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This is an electronic version of a paper presented at the *3rd Multidisciplinary International Social Networks Conference*, New Jersey, USA, 15 to 17 August, 2016.

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http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/2955129.2955143

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A Social Networking Strategy for Improving Knowledge Management and Communication in the Travel Industry

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ABSTRACT

In today's technology-driven marketplace, the adoption and management of corporate and customer-facing Social Networking Sites (SNs) is often viewed as a key success factor for Travel Industry (TI) organisations. Knowledge management and the sharing of expertise and experiences through communication between internal and external stakeholders via social networks is an activity which TI organisations are aiming to exploit in order to improve the open sharing, retrieval, organisation and leveraging of knowledge. Through a study of currently-available literature relating to social networking adoption within the TI and a case study analysis of corporate social networking practices at three multi-national TI organisations (British Airways, Thomas Cook and Marriott Hotels), it may be observed that correlations exist between the development of social networking and the processes TI organisations now use to manage knowledge. We explore how these companies are currently utilizing SNs to improve knowledge management practices inside and outside of their organisational boundaries. From our analysis, lessons may emerge as to how TI companies are gaining competitive advantage through the use of social networking; a proposed strategy is identified to determine how TI organisations may make best use of social networks.

CCS Concepts

• Human-centered computing~Social media • Information systems~Internet communications tools.

Keywords

Knowledge Management; Social Networking Adoption; Social Networking Strategy; Travel Industry.

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of Web 2.0 technologies by travel industry organisations has grown rapidly in recent years primarily due to the explosion in use of social networking sites by employees in their private lives and the benefits they offer to market to end-consumers. The adoption of Enterprise Social Networks (ESNs) in organisational settings is also growing and has been seen to show improvements

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MISNC, SI, DS '16, August 15-17, 2016, Union City, NJ, USA © 2016 ACM. ISBN 978-1-4503-4129-5/16/08...\$15.00

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2955129.2955143

in the management and sharing of employee and organisational knowledge, internal communication and external communication and marketing, all of which are important elements which can drive organisational success [1]. Yet, with many travel companies now embracing social networking sites for external usage, corporate communication budgets still allocate on average less than 1% for internal communication and knowledge sharing tools.

Web 2.0 in the travel industry (Travel 2.0) can be seen to facilitate numerous customer-facing functions, including collaborative trip planning and content sharing networks, which "empower travelers to engage with the operations of tourism firms" and share travel experiences with other Worldwide Web (WWW) users [2]. In recent years, travel companies have experienced a shift from 'Travel 1.0' which focused on offline operations, to a much more online operation experience, which enables travelers to book flights and hotels, leave reviews and collaboratively build travel itineraries inter alia via the WWW. Travel 2.0 has created the potential for increased profitability by improving customer access to reviews and multimedia content uploaded by fellow passengers, adding an unbiased view of holiday destinations and experiences [3]; this view is supported by Xiang and Gretzel [4] who stated that "social media leaves room open for tourism marketers to effectively compete ... for consumers' attention".

Social media, in particular, is seen to play an important, active role in travel organisation operations as it allows for "promotion, product distribution, internal and external communication, knowledge management and research" [5]. According to Xiang and Gretzel [4], travelers use social media most frequently to: 1) Share experiences through blogging sites; 2) Post and tell their stories; 3) Post Comments; 4) Share or post pictures and movie clips of trips; and 5) Review or contribute to a forum.

Andriole [2] suggests that the traditional business model of travel enterprises is changing to facilitate technological change, such as social networks. There is seen to be a correlation between the development of social networks and the way travelers and tourism destinations and suppliers operate. Au [6] highlighted that businesses are diversifying and adapting "their approach to ... presenting themselves online". Travelers have stereotypical characteristics, according to Xiang and Gretzel [4], whereby they use social media for particular purposes before travelling, as well as after their trip; these pre and post activities can help travel companies plan their social media strategies to become more profitable by predicting consumer behaviour through trend analysis of previous consumer behaviour, which can be analysed and illustrated by software, such as Google Analytics [7]. Not only do the enterprises strategize for the consumer, the consumer also contributes due to the beta stage of Web 2.0 and Travel 2.0 [8]. For example, in the creation and development of travel websites, travelers become co-producers as well as co-marketers; people partake in activities online and contribute to the information shared about the enterprise, this can either be through positive reputation building or can cause the failure of a business due to negative images due to activities such as complaints on hotel review sites like TripAdvisor [7].

The most recent trends in ESNs, with regard to the travel sector are, according to Milano, Baggio, and Piattelli [3], the increase in business partnerships that create benefits through social media and a more customer-centric approach in relation to their marketing strategies and business models. Statistics show that more than 1 billion Twitter Accounts are active Worldwide, with 50% of those logging on daily, and 6 million of them accessing this application through smart mobile phones [7]. Engagement and interaction via social media is becoming increasingly popular in the TI. Twitter, due to its informal tone and micro-blogging abilities, creates an informal platform for the public to tweet both large corporate hotel chains and small transportation firms, with customers now expecting a response in a short space of time; this is also seen on Facebook, where users expect quick replies to their 'comments'.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Although a vast amount of customer-focused literature exists relating to the role and impact of social networking in the travel industry, limited studies are evident which focus on the organisational usage of social networking and their role in enhancing internal knowledge management and communication.

Since the 1990s and given the ever more challenging economic conditions experienced by travel companies today, there has been increasing recognition that one of the most valuable resources owned by organisations is employee knowledge. Prior to the 1990s, Porter and Millar [15] suggested that the key to a company being successful was in the information it possessed. Nowadays, it is believed that knowledge is the key to corporate survival; companies need to maintain and make use of both their internal and external employee, partner and organisational knowledge [8]. The need to manage and develop this knowledge effectively has increasingly been acknowledged in order that organisations may respond to the challenges presented in today's dynamic and complex business environment and to overcome economic uncertainties [17].

Knowledge collection refers to the identification of knowledge and the methods used to capture such knowledge. He, Ghobadian and Gallear [9] explained that it is the process of accessing and absorbing knowledge through direct or indirect contact or interaction with knowledge sources, including customers. Grant [10] added that the ability of a company to successfully capture knowledge is relative to its organisational performance. In today's social media world, Minazzi [7] suggests that travel companies

"often underestimate social media content" which means that there is missed potential to target consumer markets when companies do not adapt their marketing strategy to customer profiles.

Chung, Lee and Han acknowledge that "for potential tourists, travel information is crucial to decide where to go, how to go, where to stay, what to eat and what to do at the destination". Leung et al. [5] supports this statement by stating that ESNs are vital to travel industry organisations to keep employees working effectively and sharing meaningful information to prospective customers. ESNs should enable more efficient information and knowledge sharing and communication between employees and allow workers to share opinions and comments, as well as experiences, research findings and work tips.

With regard to external communication, Minazzi [7] suggests that travel companies should co-create experiences with their customers, allowing customers to tell their story which can enhance the memories and, therefore, enhance a longer, greater reputation for the company [11]. This concept of 'mobile story-telling' is defined by Klastrup [12] as "the structured and shared presentation of visual material produced with a mobile device supplemented by text and/or music and sound". Leading from this, issues arise with external communications as there are almost too many sources that claim to offer credible information, as well as a vast amount of useless information in circulation [3].

3. ANALYSIS: SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE IN THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY

In order to propose a recommended social media strategy which can be used by travel industry organisations, we analysed the social media accounts of 3 multi-national travel companies: Thomas Cook, British Airways and Marriott Hotels.

Social media sites examined included Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Youtube; the reason for choosing these 4 sites is due to the different Web 2.0 tools each site provides. Facebook offers users a social networking experience with in-built communication functions including private and group messaging. Twitter adopts micro-blogging as its core functionality with private messaging enabled between users. Youtube is based on video sharing, allowing users to upload videos from holidays and travel experiences. Finally, LinkedIn is used predominantly for business purposes, allowing each organisation to engage with potential employees and those looking for information on the organisation.

As can be seen in Table 1, statistics analysed include the number of followers for each platform, the frequency in content posting and the engagement with end consumers. Analysis using Safko's [13] 'Steps to Social Media Strategy Plan' shows the good and bad usage of social media by each company.

Organisation	Facebook (F)	Twitter (T)	LinkedIn (L)	Youtube (Y)
Thomas Cook	Over 400,000 likes.14-500 likes per post.5-56 shares per post.	 Two accounts: 1) Marketing (M) and 2) Customer Care (C). M: 104,000+ followers. C: 6,700+ followers. 	 Two accounts: 1) General Organisation (G) and 2) Media and Partnerships (M&P). G: 57,000+ followers M&P: 350+ followers. 	• 3,240 subscribers. • Posts on average every 2 weeks – 2 months.

Table 1. Thomas Cook, British Airways and Marriott Hotel Group: Social Media Analysis

	Delivering informative marketing content with flash sales (T).							
	 Responding to customer concerns within 20 minutes (T). 							
	 Blogging to market organisation (L). Showcasing specialist content for holiday destinations (Y). Bad at One way communication instead of engaging with audience (F). 							
	• Posting content only relating to recruitment (L).							
	Posting real-life experiences from real 'customer holidays' (Y).							
	Over 2 million likes.	• 804,000+ followers.	• 10,000+ employee	• 55,723 subscribers.				
Drivink	• 43-6,200 likes per post.		followers.	 Posts on average 				
	• 19-345 shares per post.			every 2 weeks.				
	Good at			-				
	• Diverse Posts, including various content types (F).							
	• Hash-tag engagement with audience (F).							
	• Visibly responding to customers within 1 hour (F).							
	• Regularly updating customers on weather at destination (T).							
British	• Use of 'Pinned Tweet' to highlight frequently asked questions/comments (T).							
Airways	• Customer engagement (T).							
	• Detailed recruitment pages and content linked to corporate blogs (L).							
	• Linking to other social media accounts (Y).							
	Bad at							
	• Linking to other social media accounts (F).							
	• Advertising to specific markets (F).							
	• Advertising holidays to professional page visitors (L).							
	• Posting on a frequent basis (Y).							
	• Over 275,000 likes.	• 213,000+ followers.	• 10,000+ employee	• 7,563 subscribers.				
	• 8-332 likes per post.	• 2 tweets per day.	followers.	 Posts on average 				
	• 1-45 shares per post.			every 3 weeks.				
	Good at							
	• Linking to information on the company's corporate website (F).							
	• Sharing relevant externally-produced travel articles with consumers (F).							
Marriott	• Re-tweeting content from partner travel accounts (T).							
Hotels	• Using hash-tags to engage with consumers (T).							
Hotels	• Providing detailed posts and blog content (L).							
	• Separating career posts with marketing content (L).							
	• Providing short stories from travelers (Y).							
	Bad at							
	• Responding to customer comments (F).							
	• Responding to customer tweets (T).							
	• Engagement with business customers (L).							

3.1 Thomas Cook

With regard to Thomas Cook, there appears to be a lack of internal communication tools used, however there is evidence of intranet usage [14]. Analysis shows that the trouble with using something unique is that problems exist when communicating with other companies. A platform such as LinkedIn can change this for many companies, whereas if it is your own bespoke platform, it becomes more difficult to adapt. Safko [13] identifies different platforms in The Social Media Bible that provide various tools to encourage communication, but to also provide entertainment within the company improving the relationship between an employee and the greater company. This also refers to his first step as all external communication needs to be to your specific demographic. This is evident when looking into the @ThomasCookCare twitter page, where it is set up for the purpose of communicating with customers that have complaints or questions. This is a well-used strategy in the travel industry where companies create a social media platform; in this case a Twitter account to channel the complaints, which reduces the amount of uncontrollable complaints on corporate forums or blogs [7].

Thomas Cook appear to be less successful on social media in terms of engagement; this could be improved by allocating staff more time to respond or make more people accessible to the account to ensure that people are feeling listened and this is more clear as there is a dedicated page to what is meant to be 'responses to comments' (@ThomasCookCare).

3.2 British Airways

As can be seen in Table 1, knowledge management practices exist in British Airways. Problems with managing information shared throughout the organisation are present and this may be due to lack of analysis on the failure of social media through analytics [5]. In our study, knowledge management is highlighted as being controlled by the organisation through a strategic flow reaching potential customers. However, Safko [13] suggests that this is not the case, highlighting that the brand message from the information the organisation shares through social media does not form the whole picture. There is a strong shift toward this power being given to the consumers, so this reduces knowledge management as a top priority for social media. Bashford [15] reported on this issue with British Airways, when they rebranded themselves

inside and out. There are general guidelines in which travel companies should follow such as listening and communicating with employees first, this is something they say British Airways do, as well as creating a strategy to 'boost morale'. This is supported by the evidence collected as they are very successful comparing the statistics of subscribers, employees joined and followers to the other two sample companies. Adrian Steel [16], in a blog post for Office Blogs brags in just under two years "we reached over one million Yammer posts, which represent a phenomenal amount of knowledge shared between British Airways employees from all corners of the organization" and there are many other articles that support his opinion.

3.3 Marriott Hotels

It is evident in the social media evaluation that Marriott hotels are also using their methods of external communication to recruit and place job postings. This supports Safko's [13] idea of using resources effectively to save time and money, which can be extremely important when trying to recruit quickly. It is clear, by comparison of the other sample enterprises, that Marriott does not use social media as successfully. They have a serious lack of engagement with the public, potentially losing consumers. They also lack the element of credibility and trust by not making their social media pages 'official', which is a good technique to provide the consumers with credible information, referring back to knowledge management. They could improve this to become more successful and reach higher potential profitability and gain consumers. However, something they are good at, compared to the other two businesses, is the collaboration with other companies. They retweet and engage with other popular travel companies which provides them with a different marketing strategy. This is evident with companies such as Lonely Planet, who could advertise them to travelers looking for hotels. This shows the emerging trend mentioned in the review of literature.

4. IMPACT ANALYSIS

Safko [13] identifies that a key element to social media success is impact analysis. It is important to measure a company's social media account impact on potential customers, repeating customers and employees as it can waste valuable time and resources with an ineffective outcome if the social media tools are applied incorrectly. By measuring this, enterprises can easily tell if they are profiting from the new strategies or losing income. Milano et al. [3] suggest that common social media analysis focuses on the image and the business of the destination by assessing the behaviour and the usage of what they refer to as 'Travel 2.0'. They believe that impact analysis reveals the set of tools that the business gives the customer or employee through social media strategies.

Table 1 shows the use of social media platforms within three companies: Thomas Cook, British Airways and Marriott Hotels. It assesses what the company is good at and bad at, looking at Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Youtube. Minazzi [7] reports the following for social media trends in the travel industry: 1) Facebook is dominant in both Web and Mobile; 2) 73% Online adults use social networking sites in general, of which 71% use Facebook; 3) 42% of online adults use multi social media platforms; 4) Other very popular social media are: Twitter, LinkedIn, and Pinterest; 5) Google+ and Youtube are favoured by men; and 6) Young people prefer to share content (Texts, images, audio and links) on Tumblr.

Through analysis of Table 1, it can be seen that the lowest level of engagement is with Thomas Cook, with Marriott hotels in second

place and British Airways in first. This could be due to a number of elements, such as the size of the company. It is also important to remember how successful companies have been prior to the social media movement as to how well they are received on social media, as our statistics show that there is a large percentage of adults online who may have been using 'Travel 1.0' and are now adapting to 'Travel 2.0'.

The rate and frequency of postings is also something to consider, as there might be particular trending topics for a field such as airlines, which may cause the enterprise to share more relevant information, increasing the level of external communication, more than other companies such as Hoteliers. There is evidence that British Airways are consistent with the tone of the information they post, as well as consistent with posting daily, unlike Marriott.

5. Proposed Recommended Strategy

Step 1 – Analyse your target market and prioritize the social media platforms your company uses.

- Create official pages and accounts on these social media platforms;
- Purchase or create an account on a social media platform and analysis application, such as Google Analytics;
- Look and refer back to continuously throughout this process; and
- Establish how you will measure each social media account.
 For example with Twitter, you can measure the number of followers, mentions and retweets to establish which customers are most important and how are they converting from potential to current.

Step 2 – Create a clear mission statement with objectives on what you want to achieve through the use of social media, what social media you will use and why.

- Keep the brand clear, each post should be in the same tone and comply with all corporate objectives; and
- Allocate time spent on each objective.

Some objectives may be harder to achieve than others, for example they may require 1 hour a day or 1 hour per week; this can be made more time effective by using a scheduling programme such as Hootsuite or Sprout Social where posts can be posted without you by scheduling the posts in advance.

Step 3 – Decide who shall have access to post directly to your social media accounts. If it is more than one person, should they let the public know individual names to make it more personal or should they speak as a company to show a united front?

- Make sure you establish why you have made the decision you have made and state it clearly in the mission statement;
- Remember this person/people are part of your business's reputation management so choose wisely.

Step 4 – Create solid legal guidelines for you and all employees with permission to post, and to those who may post on behalf of themselves (personal accounts).

• Make it public and accessible to all employees.

Step 5 – Create a content strategy for each social media platform, following basic formula below with the market you intend on communicating with, highlighting their specific interests, which social media platform they use most, what strategy you will put in place.



Figure 1. Content Strategy.

Step 6 – Once initial contact is made, and the social media accounts and pages have subscribers (followers, friends, likes), you have the potential to build onto these customers by:

- Providing employee stories to improve marketing strategies and branding;
- Creating a theme e.g. destination or type of transport. Build on this by encouraging customers to contribute to the storytelling activity, sparking co-creation.

Step 6 – Analyse responses, respond to comments and do not be afraid to join the conversation. Negative complaints or comments should be treated with sympathy and understanding. Positive Comments should be praised, thanked and acknowledged.

Step 7 – Integrate all social media content.

- Place direct links onto corporate website and other social media accounts. RSS feeds can be very useful here.
- In the footer of emails, provide links to all social media pages making them accessible and visible.
- Ask for feedback or incorporate the use of a hashtag to show a direct connection.

Step 8 – Revisit all of your measuring tools and begin the process again, with comparisons of how the business behaviour has affected the behaviour of the customers and employees. Have you facilitated a good reputation for your business using social media? Where were their issues? How could you resolve them?

6. CONCLUSIONS

Due to the travel industry's diverse nature, the recommended social media strategy may come across as quite generic. However, this has been put together using the specific sources and references used throughout this report. In the literature review, there were researchers identified that were specific to the travel industry. However, there were some leading authors in social media who were leaning towards generic trends in social media, which had relevance due to the travel sectors diverse nature. An example of this was Safko [13] and his 'Five Steps to Success'. These have weighed heavily on the strategy shown in section 5.1.

The proposed strategy has taken into consideration three very important characteristics for the travel industry, which are: 1) Intangibility, 2) Heterogeneity and 3) Perishability. They cannot all be considered all of the time, however due to these being important inevitable elements in the industry, they are incorporated where relevant.

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research is funded by the University of Westminster under the Distant Horizons Award. The authors would like to thank the University and specifically the Student Funding and Scholarships Office for providing the financial support to attend the 2016 MISNC Conference.

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