) group commonality. Online communities are products of culture and reflect certain practices or acts exercised within that culture. Examples include ways of naming a community. Hofstede (1980) argued that culture influences a human group’s response to its environment. Culture may determine dominant issues within a community.

An example of cultural interference comes from the People’s Republic of China, where Facebook, one of the most popular social network websites, is currently banned (Riley, 2015). This is only accessible in Hong Kong (SAR). On the contrary,

local social networking websites such as renren.com are rather popular. Japan’s most popular social network website mixi is accessible to Japanese citizens with more than 27.1 million users. Mixi users are estimated to be approximately 5 million back in 2006, while Facebook users today are about 15 million (“About Mixi”, 2015; Ghedin, 2013).

In order for marketers to create strong online brand communities, they need to create or adopt a language or symbols that will help them connect better to their respective communities. This language will have to take into consideration cultural issues and sensitivities. Further research is needed to examine the significance attributed to the concept of a constructed language, along with its symbolism. Preliminary exploratory research in the hotel and tourism industry illustrated that members of an online community prefer using code-words, symbols and a commonly understood language (Kavoura & Tiago, 2016). Further research in this field will provide further insights.

ONLINE COMMUNITIES: PASSENGERS AND THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY

Users attracted to social networking websites have a certain degree of homogeneity. Usually they speak the same language and share similar interests in order to be incorporated in the social networking group. Gregorie, Salle, & Tripp (2015) pointed out that emphasis should be placed on the connected passenger and the respective online communities he/she belongs. Social media are changing the traditional communication norms between the customer and the company and user-generated content can in fact influence a company’s reputation.

The user-generated content of all users is available to the entire social media platform. This may influence others, meet popularity and create trends. Content creators often act as ambassadors of ideas or may represent a company and its products. Content creators are members of the

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