Vitor Roque, Rui Raposo
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The Integration of Social Media in Portuguese Tourism Public Organizations

–A Proposal for Guidelines of Good Practice –

Vitor Roque, Rui Raposo
Polytechnic Institute of Guarda, University of Aveiro, Portugal
vitor.roque@ipg.pt, raposo@ua.pt

Abstract

This work analyses how the Portuguese Destination Management Organizations (DMO), working in the tourism area, use the Internet and in particular the tools of Web 2.0/social media in their communication strategies.

Tourism, as an economic sector where information plays a key role, is therefore one of the most affected by the arrival of the new realities such as social media. Currently, the widespread use of Web 2.0 tools and especially the exponential growth of social networking platforms, are causing remarkable changes in the promotion of tourism destinations, with a clear strategy to switch to the use of user generated content. Given this new paradigm, the DMOs, as dynamic organizations, whose objective is the promotion of tourism destinations, have to adapt in order to fit this new reality.

1 Problem Definition

The use of social media is currently one of the main activities on the Internet and has become a powerful and current mean of communication. This is changing the dynamics of marketing and advertising from a passive perspective, for example television, to an active and dynamic perspective as Web 2.0/social media.

On the other hand, users are becoming increasingly more mobile and play a closer and more active role in the media. This consumer involvement is leading to user-generated content (UGC) that is exploring new dimensions of marketing and advertising.

Traditionally tourism promotion is done through conventional media. Today this trend has been falling sharply, as consumers/tourists prefer to get the information they need online, using two major sources (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010): (i) the websites of social media and (ii) searching through search engines, instead of resorting to traditional tour operators or travel agencies.

These platforms allow potential tourists to obtain the desired knowledge from different sources and draw on the experiences of others, taking advantage of their own travel experience. Thus, the tourism industry is passing from a labor intensive

industry to an information-intensive industry (Sheldon, 1997); (Werthner & Klein, 1999); (Buhalis, 2003).

The technology behind Web 2.0 (O' Reilly, 2005) led the media to establish new trends, where social media are the most prominent example, and that have the greatest potential for disseminating information in a contemporary way. Social media are considered a good tool for marketing and advertising that runs through the engagement of virtual communities around a theme, brand, or other subject. The rapid growth of social media has led to huge consumer groups, which are able to reach the masses, in an easy and efficient way. In addition to targeting consumers, social media also enable companies to develop levels of relationship with their consumers. Consumers in turn also have the perception of value, since they feel that they control this type of scenario. On the other hand, it also reduces the workload of tourism promotion by companies, since this load is to be shared by users also that can provide the desired information to potential consumers. The facts and data provided by users to other consumers strengthen the degree of consumer confidence.

However, to ensure that the responsible agencies and companies for the promotion of tourism take full advantage of social media to their consumers, it will be important to understand their needs. What information do consumers look for and to what extent should they be involved? The roadmap of the consumer that needs this service must be understood and the value they attach to their priorities should be taken into account. The need for brands to have a loyal online community in order to study the behavior of its users and thus better understand their buying process is nowadays recognized (Holland & Menzel Baker, 2001).

From this context, the resulting perception that Portuguese tourism public organizations (DMO) may not incorporate or integrate more than limited and inefficient social media in their communication strategies, which results in the desire to investigate these communication strategies in terms of the set of emerging social media platforms.

In accordance with the above, was defined the research question "What strategies can be adopted in the integration of social media in the activities of the portuguese public tourism organizations related with destination communication?".

The research hypotheses defined were: (h1) destination communication done by Portuguese public tourism organizations uses social media, but is not supported by an overall integrating strategy; (h2) the definition of a strategy for integrating social media into destination communication done by Portuguese public tourism organizations can contribute to an increase in their use; (h3) the results of destination communication done by Portuguese public tourism organization can be improved using a strategy for integrating social media defined specifically for it and (h4) the results of destination communication done by the Portuguese public tourism organizations can be improved using a global strategy for integrating social media shared across all DMO.

2   Literature Review

2.1 Portuguese Tourism System and PENT

The Portuguese government considers tourism as a major and structuring factor on the dynamics and development of the national economy. In this sense, in recent years it has created strong, modern and dynamic public structures, capable of responding to the challenges faced by this industry. In order to better manage the country, mainland Portugal was divided into five regional areas of tourism, endowed with administrative and financial autonomy and its own assets including: (i) Porto Tourism and northern Portugal Tourism, (ii) Portugal Center Tourism, (iii) Lisbon and Tagus Valley Tourism, (iv) Alentejo Tourism and (v) Tourism of the Algarve.

In order to define a strategy and an action plan for the development of tourism in Portugal, based on the quality, competitiveness and sustainability of its offer, the responsible entity for the sector, the Turismo de Portugal IP, developed the National Tourism Strategic Plan (PENT) (PENT, 2007).

2.2 Tourism and its Mass Information Challenges

The "new" tourist system presents two fundamental characteristics and at the same time related to each other: the international interdependence and the revolution in information access.

The international interdependence results of modifications that have arised because tourism was no longer seen on a closed and regional/national perspective to be seen as an open and international perspective.

The information revolution has been driven by the emergence of new distribution channels, where the communication cares about the masses, since there was an exponential growth of the population exposed to these same means. The Internet is one of the most important means of communication, because it brought into the mainstream a range of social possibilities for monitoring the current ones through simple clicks (Mowlana, 1997).

Tourism also follows this trend, where Internet plays a key role. In this sense, Internet has mainly reshaped the way information related to tourism is distributed and the way people plan their trips (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

In recent years, two major trends have emerged on the Internet and are causing significant changes in the tourism system (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). On the one hand, the so-called social media websites, which represent the various forms of content generated by the user/consumer (UGC), such as blogs, wikis, social networks, collaborative tagging and file sharing websites like YouTube and Flickr, that have gained great popularity due to its use by tourists online (Gretzel, 2006); (Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007). Many of these social media websites allow consumers to post and share their comments, opinions and personal experiences related to travel, which will provide information to others (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). This supports the argument by T. Friedman (2007) that "*The World is flat*" where consumers are gaining more power in determining the production and distribution of information due to the increasing ease of Internet access.

These technologies driven by social interaction at various levels and in various contexts, allows potential tourists to get the desired knowledge from different sources and draw on the experiences of others, to then take advantage to their own experience. The tourism industry is thus passing from a labor intensive industry, to one of intensive communication and social interaction (Sheldon, 1997); (Werthner & Klein, 1999); (Buhalis, 2003).

2.3 Tourism 0.0, 1.0 e 2.0

The tourism model before the Internet, is known as mass tourism (Poon, 1993); (Fayos-Solá, 1996); (Buhalis, 2003) and (Sheldon, 2005). This is also known as Tourism 0.0 or off Tourism.

Due to the development of the Information Society, tourism began to develop a different, more flexible and customer-centric model (Poon, 1993), (Poon, 2003), (Fayos-Solá, 1996), (Werthner & Klein, 1999), (Gretzel, Yuan, & Fesenmaier, 2000), and (Buhalis, 2003). Tourism in the Information Society, which is also linked to the very beginning of the Internet – Web 1.0 – can be called as Tourism 1.0 or Informational Tourism (William & Perez, 2008). Tourism 1.0, with the development of ICT, gives rise to e-tourism, which an exhaustive analysis is made by Buhalis (2003).

In order to define Tourism 2.0 we will use the definition of O'Reilly (2005) for Web 2.0 and adapt it to tourism. Thus, tourism 2.0 *"is the business revolution in the tourism industry driven by the translation to a new platform – the social web – and trying to understand the new rules for its success. The main rule is: the construction of business and destinations that use the network effect to improve their productivity, as more individuals and companies participate in them"* (William & Perez, 2008).

3 Conceptual Development

For this project it was decided that its operation would consist of six phases, namely: (1st step) Literature review, (2nd step) Used Research | Sample definition | Data collection, (3rd step) Analysis and treatment of data; (4th step) Construction and development of the applied strategy, (5th step) Implementation of the developed strategy in a pilot DMO; (6th step) Evaluation of the results of the pilot DMO and (7th step) Revision of the proposed strategy based on results.

4 Proposed Methodology

According to Punch (2005) and Salkind (2006) descriptive research describes the characteristics of a specific phenomenon providing an overall view of what is happening. In this sense, for the research strategy, the choice falls on the descriptive research once thought to combine primary data, both quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (focus groups and/or interviews), and secondary data, in order to gain comprehensive insight on the use of social media. In relation to the universe of the sample, we intend to include the most representative national tourism public organizations.

The quantitative data from questionnaires will be analyzed using the tools: SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and/or Microsoft Excel. For the treatment of qualitative data resulting from the open questions of the questionnaire and interviews with leaders of organizations that regulate tourism in Portugal, we will use the WebQDA and/or NVivo tools.

5 Anticipated Results

At the end of the investigation, there should be a significant contribution on how the Portuguese DMO can improve their communication strategies with the use of Web 2.0/social media.

As partial results the following aspects should be implemented: (i) questionnaire of Web 2.0/social media technologies used by or integrated into the Portuguese DMO websites, (ii) what determines the choice of the tourism websites, (iii) profiling consumers who use such services, (iv) identify and analyze the route and behavior of consumers who use the Internet for this type of service – interaction with the DMO and (v) understand and identify national and international trends in terms of Web2.0/social media in tourism. As a final development, define the strategy for the integration of social media in the activities of the Portuguese public tourism organizations related with destination communication.

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