

Social Media in Hotel Crisis Communication: A Case Study

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Abstract: The evolution of social media has transformed the way people communicate, share experiences and search for information before and after a trip. These platforms can bring countless benefits to businesses but implementing them effectively brings countless challenges. In the hotel industry, the use of social media as a digital marketing strategy has become fundamental to promote brands and services, as well as to create a closer relationship with the customer. It then becomes essential to understand how hotels can use these platforms effectively. Moreover, defining communication strategies, especially in periods of global crisis, with customers and public that include social networks are fundamental and a great challenge. In this sense, in this paper a case study of a hotel in a period including the global pandemic crisis of COVID-19 was conducted where good practices for social media management in hospitality are proposed, supported by the literature review and the practical learning provided in the fieldwork. These good practices also take into consideration the application of successful social media strategies in a hotel during times of crisis.

Keywords: Social media, Crisis communication, Hospitality

1. Introduction

In the last decade, social networks have become a predominant source of information, changing the way companies and consumers connect and communicate, being the hotel industry especially active in this medium with a high level of implementation (Mellinas, María-Dolores and García, 2016). According to these authors, with the adaptation to social media it is important that companies consider the customers they want to capture and the goals they want to achieve, so that the campaign strategy and the platforms used are the most appropriate and effective for the success of the business. According to Statistica Report (Statistica, 2023), in July 2022, 5.03 billion people were Internet users and 4.7 billion were active users of social media and so one can understand the power of the Internet as a medium for businesses.

The dominance of social networks has changed the contemporary information landscape, in terms of transmission and accessibility of information, which in turn may affect the application of interventions for risk reduction and crisis management. Marcelino (2011) states that with the constant technological development, in this era of media globalization, information reaches the entire world instantaneously. The vulnerability of an organization's image and reputation thus becomes very susceptible and very fragile to a crisis. Communication is, therefore, an essential tool in the prevention or resolution of potential problems as well as in the restoration of credibility and corporate image (Marcelino, 2011). Although the media allow a greater reach to information in response to emergency situations, these platforms also present many challenges for risk and crisis management (Lin *et al.*, 2016).

Therefore, despite the numerous benefits that social media offer to the hospitality industry, their use requires overcoming several adversities, making it essential to understand how hotels can use them strategically to reinvent their relationship with customers, as well as how they can integrate the communication strategy in periods of crisis. This paper aims to develop a social media strategy for the hospitality sector, more specifically, to identify the strategies for social media platforms for the hospitality sector and to know the communication strategies to be used by a hotel during a crisis.

This paper is organised into four sessions, first it is presented the literature review, after the methodology applied in the study, then the results are presented and finally the conclusions, limitations of the study and future work.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Media in Hospitality

Social media has revolutionized hotel marketing strategies, changing the way they communicate with their consumers, adopting a mutually beneficial, personalized, trusted, and transparent approach to relationship

building (Minazzi, 2015). Di Pietro et al (2012) state that social media represent platforms where tourists can find information created by the companies themselves or content created by other users sharing their experiences, which helps them plan and select a potential destination. Ferrer-Rosell et al (2020) highlight the influence of social media in the travel industry as they are mainly used to share information and experiences among tourists who believe that user-generated content is more reliable than official tourism websites, travel agencies, and mass media advertising. This trend makes social media very important for the hotel industry, especially since more than half of today's customers read reviews before booking a hotel room.

The ability to interact with other users and businesses anytime and anywhere offers hotel guests high power, and as such, marketers need to provide reliable, beneficial, and enjoyable content to encourage guests to share information and spread positive word-of-mouth (Jung, Tom Dieck and Chung, 2018).

According to the study conducted by Garrido-Moreno & Lockett (2016) in hotels in Spain and the UK on the implementation and use of social media, it was observed that review sites and social media are the most used tools. Regarding the factors that can influence the use of social media, it was found that ownership structure (integration into hotel chains) and hotel size were related to a greater use of these tools. Thus, larger hotels and those included in chains have more favorable conditions to better interact with customers using social media.

The most beneficial social networks used in the hotel sector are Facebook, as it allows a great capacity for exposure and interactivity with the public, and Insta-gram, for its power to attract younger consumers, but also for the quality of content editing (Yoopetch, 2018; Malheiro, Sousa and Ferreira, 2019). Facebook is the social network most used by hotels, both to interact and to establish relationships with customers and potential customers, as well as allowing the provision of relevant information and content. In general, hotels' posts on Facebook highlight the hotel's services or aspects related to the hotels' location, to arouse users' desire (Ferrer-Rosell, Martin-Fuentes and Marine-Roig, 2020).

Social networks in hospitality offer numerous advantages such as ease of information transmission, promotion of the establishment, interaction with customers, internationalization of the brand, as well as the importance of having access to information anywhere and anytime (tom Dieck *et al.*, 2017).

Hotels can interact and create engagement with customers before, during, and after the vacation experience through social media, allowing for the creation of a relationship between customers and businesses, which creates brand recognition and purchase intent. Thus, social media helps to enhance the tourism sector, since it allows a high exposure not only nationally but also internationally creating value for brands, although many hoteliers are not yet using all the mechanisms offered by social media, such as non-organic posts and statistics offered for evolution analysis. Thus, there is room for this industry to improve its level of influence and effectiveness on these platforms (Malheiro, Sousa and Ferreira, 2019).

2.2 Crisis Communication in Social Media

The development and rise of social media have changed the landscape of crisis communication, as through these communication platforms, the public not only receives information about crises, but also provides and shares information about crisis preparedness, response, and recovery (Lindsay, 2012). Although these platforms were not designed with emergency response in mind, a crisis increases the need for people to seek information about the current emergency situation, as well as the exchange of urgent and reliable information about other safety issues among family and friends during and after a disaster (Webb *et al.*, 2016).

Although social media is used in the day-to-day operations of a company, it is during a crisis period that social media can become critical, as it allows for a quick and instantaneous response to problems that may arise (Fearn-Banks, 2016).

Social media characterized by its amplifying effect can make some aspects of crisis communication more difficult and others easier, since there is a high speed of interaction, but at the same time a loss of control of the situation (Coombs, 2015). This circumstance occurs because the nature of these platforms can allow not only the government and Media to work together, but also bring the public into the conversation. Through this sharing and promotion of information, a cooperative environment can be created where information is shared, commented on, and supported, in real time (Fearn-Banks, 2016).

Being that information transmitted through social media is generally unverified, identifying accurate data and valid sources can be challenging (Webb *et al.*, 2016). This concern is coupled with the fake news that social media can communicate. An example is the misinformation shared on social media regarding the Covid-19

pandemic, such as fake drugs, conspiracy theories, origin and spread of the virus putting the health of users of these platforms at risk (Maal and Wilson-North, 2019). Non-regulation of publications misleads the public, and therefore it is the responsibility of crisis management to remedy these situations to facilitate access to reliable information (Hagen *et al.*, 2018).

In this sense, the need arises to adapt crisis communication strategies and plans to the digital environment, since it has different characteristics from the usual crisis communication (Coombs, 2015). According to the Social Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) model theory, crisis management professionals should pay attention to three types of audiences when using social media as a response to crisis communication: influencers who create information to be consumed by others; followers who consume the information published by influencers; and inactive audiences who receive information indirectly through traditional media (Lindsay, 2012).

Thus, it becomes necessary to identify which response strategies are most appropriate for social media in a crisis. Lin *et al* (2016) identified seven main practices: (1) define a social media policy and include it in a crisis plan; (2) interact with the public and respond to requests for information; (3) provide information from credible sources; (4) update information frequently; (5) create or use a hashtag for the crisis; (6) collaborate with the public and official authorities; (7) monitor misinformation, such as rumors or fake news.

According to authors Maal & Wilson-North (2019) being active on social media before a crisis occurs is crucial for building user trust in the organization's page and the content shared. At the same time, empathetic communication and honest responses to users' messages and comments show that the organization cares about their opinion and lead to preserving trust in the organization to solve their problems. These authors indicate that to respond to a crisis, it is important to use social media as a space for cooperation and mutual aid. As such, ask the public for collaboration in providing important information and sharing actions that are being taken to help combat the crisis. It is important to note that social media is not a solution to a crisis, but one of the tools that allows companies to communicate during one.

3. Methodology

This paper aims to identify the strategies for social media platforms for the hospitality sector and to know the communication strategies to be used by a hotel during a crisis. To achieve these objectives, we used a qualitative approach into a research-action method applied to a case study.

Our case is a four-star hotel in the North of Portugal with 65 rooms. The main facilities of the hotel are a restaurant, a business center, spa, swimming pool, and tennis court.

This research occurred from January until July 2021, the COVID-19 period, allowing us to understand what social media strategies were used by the hotel during a crisis period.

For the development of the case study, we used bibliographical research and documentary research, direct and participative observation (Yin, 2008). The bibliographical research related to the management of social media and the documentary re-search related to the analysis of whitepapers and reports related to the strategies used in social media to collect information related to the research field. During the observation process, the researchers went to the hotel, observed the hotel's social media management, and had also the opportunity to contribute to the social media management. All the qualitative data collected were triangulated and analyzed according to the content analysis procedures to identify the main and most important themes to integrate of the social media strategy (Bardin, 2018). After the development of the social media strategy for the hotel, according to the research action methodology, the strategies defined were implemented in the hotel, tested, and assessed to define the final social media strategy for the hospitality sector. All ethical procedures were used.

4. Results

Our results are organized into three main areas: Development of a strategy to social media, Strategies for social media platforms, and Communication strategies in social media during crisis periods.

4.1 Development of a Strategy to Social Media

The use of social media allows a brand to gain notoriety, proximity, knowledge, and recognition of the customer. Our results showed that there are seven important steps for the creation of a social media strategy aligned with the hotels' objectives:

- **Defining objectives:** Defining objectives provides insight into what the main reason why the hotel is on social media. Hotels can have more than one objective, however, if the social media management team is small the focus should only be on a more limited number of objectives, some of the objectives set by hotels include increasing brand awareness, driving traffic to the hotel website, generate new leads, increase revenue through sign-ups or sales, understand public opinion of the brand among others (Garrido-Moreno and Lockett, 2016).
- **Persona development:** For assertive communication in social media, it is necessary to know for whom you are communicating (Faustino, 2019). Therefore, defining a persona, the ideal profile of the consumer allows to understand what tone and style of message to be transmitted, the type of content to be created, as well as understand the consumer's buying behavior, how he researches and how he wants to buy.
- **Themes definition:** After knowing the persona for whom the hotel communicates and understanding their interests, it is necessary to start communicating with them. The topics to be shared should be defined to meet customer needs and create engagement with them.
- **Selection of the social media platforms:** The next step is the decision of which social media platforms they will be shared. A good strategy does not imply being in all platforms but being only in those that make sense for the hotel (Kinzel, 2020). Thus, knowledge of the persona can help to understand on which platforms the hotel's audience is.
- **Choose hashtags:** The definition of hashtags allows to create greater engagement, helps to increase the number of followers, and attracts new customers (Kinzel, 2020). The creation of a hashtag brand allows to aggregate all the brand's publications, as well as being a way for customers to search for the brand. The use of many hashtags does not mean that the success obtained is greater, because you should only use those that make sense, according to the context of the publication or campaign.
- **Assessing and monitoring competitors:** Competitor research and analysis provide an overview of the market. The information collected facilitates the decision of which the best strategies to adopt, as well as the definition of the brand positioning (Lee, 2018). Competitor analysis can be done only by manual analysis, or through platforms for this purpose. This analysis allows a better understanding of the market and what increases interactions with the public, what the customer's favorite content is, what keywords and what hashtags they follow.
- **Analyse and assess own performance:** The last step is to measure the success of the various actions implemented on social media, to understand if they were successful and how they can be improved (Lee, 2018). The Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) analysis will depend on the objectives previously defined, however, at least impressions metrics, new followers, and engagement per publication (likes, comments, shares and clicks) should be followed. It is also important to analyze the frequency of publications, and on which days of the week and at what time they are most noticed.

4.2 Strategies for Social Media Platforms

We achieve 12 good practices to use in social media to increase their performance.

- **Have a complete profile:** The first impression of a page on social networks goes beyond the profile picture or the photographs posted. The description of the page is a key point to ensure the credibility of the company. It is important that the customer has easy access to important information such as an address, phone number, and website.
- **Maintain consistency in visual and textual language:** The communication carried out in social networks, as in any other medium, must be consistent and developed in accordance with the concept of the company and the audience to whom the message is intended (Kinzel, 2020). Therefore, both the design and the type of text must appear in the various channels in a coherent way.
- **Use quality images:** A good image can be worth a thousand words! On a hotel page, this statement takes on another importance. Well-framed images with good resolution are key to attracting the public's attention (Kinzel, 2020). Professional photographs allow showing the spaces from different angles.
- **Sizes on social media:** The size of the type of content you want to publish varies according to the social media you use. It should be considered the type of content that will be published and on which platform, because it is a very common mistake, for those who manage social media, not to know that each platform has specific indications.

- **Diversify content formats:** The implementation of a communication strategy based on the creation of different content allows you to test the public and understand which type of content is more attractive to them. The final objective will always be to add value to the audience. You should bet on different formats such as images, videos, articles, e-books, podcasts, and lives, among others, according to the social network where it will be published (Watson, 2021).
- **Create a content strategy:** After understanding what type of content works in each social network, it becomes easier to create content that is aligned with the objectives. In this sense, and following the rule of thirds, content should be divided into three parts (Martin, 2022): pro-motion, personal, and sharing. These three types of content allow to create a relationship with the consumer, an increase in traffic, and, consequently, an increase in revenue. For a hotel website to be successful, it is necessary to share useful content with the customer.
- **Create and schedule a weekly or monthly planning:** A weekly or monthly planning helps to organize and control the publications for each social network. It is possible to define and maintain a frequency of publications, essential for the algorithms to realize that the profile is active and continue to show it to users.
- **Humanising the brand:** Publishing topics related to the more personal side of the brand helps customers understand that they are dealing with people. Thus, sharing content about the hotel team such as birthdays and members' presentations, as well as images or videos of the preparations for receiving guests allows you to create a closer relationship with them. Also sharing topics related to awards won by the brand creates a great engagement on social media. Thanking customers for an award won will make them feel valued, creating empathy with them.
- **Collaborate with digital influencers:** Digital influencers allow a hotel to be promoted through their own experience, which is described in travel blogs and/or on social media. The content published by influencers is of a personal nature, which allows for creating a relationship of trust between the hotel and its followers. Like any direct referencing, it increases the likelihood of future bookings.
- **Interact with social media users:** Publishing content alone does not allow a brand to build relationships with its customers or attract them to a hotel. One of the fundamentals of social media is interaction with the public, which is essential for any company (Godey *et al.*, 2016). On these platforms people want to be seen and recognized by brands, so responding to messages, comments and mentions is essential, as it allows the recruitment of potential customers. The response time will have to meet the demands of the consumer and should be as short as possible, both in messages and comments. The same goes for automatic replies, as they may not clarify the doubts of possible guests and it may be necessary for an employee to reply.
- **Managing the online relationship:** Adopting a posture of friendliness and empathy with the public allows the creation of a good relationship with the same, as well as the association of a good image to the brand (Godey *et al.*, 2016). Even if a comment or mention is negative, it should never be deleted, and one should always seek to respond in a polite and understanding manner. The lack of response by a hotel to criticism can lead to the loss of other customers. A personalized service by the brand will cause better reactions before consumers.
- **Promote content and make ads:** Organic content on social networks is no longer enough for a strategy to be successful. New algorithms mean that organic posts reach fewer and fewer people. Promoting content and running adverts, therefore, allows you to reach users who would otherwise never find a particular hotel.

4.3 Communication Strategies in Social Media During Crisis Period

The hospitality industry is vulnerable to different types of crisis from terrorist attacks, natural disasters or even public health problems, to petty crime or food poisoning (Affect, 2014). Nowadays any crisis is quickly propagated in social media, and these play an important role in managing it (Fearn-Banks, 2016). As these are platforms where communication with the public is made quickly and effectively, they allow providing support to customers who need information and help. Thus, the ten best practices for each crisis phase were defined to help any hotel to overcome it successfully.

Pre-crisis

- **Create a crisis communication plan:** A crisis communication plan allows a company to respond quickly and effectively to a crisis, since all procedures have been previously decided and approved (Element, 2020). Social media should not be left out, being the first approach that the hotel can

have with the customer. This plan should include: guidelines to identify the type and degree of a crisis; The responsibilities and roles of each department; An internal communication plan; Employee contact details; A link to the document regarding the policy on acting on social media; Preapproved messages to give; Preapproved posts to communicate on social media.

- **Create a social media policy:** When a crisis arises, brands are more susceptible to spoiling their online reputation. Thus, a document should be created, on social media policies, to establish guidelines for the whole team to be aware of how to proceed (Affect, 2014). This should contain: An updated emergency contact list of both the marketing team, legal advisors, and executives with decision-making power; Guidelines on how to access the different social networks and how to act on them; Guidelines on how to use and credit third-party content; Instructions on how to interact with clients; Indications on how to behave in the social networks; A description of what information employees can and cannot share.
- **Defining the responsible person for communication:** As mentioned before, one of the steps of the crisis plan is to define who is responsible for the communication on the networks and what their functions are. Thus, one or more responsible for communication must ensure that the following tasks are fulfilled (Element, 2020): Publish daily updates; Respond to all customer support-related questions; Monitor and report developments on what is published about the brand; Perform and verify the information and rectify possible rumors; Coordinate and communicate with other teams, stakeholders, and the rest of the company; Ensure coherence and consistency in communication.

During the crisis

- **Review and change the planning of each social network:** The planned contents and advertisements should be reviewed. They may no longer be appropriate and relevant in a crisis. Therefore, the content to be published should be adjusted to the moment and new planning should be created.
- **Create useful content for the audience:** It is very important to value the quality of the publications rather than their quantity. During a crisis, customers seek information about changes that may affect the normal operation of the hotel, such as new procedures, new service schedules, and refund policies. Seeking to clarify customers' questions, concerns, and needs, not only in relation to the hotel but also to the current situation allows the hotel to strengthen its presence on social media even during periods of uncertainty. In addition to the content of a more informative nature, social network users seek moments of distraction and positive messages. The creation of content that shows that the hotel is available to help customers overcome a certain phase, such as giving tips to create a spa at home, videos showing how to prepare a hotel breakfast, live show cooking with the restaurant's chef, all this allows to entertain followers and strengthen their engagement with the brand.
- **Communicate with honesty and empathy:** More than ever, in a time of crisis customers, expect understanding and honesty from a company (Fearn-Banks, 2016). Uncertainty, fear, and worries lead to people reacting impulsively, and it is up to the company to mitigate and deal with these situations by reacting with empathy and understanding toward their customers. Having a message from the hotel director, where he acknowledges the seriousness of the situation, and shows that he is aware of what is happening and that he will act in the best interest of the public, creates enormous empathy with the customer. Taking advantage of a crisis to humanize the brand by taking advantage of one-to-one conversations helps strengthen the relationship with the public (Element, 2020). At the same time, publications should not be made with informative content in a distant way. This should be a video made by the hotel staff or signed by someone higher up. It is up to the hotel, in the middle of a crisis, to be sympathetic, and empathetic, to give condolences or even apologize for mistakes made.
- **Refer only to credible sources:** The spread of misinformation is one of the problems that social media try to combat. In this sense, before there is sharing of publications from other pages should be confirmed first the credibility of the information contained (Lin *et al.*, 2016).
- **Monitoring the various social networks - Social Listening:** By monitoring the social networks where the hotel is present it is possible to understand the feelings of its customers towards it and react quickly well when something wrong happens (Element, 2020). This analysis also makes it possible to analyze what is happening with competitors. For example, to understand what actions other hotels are taking and how their customers are reacting. This information makes it possible to know if it is necessary to adapt new strategies and/or improve those already practiced.

- **Reply to all messages, mentions, and comments:** At a time of crisis, when many questions arise from customers, the adoption of platforms such as WhatsApp Business and Messenger allows a hotel to have direct and fast contact with them. As these social networks are among the most popular worldwide (Dixon, 2022), it is important to be present where the public is, offering a more personal and personalized service.
- **Do not disappear:** It is in a crisis that people spend more time on social networks, so it is in this period that it is necessary to be more present than ever. If the company disappears from the networks, the public is no longer loyal, and the company's credibility is called into question. The silence of a company generates doubts about it, and this is no different in the hotel business. Communication channels must be open, and communication must be clear, regular, and consistent.
- **Do not give space to problematic audiences:** On social networks problematic users are omnipresent, and it is best not to interact with them too much, so as not to gain visibility. These are users who only want to create problems and post inconvenient comments often going on to attack brands and employees. When dealing with this type of audience, it is best to avoid stooping to their level of language or response. When necessary, the social media manager can choose to hide the comments or, in extreme cases, block them from the page for disruptive behavior. Having a well-defined course of action, helps the team to act consistently with this type of audience.

Postcrisis

After social media crisis management, it will be beneficial for the hotel, to bring the team together to discuss the event. Creating a report on what happened and how the management was done will be an asset for the future, as different departments may have a different view on the crisis and deal with customers differently. Thus, the action plan should be updated, including the experience of the various departments, taking the opportunity to fill gaps in the existing plan (Element, 2020).

5. Conclusions

In the tourism industry, and especially in the hospitality sector, social media networks are increasingly proving to be a strategic tool to gain prominence and reach a wider audience. They present advantages such as proximity to the customer and the creation of brand and service awareness. However, without the adoption of appropriate strategies, their potential is not fully and effectively used.

Within this work were studied the best practices in social media gathered from the literature and applied in a case study of a hotel. This practice makes it possible to understand what the most suitable strategies were, by testing in loco the reactions of customers, collaborators, and stakeholders. This methodology allowed the development of best practices for social media communication in hospitality.

Moreover, this study covered a period of the pandemic crises COVID-19 what allows us also research about communication in crisis, evaluate and test some of the best practices of communication in social media in crisis periods. Therefore, as a result we also present a list of best practices and strategies for communication in social media in crisis.

This work presents some limitations, namely in that the theme of social media in hospitality is little explored in the literature, with a large concentration of studies focused on Facebook and few related to other platforms. Also, the scarcity of in-formation on social media communication in the hospitality industry during a crisis.

In this sense, we identify as suggestions for future work: i) conducting a study with guests of a hotel to analyse what their considerations are regarding the strategies applied by the hotel on social networks; ii) investigating the type of strategies applied in various hotels and how successful they are; iii) using the best practices defined in this work for different types of hotels, in order to analyse whether the actions defined here are influenced by the characteristics of each hotel, such as its human resources, investment in digital marketing, its location, among others.

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