TWITTER TWITTER – BUT WHO IS LISTENING?
A REVIEW OF THE CURRENT AND POTENTIAL USE OF TWITTERING AS A TOURISM MARKETING TOOL

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the use of twittering as a tourism marketing, tool from the perspectives of destination marketing organisations (DMO), hotels and the consumer. Twittering is a social networking tool and, as with all such tools – especially one that has existed only since 2006 – its use is still evolving. This study had initially two objectives: to review the current use of twitter by DMOs and by hotels, but during the course of the research sufficient information was obtained from both these organisations to add a third objective, the perceived use of twittering by tourists.

Using twitter as the survey instrument, in mid 2009 over 400 hotels and DMOs were contacted about their use of twitter as a marketing tool, both now and in the future. The results suggest that because twitter is the new kid on the social networking block and as its development is still evolving, both organisations and consumers are struggling to understand its full potential. Although it remains open as to twitter's effectiveness as marketing tool, two questions still remain – can a organisation be real friend, and the much bigger question – who is actually listening? The paper concludes that twittering provides a voice for the consumer to learn and to share common experiences, and outlines some issues that require further research.

Key words: Twittering, Consumer Marketing, Hotels, Destination Marketing Organisations.

INTRODUCTION (TO TWITTERING)

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the use of twittering as a tourism marketing tool, but given the short length of its existence, it needs to be recognised that its use is still evolving. This study has three objectives: to review the current use of twitter by Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs), by hotels and by tourists.

In terms of the conceptual frameworks and variables, this study will explore how businesses (DMOs and hotels) perceive and use twittering as a marketing tool, and what benefits, if any, does it add to their marketing. Do they see twittering as just another social media tool, which they think they should use, without fully understanding its potential or limitations. The paper will also explore (indirectly through information gathered from organisations) how tourists use twittering as a tool for selecting destinations and in their trip planning.

Twittering was developed primarily as a social networking tool and, along with other tools such as Bebo, MySpace and Facebook has changed the way we communicate. It is a free service that enables people to communicate through the internet and by cell phones. Sometimes known as microblogging, twittering brings together instant messaging, social networking and wireless communication, enabling users to send and read each others' messages, These messages known as tweets, are restricted to texts of up to 140 characters. Twitter was developed in 2006 and used initially by families, friends and co-workers to keep in touch with each other through the exchange of short text messages. Its use, however, expanded in 2009 to include customer-to-business communication through web links, containing marketing messages. With open, as opposed to restricted access, anyone can read these tweets, so twittering's potential as a tourism-marketing tool is now being explored. Twitter is so popular; it has been labelled as the 'Top Word of 2009' according to the Global Language Monitor (2009).

Twitter was widely used in the 2008 USA presidential campaigns as a means of communicating with the young, and in June 2009 was used extensively to co-ordinate demonstrations in Iran, when the Iranian Government (Veiszadeh, 2009) restricted other means of communications such as cell phones. A number of studies have shown that twitter can be useful in emergencies (Jason, 2008), best highlighted by three specific events in 2009. In the USA, the bird strike, which resulted in the plane crash in the Hudson River, was photographed by members of the public and twitpixs sent around the world hours before any official media photos. In Australia, the Country Fire Authority used twittering to send updates on the Victorian bushfires to people living in the danger areas (Young, 2009). Perhaps twittering's popularity was best illustrated, when the pop star Michael Jackson died; the system crashed when too many people tried to use it at the same time.

Since its launch, twittering has grown considerably. In February 2009 it was ranked as the third most popular social networking tool in terms of the number of users, with 55 million visits generated by 6 million visitors (Kazeniac, 2009), but this could have been as high as 10 million visitors, according to Curtis, 2009. While ComScore the web tracking firm, claims that Twitter has 54m users a month and 300m users overall. However, large numbers does not mean high quality, and twitter has been criticised by some consumers for its many trivial messages (Lavallee, 2007).

Twitterings' popularity maybe due to its low entry costs and simplicity of use, but also to the sharp increase in broadband availability, and the growing number of people who feel comfortable using new methods to communicate. Although Twitter is a private company it has no income, no revenue stream, no sponsors, no advertising and importantly no profit, yet it has attracted some $US100m in venture capital, and is now said to be worth over $US1 billion (Rushe, 2009), but will it last? Twittering's appeal lies in its novelty, but when traditional businesses start to use twittering to communicate it may lose its edge, as its early users move onto the next big thing (Leongettler, 2009).

Although twittering's use as a marketing tool is a relatively new concept, it is becoming a popular method for tracking and directing the consumer's attention to particular tourism products and services (World Tourism, 2009). Through the use of imbedded messages, twittering allows an organisation to monitor the behaviour of twitter-users and to communicate with them through active monitoring of their tweets. But perhaps twittering's main benefit is that it allows an organisation to infiltrate into the lifestyles of individuals through the tracking of messages sent through twittering, thereby gaining a better understanding of their needs and aspirations and so build customer loyalty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2008 Portland, Oregon, was the first city to launch its official twisitorcenter (online visitor information centres) www.twitter.com/travelportland. Because many of the requests for information are sent as open messages, this encourages other people to take part in unrestricted discussions, and this is why DMOs like twitter (Strachan, 2009). By July 2009, some 210 DMOs in North America, eight in Europe, and one in Australia were using twitter as a viral marketing tool (www.twisitorcenter.com). In the USA, while most of the large States have a twisitorcenter, twitter is used mainly by small destinations at the county level as an inexpensive marketing tool. A number of airlines such as Alaskan Airlines (6,000+ twitter-users) and JetBlue (4307000+ twitter-users), (Travel Weekly, 2009) have recently set up twitter information booths, so that they can respond quickly to events such as delays (Hotelmarketing.com, 2009). Restaurants are using twitter as a new marketing tool, because it provides a quick route to pass on information about new menus (TIG, 2009). On-line travel agents have also been quick to adopt twitter, because it gives them the ability to offer time sensitive special deals (Strachan, 2009).

Research into the effectiveness and usefulness of twittering as a marketing tool is scant. While, there are an increasing number of observations by social commenter's about twittering (Joel, 2009, Morris, 2009b), there is little robust research. The tourism industry are aware that they are at risk from negative comments placed on open message sites such as twitter, (Tamar, 2008), but have difficulty in formulating the best strategy to react to such comments.

According to Gartner (2009), there are four practical ways that businesses could use twitter:

1. Direct – as a marketing or public relations tool
2. Indirect – company employees use it to enhance their own and the company's reputation
3. Internal – employees use it to communicate ideas and information to each other
4. Inbound signalling - through the use of streaming and search tools to provide information about their customers and what their competitors are saying about themselves.

Through the empowerment of the individual by the internet, the holiday booking trend is moving away from not only traditional travel agents, but also on-line travel agents, towards suppliers' websites such as hotels and airlines, and Emarketer (2007) has suggested that there is an even greater need to understand how consumers make decisions and the tools they use. Java, et al. (2007) suggested that people use microblogging sites like twitter for routine purposes such as keeping in contact with friends, and for seeking and sharing information about a wide range of activities. However, Wenger (2008) questioned the usefulness of blogs as a research tool in terms of providing additional information that is not available from other more rigorous research techniques; he did, however, suggest that more useful information could be gained by speaking direct to the bloggers and the organisations, which used twitter. Carson (2008) suggests that valuable data could be drawn from blogospheres, but finding and analysing such blogging data is time-consuming and he recommends a targeted approach, taking into account a destination's market segments.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

From a public mailing list maintained by the Travel Trade Gazette, in mid 2009 some 216 hotels and 219 DMOs, which had a twittering address, were sent a short twitter message about their use of this method of communication as a marketing tool. If they did not respond after three days, another tweet was sent, but this follow-up message had little effect on response rates. Of the 435 tweets sent, some 87 failed to be delivered and 132 replied out of 348 actually delivered, giving an effective response rate of 38%. Of these 132, some 117 also provided responses on how they tourists used twittering. Of the 132 replies, some 120 provided answers to all five survey questions, while 12 provided only partial answers. The use of twittering as a research instrument to conduct surveys is very new, so little evidence-based research is available on its suitability as a research instrument, and the expected response rates. The first twitter message from the researcher was sent to the known consumer twitter address of the hotel or DMO, rather than to an individual manger. After eliciting an interest to participate in the survey, along with a promise to share the final paper and any power-point presentation, and if funded, to undertake a bespoke presentation to the organisation the five questions (noted below) were tweeted to the organisation one at a time. That is each question was sent only after the previous question was answered. Although not ideal, after piloting this was found to best method, as each response could then make use the full 140 characters, rather than trying to answer all five questions with 140 characters. The survey questions were: their use of twittering for consumer marketing and/or business communications along with examples, costs, criteria for measuring success, willingness to share successful/unsuccessful stories and their views on future use of twitter in their marketing strategies.

One severe limitation of this methodology is the restriction in the number of characters that can be used in any tweet question; this also restricts the information in the response. An additional difficulty was the widespread use of abbreviations, and unfamiliar new words e.g. crowdsourcing., which sometimes made it difficult to interperate the information. Although the author was able to seek clarification through follow-up tweets, it was difficult to control the quality of the responses and to be confident that the person responding had the necessary knowledge to answer the tweet survey. It was also noticeable that the person who replied to the first tweet was not necessarily the person who replied to the follow-up tweets. The research outputs focuses on developing ideas, concepts and twitters possible future developments from the perspectives of the DMOs, the hotels and the tourist. Although information was not gathered directly from tourists, many of the tweets also included thoughts on how tourists are using twittering, and this used in the paper. The differences in regional responses were few, and where they

were different, are noted.

Table 1: Tweets Sent and Answered, by Region and by Type of Tourism Organisation

| | NORTH AMERICA | | EUROPE | | OTHER | |
	Tweets Sent	Tweets Answered	Tweets Sent	Tweets Answered	Tweets Sent	Tweets Answered
Hotels	151	37	48	19	17	2
Destination Marketing Organisations	210	70	8	3	1	1
Total Responses	361	107	56	22	18	3
Average Number of In-bound Messages		8.3		8.1		12.7
Average Length of Time From First to Last Tweet (hours)		7.3		8.4		5.8

Table 2: Number of Tweets That Included a Response on How Tourists Used Twittering

| | NORTH AMERICA | | EUROPE | | OTHER | |
	Tweets Answered	Provided Information about tourists	Tweets Answered	Provided information about tourists	Tweets Answered	Provided information about tourists
Hotels	37	32	19	18	2	2
Destination Marketing Organisations	70	61	3	3	1	1
Total Responses	107	93	22	21	3	3

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

TWITTERING AND DESTINATION MARKETING ORGANISATIONS (DMOs)

DMOs believed that twittering could be helpful to them, because it provided an additional and inexpensive method of destination marketing. Most of the DMOs surveyed tended to see twittering as limited to local and regional markets, and not for overseas markets. They did, however, think that it would be useful to overseas visitors once they were at the destination in order to draw their attention to specific products.

All the DMOs had difficulty in evaluating the effectiveness of their tweet messages, especially in providing conversion rates (ratios of tweets to actual destination visitors), and were cautious in overestimating its effectiveness. Although they recognised that twittering could deliver their marketing messages to potential visitors, they saw it more as a communications rather than a marketing tool, one that could provide positive as well as negative messages. In terms of monitoring what was said about their destination in tweets, none had any formal monitoring procedures, but most relied on their younger staff to informally monitor open tweets and to respond to negative comments. They appeared to use twittering as a policing tool, one that searched for negative messages, rather than as a positive marketing tool.

The DMOs reported a growth in the use of twittering in both 2008 and 2009, but were unwilling to share data, or probably more correctly, did not know the extent of that growth. They did, however, expect that, as more people used twittering for social networking, its use in the future as a marketing tool would increase, especially in providing reassurance to first-time visitors. It was clear that a few of the DMOs

had thought about their future use of twittering, but were reluctant to provide details of their future marketing campaigns using twitter.

From this research, several methods in which twitter could be used as a marketing tool were highlighted.

1.Online Advertising

Most of the DMOs suggested that twittering could best be used for targeted advertising to promote new tourist destinations or destinations with low visitation rates, by directing individuals to particular destination websites. In spite of knowing little about the profile of twitters, in terms of their tastes and preferences, the DMOs thought that through the placement of different links within a twitter message, the chance of reaching people who may be interested in a destination would be greatly increased. This scattergun approach, although not normal in other forms of marketing, was considered by the DMOs as suitable for twittering, because of the low entry costs. None of them, however, considered the possible negative impact of promoting a destination, which the twitterer did not want to know about. DMOs thought that twittering was perhaps more effective at raising awareness than in generating direct sales.

DMOs believed that they could use twittering to send messages to people who had indicated that they would like to receive tweets containing information on their destination. Especially when they believed that, these tweets might contain special or secret knowledge, such as the best time to visit, or special accommodation rates.

2.Educating Tourism Decision-Makers & Tourists

Although twitter restricts the size of the messages to a maximum of 140 characters, a number of DMOs used twitter to educate political decision-makers/lobbying organisations about their destination. For example, during the USA 2009 national travel and tourism week, DMOs used tweets to educate key local, state and national political leaders about the importance of the travel industry. DMOs also used tweets to play on politicians' fears, because people whose jobs were dependent on tourism are also voters and any negative impact on its growth may damage the politicians' re-election.

Informing local people about tourism through twitter is being considered by a small number of DMOs, because they felt that residents were not fully aware of the importance of tourism. The European DMOs, although aware of this possible use of twitter, were reluctant to pursue this avenue, as it could be seen as political activity, not so the American DMOs.

Some of the smaller, mainly county-based DMOs also saw twittering, as means of encouraging the VFR market as well as informing the residents about the benefits of tourism. Other, smaller DMOs with low visitation rates from large neighbouring centres of populations thought that twitter could be used to remind them about how close the destination was to their home, so help develop their day-trip market.

3.Improving Marketing Strategies

A number of the DMOs in destinations with multiple agencies dealing with tourism from their own perspective, experienced co-ordination issues with different marketing messages and physical development priorities. Through tweeting, DMOs believed that they could better keep in touch with key staff in the different agencies, through frequent and informal contact on a person-to-person basis. Frequent contact was seen as important in maintaining good relationships between agencies, not so much by staff at senior level, but by those tasked with actual delivery of common projects.

Through twitter, DMOs could also organise more effectively inter-agency working groups. If individuals cannot attend such events, they can still contribute to the discussions using twittering. Twittering participation in such events could act as a surrogate for face-to-face discussions and thus individuals could still present their ideas and support others, without actually attending an event, although the effectiveness of such activities was doubtful.

4.Competitions

A number of DMOs have used twittering to organise competitions in order to raise awareness of their destination. During the 2009 Travel and Tourism Week in the USA, DMOs organised competitions and

the winners were awarded prizes (Huber, 2009). Many of these competitions focussed on those working in the tourism industry and required participants to undertake some research about the destination in order to win.

The DMOs also suggested that competitions open to all tourists could be beneficial, even if individual twitters did not win a competition, the research they undertook to answer the questions would enhance their knowledge about a destination and so increase the likelihood of visiting. Some DMOs suggested that if a large number of people participated in a competition this in itself may bring twitters together with one purpose in mind (winning the competition) and so help create a community twitter group of like-minded people, interested in a particular destination – thereby provide a marketing opportunity for the DMO. A suggestion from a number of DMOs was that such competitions should be organised on a regular basis and not restricted to an annual contest in order to maximise the benefits and maintain the development of the twitter community.

TWITTERING AND HOTELS

From the results of this research, it appears that hotels and hotel groups have not utilised twitter effectively to market their services. Some hotels sign up for twitter as they did with other social media sites, only to abandon them later, while others have not updated their messages to keep them in active contact with their twitters. However, there are a number of hotels and hotel groups, which are actively using twitter as part of their marketing mix, including Fairmont Hotels (Kirk, 2009, Shallcross, 2009); Westin Bonaventure (Kirby, 2009); Hotel Casa del Mar (California 2009); Four Seasons Resorts (Kirk, 2009); The Citizen Hotel (Kirk, 2009); Design Hotel (Valinhas, 2009).

Based on this research, there appears to be a number of uses to which twitter is being exploited by the hotels.

   1.Consumer Competitions
A few hotels are utilising twitter to organise competitions for marketing purposes. These competitions are a useful marketing tool because they bring people together into a community, especially if the tweets are shared with others to achieve a common goal of winning a competition. As communities are at the heart of twitter, a number of hotels suggested that this low-cost tool has good potential to create awareness, as well as to reach a large number of potential customers in a short period of time. Hotels would organise more twitter competitions, because they perceived the benefits outweigh the costs.

Most of the Hotels also thought that by offering prizes, the winners were much more likely to revisit the hotel as a paid client at some future date, however while the winners may revisit, will the losers also visit? The hotels also thought that they could add value by including other products in the prizes e.g. restaurant vouchers, and while of course this adds value to the prize, the benefit to the hotels or other providers is not clear.

   2.Special Rates
Offering follower**s** special rates exclusive was regarded as a much more effective marketing activity than competitions, if only because everyone is a winner, not just the lucky few who won! These special rates could include discounts on accommodation, meals, activities and extra services such as spa treatments. A number of hotels thought that their loyal followers would be much more susceptible to discounts and special offers, even though the same discount might be available through other sales channels. There was also a common feeling that such discounts increased the twitters' length of stay and encouraged them to visit other hotels in the chain, particularly to destinations they may not have considered. Through the use of promotional codes available only through twitter, the hotels are able to track the impact of any special offers. Travelodge (a UK budget hotel group) recently offered a £GBP10 discount to its followers on its already low prices in the low season around Christmas.

The hotels assumed that twitters could also be encouraged to read more marketing messages and news stories about both a particular hotel and the wider hotel chain, than they would through other marketing methods. There was a perception that unique and boutique hotels could benefit more by tweeting short

stories about special guests and quirky incidents, than would standard hotel chains.

3.Internet Advertising

Tweeting news and updates about a hotel and the services it offers, and information about the wider hospitality industry was thought to be a good use of twitter, especially when users allowed links to be placed in their profiles, so that a tweet could be forwarded to all members of a twitter's group of friends.

4.Customer Service and Brand Improvement

One of the major uses of twitter is that it allows individuals to have conversations and thereby connect in real time with other twitters. The hotels thought that by interacting with their customers through twittering they could build consumer loyalty, and by befriending twitters, develop a friendship which might lead to increased brand loyalty and repeat custom. Nevertheless, the question that should be asked, can a hotel really be a friend? The answer is, of course, no, but through regular communication with twitters, this could result in a perception of a friendship.

By using tweets, hotels should be able to track and monitor the perception of their brand in the marketplace and hence evaluate their performance; the hotels did, however, recognise this would be labour-intensive and many were reluctant to make the necessary staff investment. One of the key strengths of twitter is that it enables two-way conversations, and consumers could share their opinions concerning the hotel and how it could be improved. Hotels recognised this strength of twittering, but the research suggests that few were proactive in taking advantage of these two-way conversations.

One of big advantages of twitter is that hotels can eavesdrop in real time on conversations about their brands and get quick feedback about their hotel (Morris, 2009a). Staff can participate in conversations and use their communication skills to convince the twitters they are actually listening and acting upon their comments, but this could be time-consuming and many hotels were not willing to make such an investment.

In an effort to broaden its appeal and to help with its growth, it has been reported (Rushe & Chittenden, 2009) that twitter will start carrying video messages. This will add another dimension to marketing through twitter, as organisations will not just be able to tell consumers about changes to their products, but will now be able to offer visual images of these new products.

5.Viral Marketing

Viral marketing is nothing new, in the 1950's the Tupperware party was one of the greatest viral networks of their day (Penenberg, 2009), it relied on consumers to market the product. It developed into not just marketing activity between individuals, but also the concept of marketing between social clusters. Utilising social networks to foster brand awareness through self- replicating viral processes, should lead to a greater spread of a hotel's marketing messages. Since twitter enables users to re-tweet other users' tweets, there is some potential in using twitter for viral marketing campaigns (Vaynerchuk, 2008). Some hotels thought this strategy would encourage people to pass on messages to others, thereby greatly increasing a message's exposure (Wilson, 2003), but just because a message is passed on, this does not mean that its influence is increased. As with Tupperware, people trust each other and those in our social clusters, rather than businesses who overwhelm us with pop-up ads (Penenberg, 2009). The ethics and usefulness of such action were questioned by a number of hotels and some recognised that such actions could be seen as annoying and even detrimental to a hotel's brand. It is also important to remember that in using twittering as marketing tool, that the logic that drives all marketing should not be dismissed. Functions such as targeting and segmentation are core to any marketing campaign, and just because twittering is a new and cheap marketing tool, does not mean that it need not follow conventional marketing thinking.

6.Free Hotels Stays

A number of the hotels suggested they were considering (although none so far had offered or more accurately admitted) offering free stays to their most loyal and positive twitters. The reason behind such a suggestion was that the twitters would then comment positively to their social clusters and others on the hotels twitters group about the product. Indeed, this has been already been tried by Ford, who gave its top

bloggers a new Ford Fiesta for six months. (Swatz, 2009).

TWITTERING AND TOURISTS (Based on comments provided by tourism businesses)

1. Learning Tool

More than three million messages are sent each day through twitter (Lake, 2009), and through twitter, people can learn about tourism destinations. For example, twitters that have been to a destination, which did not live up to, their expectations, can and do voice their complaints on twitter, making them available for others to read. Through the use of twittering, a tourist's knowledge is no longer limited to their own experiences, but rather they can draw on the combined experience of other twitters through posted comments. Comments about destinations sometimes focused on high-level observations such as seasonality, sustainability and the welfare of employees, but most tended to focus on very detailed observations based on the twitters' experience of the destination such as cold weather, little to do at night, etc,. A number of respondents said that twitter allows tourists to develop a detailed level of experience about a destination, akin to their second visit, rather than a first visit, because twittering provides for sharing knowledge. Also through the search engine provided by twitter, tourists can plug-in brand, personal and company names and even topics in order to download comments posted by other twitters.

2.Group Formation

As twitter is a social network tool, it enables tourists to communicate and share information. Individuals planning to visit certain tourist destinations at the same time could benefit through tweeting, by forming a virtual group, prior to their visit. Group formation was seen as helpful to first-time visitors, because it provided a degree of comfort and security, especially when visiting overseas countries. Individuals do feel more secure when in the company of others in case of problems, and through a twitter group, feel they can call on the others should an emergency occur. Because of this assurance, single tourists with the support of their twittering followers felt more secure in choosing destinations.

3.Communication

Twitter can also be used as a communication tool for tourists to interact with tourism providers about the services they provide. Through twitter, accommodation and other providers can learn about complaints and improve their services to maintain their customer base. Tourists could also utilise twitter to praise suppliers who provide good-quality service. Placing of twittering comments on DMOs' and hotels' sites could provide an additional marketing advantage. There was a suggestion that twitter users are more willing to accept messages from organisations inviting them to open links on their twitter page, rather clogging up their email in-box (Rushe, 2009).

4.Reminder Mechanism

Tweeting can be used to remind tourists about their past and future trips (Trapani, 2007). Individuals can be alerted via their cell phones when their twittering friends update their accounts and so be better informed about a destination. In addition, they can be reminded by DMOs and hotels about a destination's special offers and official requirements, such as visas and exit charges. A number of DMO's also mentioned that they felt the timing of tweets was crucial if you wanted them read, with lunchtime and late afternoons being best for posting tweets.

CONCLUSIONS

Twitter has the potential to provide many benefits to the tourism industry, but the industry seems reluctant to make full use of it, not so much because of active rejection, but because they are unaware of its potential. It is regarded by many DMOs and hotels as just another marketing and communication tool, and is misunderstood by many managers. However, as with the introduction all new media (books, newspapers, radio, television, internet) there is an inbuilt fear of the new. There is also a group of people who see twittering as superficial, and bemoan the move away from face to face communications and see twittering as no more than a new form of stalking, while others 'consider it too cool for school'. (Swartz, 2009). It could be argued that with twittering 'the medium is the message' that is, twittering itself is more

important than the content of the message, businesses have to be seen in touch with zeitgeist?

Tweeting appears to provide an inexpensive method for organising competitions and for providing multi-agency input into local tourism strategies. It also provides a mechanism to communicate with the young, who may not be listening to marketing messages delivered through other forms of media. Its use tends to be limited to some hotel chains, luxurious and boutique hotels, but they are not sure, if it will help them to become more competitive, nor if their existing customers actually use this technology. In a sense DMOs and hotels are playing a waiting game, looking for clear evidence that twittering will add to their bottom line. This lack of evidence (or is it faith?) prevents many of them adding twitter to their marketing toolbox. One way round this issue would be to use a blog-analysis tool, as suggested by Bulkeley, 2005, to monitor tweets.

The development of twitter groups loyal to a destination or a hotel which offer each other mutual support and exchange of information, was perceived by both as being useful, and these twitter groups also creates a market segment which could be easily targeted. Another trend suggested by some hotels was the development of closed or specialised twitter groups. Groupings of like-minded middle managers of similar companies could use twitter to develop what could be described as a mutual support group, to share common problems and issues (Kellaway, 2009).

Although this research suggests that twittering is used for generic marketing campaigns, it is difficult to determine the level of the potential interest for products within specific groups of people, thus limiting its use as a marketing tool, until better marketing measurement and effectiveness tools are developed. This use of twittering by DMOs is currently seen as a virtual 'big brother house', with the twitters commenting and passing judgements on destinations, products and services, but one in which the DMOs have little control, and this makes them feel uncomfortable.

Twittering is also about providing an enhanced customer experiences, and communicating directly with consumers. A number of senior hotel managers stated that they used twittering to bypass their marketing departments, and through twittering spoke directly to their consumers, to get a better understand how their products were perceived by consumers. They also used it to override the company's normal complaint procedures, as they could immediately act on consumers concerns. Some sated that they appreciated the raw honesty of consumers, and recognised the need to a develop a social media marketing plan, that was outside their normal marketing activities.

Tweeting can also be beneficial to individual tourists, because it provides them with an affordable means of communication where they can spell out their complaints and comments and share them with anyone who will listen. Through tweeting tourists are becoming much more informed and more knowledgeable about products on offer. This is part of a wider shift in the balance of power, from business and organisations, to the consumer. However, in spite of twitter's many benefits, tourists still need to evaluate information before using it to make decisions. As long as such information is provided by a small group of known friends and family twitters, there is tendency to believe it, because word-of-mouth recommendations have long been recognised as the most effective marketing tool. However, when messages are from surrogate friends such as DMOs and hotels, there is tendency to treat them with suspicion.

One of the biggest mistakes companies make is to use twitter and other social media to hawk their products (Lalley, 2009) as twitter is about engaging people, not selling products. Twitters are tired of such surrogate friends and the best way for organisations to develop friendships seems to be by offering twitter-only discounts and special offers. However, this anthropomorphise of products through twittering, by suggesting they are friends debases humanity. Consumers are looking for help in selecting products as well as utility and value, with large companies now using twittering as an extension of their call centres, rather than part of the marketing departments. This shift from marketing and selling to communications is where the strength of twittering may show through in the future.

A number of small hotels with small marketing budgets have praised twitter as an inexpensive way of marketing to a global audience. They have also used it as substitute for more market expensive market

research tools such as focus groups, as it is able to provide fast feedback. (Prentice, 2009). For small tourism businesses, the important message is to tweet with quality, to make sure the right message is getting through to the right potential customer. It is no use establishing a twittering site, then not using it to communicate with your customers, it is important to provide customers with information they can use to buy your product.

Some DMOs and hotels enter twitter discussions as a form of damage control to counter negative comments; others participate on a positive bias, using it to resolve issues before they become serious. However, the organisation must first enter a discussion before they can decide how best to use it. Twitter has been described like a friend who does not stop talking (Lavallee, 2009) and this is a danger, that by using twitter you could end only talking, and not adding anything to the bottom line.

In terms of further research, there is real need for case study material to be developed to show the effectiveness (or not) of twitter, as well as perhaps new measurement tools to measure actions in terms of bookings, not just in the immediate timeframe, but over a longer time period. The psychological benefits of friendships between businesses and individuals also needs to be explored, as does the truthfulness of twitter messages, especially if they have a relationship with the businesses. Further exploration is needed into the differences, if any, between those tourists who are using twittering as social tool, for holiday planning purposes, to make decisions making and those who use it for actually bookings – who is listening to the tweets and monitoring the resulting actions. Manager's perceptions of tweeters would be a useful research topic, do they really listen to them, or are the seen as slightly sad people who have nothing better to do? The confidence of marketers in the effectiveness of twitter is underexplored, particularly in terms of targeting and segmentation, which is at the heart of all marketing – or these values overridden by the low costs? The negative effects of twittering, including the level of uninteresting tweets has also been under-researched.

However, the unknown factor that drives twitter's future development, as with other social networking sites, is its ability to change continuously into something unexpected. As twitter goes mainstream, it could develop into just a high-tech means of chatting to friends about their holiday (a communication version of the traditional photo album), but does the wider world want to listen? This research suggests that using twitter to target specific groups of people is difficult, so its use in targeted tourism marketing is limited. DMOs and hotels have forgotten that twitter is – basically – a social networking tool. There is a danger with twittering that communication will become a substitute for action, and while organisations, which use it as such, feel comfortable, but those who depend on it as marketing tool will be disappointed. The big research question that still remains unanswered is – can one communicate meaningfully with on-line strangers?

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