Chapter 7

Tourism Services, Micro-Blogging, and Customer Feedback: A Tourism Provider Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The digital environment and the tools of Web 2.0 provide opportunities and challenges for the providers of tourism services to better listen to and understand their current and potential consumers. This chapter approaches the Social Media, and more specifically Twitter, as a tool for integrated communication with tourism consumers. It takes a strategic and operational marketing perspective to analyze the potential contribution of micro-blogging, from the point of view of tourism providers. Twitter is regarded as a source of and medium for interactive communication with customers. Therefore, the main aim of this chapter is to examine and suggest the ways in which tourism businesses could take advantage of Twitter as a channel of interactive communication and constructive dialogue. More specifically, it examines the potential contribution and possible uses of Twitter by tourism businesses in acquiring customer feedback for two purposes: service quality/performance and customer-driven innovation.

INTRODUCTION

The influence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on business environment and the ongoing outputs of the “digital revolution” for travel and tourism industry are well documented in the literature (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Pease at al., 2007). The challenges and opportunities for tourism-related industries that arise from the digital environment are obvious in everyday business practice. One of the main challenges in the digital environment and globalized travel and tourism markets is the rise

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of social media (SM)/networking platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and MySpace) that allow tourists to interact and share their views and experiences with potentially unrestricted virtual communities (Sigala et al., 2012).

The total volume of SM users at global level was accounted at two billion in August 2013 (Bullas, 2013). Since there are more and more people communicating via SM, this approach to meeting and communicating with people all over the world is emerging as a major social phenomenon. SM introduce substantial and pervasive changes to communication between organizations, communities and individuals (Kietzmann and Hermkens, 2011), and their utilization is believed to be a driving force in defining the current time period as the Attention Age (Morgan et al., 2012) and the Age of Exposure (Munar, 2010).

This social phenomenon has revolutionized communications and consequently the marketing of tourism destinations and businesses. One of the main functions of SM is to establish an interactive channel of communication, which is mutually beneficial to both poles/parties involved: it offers a medium for tourists to express their demands, wishes and requirements, and gives providers of tourism services a tool to acquire customer feedback. The SM have become truly integrated into the tourism field, representing both threats and opportunities for the industry (Deloitte, 2010). The new form of feedback is good news for customers and offers both threats and opportunities for operators. Whilst this represents a real challenge for tourism providers, it also offers unparalleled opportunities for customer feedback and opens new channels of communication between the latter and their consumers. It is believed that these issues must be properly addressed by tourism businesses and destinations that need to understand this changing landscape if they are to survive and thrive in the new marketing era. In other words, it is imperative for tourism destinations and businesses to consider how SM are shaping business-to-consumer marketing communications and how may tap into their full potential (Sotiriadis and Van Zyl, 2013).

Within this context, the present chapter takes a strategic and operational marketing perspective to analyze the potential contribution of micro-blogging, from the point of view of tourism providers. The main aim of this chapter is therefore to suggest ways to take advantage of Twitter as a channel of interactive communication and constructive dialogue. More specifically, it examines the potential contribution and possible uses of Twitter by tourism businesses in acquiring customer feedback for service performance improvement and customer-driven innovation. Hence, it is structured into four parts, namely: (i) a review of related literature, the academic research on SM in tourism; (ii) a presentation of the main challenges in tourism business environment, outlining tourism consumer experience and innovation in the tourism industry; (iii) a synoptic analysis of the ways in which SM and Twitter are used by tourists; and (iv) formulation of suggestions and recommendations regarding the potential contribution and possible uses of Twitter by tourism providers in acquiring customer feedback for two purposes – service improvement and customer-driven innovation. The chapter is completed by a brief presentation of future research directions and the concluding remarks.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section deals with the issues that have been investigated by academic research on SM in tourism. Munar and Jacobsen (2014) argue that SM are increasingly relevant as part of tourism practices affecting destinations and businesses, as they are changing the many ways in which information about travel and tourism experiences are disseminated. SM platforms permit tourists to digitize and share online knowledge and experiences (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Sigala et al., 2012). Moreover, Web-based platforms