Chapter 2

Stakeholder Engagement via Social Media in the Hospitality Sector:
The Evidence from BRIC Countries

María del Mar Gálvez-Rodríguez
University of Almería, Spain

Laura Saraite
University of Almería, Spain

Juana Alonso-Cañadas
University of Almería, Spain

María del Carmen Caba-Pérez
University of Almería, Spain

ABSTRACT

Although there is little doubt about the increasing use of social media, however, there is little evidence of the real success of social media in the improvement of stakeholders’ participation in the hospitality sector. Within this context, this paper aims to perform a comparative analysis of the use of Facebook as a communication strategy for encouraging stakeholder engagement in hotels from Brazil, Russia and India. In general terms, the Facebook pages of Brazilian hotels present the greatest level of online engagement with their stakeholders, followed by those in India and Russia. Moreover, it should be pointed out that in the Brazilian case, stakeholders pay greater attention to answering the messages posted by hotels than to sharing the information. In contrast, in the case of Russia and India, the preferences of stakeholders are towards the spread of the information posted by this sector.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism in BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) has increased dramatically, making these countries key players in the global hospitality and tourism industry (Assis-Dorr et al., 2012; Pop, 2014). Nevertheless, while these countries are very popular among travel consumers and, as many researchers point out, the hospitality industry is very competitive, it is crucial for hotels to implement information technologies (IT) as a strategy to enhance their competitive advantage (Veázquez et al., 2015). The

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reasoning for this is that IT applications can improve service quality, reduce costs, augment guest satisfaction as well as obtain long term profitability (Karadag & Dumanoglu, 2009; Ruiz-Molina et al., 2011).

With regards to the different IT applications, the growing use of social media among people of all ages should be highlighted (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Sun & Wu, 2012). These tools are online platforms that provide the opportunity for developing online communities and to share the content created by online users (Kim et al., 2010). In this sense, Distaso and McCorkindale (2013), point out that, through these technologies, organizations are able to interact with a greater number of stakeholders and are also able to encourage their stakeholders to participate in the organization in a more active manner. In this respect, there is growing concern about stakeholder engagement in social media as they are key players for fully realizing the potential of social media and specifically for obtaining popularity, dialogue and virality of the information posted on these online platforms (Bonsón & Ratkai, 2013).

Focusing on the benefits of social media in the hospitality sector, Dobele et al. (2005) state that through these applications, travelers can access a wide and reliable database of information, as the information given by others travelers is unfiltered and thus, rather than merely receiving advertising messages from the hotel, social media provides travelers the chance to get to know the hotels they are interested in better thanks to the experiences of other travelers. Consequently, travelers are increasingly demanding the availability of these tools in order to allow them to easily interact with other customers and with the organization (O’Connor, 2010). Thus, hotel companies should be more aware of the importance of increasing their presence on such communication mediums not only to respond to their customers’ expectations but also to make the most of the advantages that these mechanisms possess for obtaining useful feedback regarding their products and services. By becoming more active on social media platforms and making full use of these tools, hotel companies can discover new strategies for improving their overall performance (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010).

Among the different social media, Facebook is one of the most popular at a global level, and currently has 1.44 billion active users monthly (Statista, 2015). It is also worth noting its impressive growth in some of the BRIC countries such as Brazil and India and, to a lesser extent, in Russia (Statista, 2013). One of the reasons might be due to the increasing number of tourists from developed economies such as the United States and Canada that are visiting these countries (Amster, 2013). This spectacular growth in visitors has impacted the hospitality industry as it has become increasingly common to use Facebook for promotions, direct bookings and to interact and improve relationships with target customers (Weed, 2011). Therefore, authors like Phelan et al. (2013) point out that hoteliers should maintain their social media profiles with updated information, thus maintaining an active online presence with the aim of not only using this tool as a fast and low-cost communication channel but also to increase customer engagement. Along these lines, Pronschinske et al. (2012) state that having a Facebook page without fully utilizing its potential for stakeholder engagement is a significant waste of the relational benefits that this tool offers.

Although there is little doubt about the advantages that social media provides to the hospitality industry, there is still a gap in the literature concerning the influence that social media are actually having on the communication policies of these organizations. In this respect, it should be highlighted that the studies related to this issue are mainly focused on the context of developed countries (Chan & Guillet, 2011; Phelan et al. 2013). In addition, it is worth noting that the studies that examine whether the social media used by hotels are obtaining a good acceptance in terms of stakeholder engagement are almost nonexistent. In particular, there are even fewer studies focusing on whether or not stakeholders are ac-
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