Influence of social media in choice of touristic destination

Răzvan Dina[1]
Gabriel Sabou

Abstract

In a society dominated by information, online communication between people, companies and groups comes as an easy, normal, ordinary solution. The spectacular development of social media applications, characterizing nowadays online communication systems, determine more and more people and businesses to use them for acquiring and giving information, for promoting or criticizing products and services.

Despite the fact that the use of social media applications seem very efficient, cheap and easy to use for promoting a company's products or services, there is a high risk of failure associated with. The organization has to take into account the messages transmitted might be received differently by the targeted users. Hence, a well documented communication strategy is needed also for social media applications which, based on community particularities, on different possible behaviors of community members, on past information and feedback, can successfully construct a positive image for the company. The purpose is to efficiently and effectively make known a company's products and services, but also, to react fast and in the most appropriate manner when negative rumors from truly or deceitfully unhappy customers are expressed through social media channels.

The current paper aims to present the main issues related to the use of social media applications in presenting and promoting a company's products and services with special focus on hospitality and touristic services. To this purpose, a research was performed on 123 Romanian young people regarding their trusted sources of information when choosing a touristic destination. The results show that online environment is considered as a trustworthy source of information and social media channels are intensely used for acquiring information before planning a trip.

Keywords: social media, tourism, online communication, consumer behavior

JEL Classification: L83, L86, M37

Introduction

Though there is a vast amount of information (text, images, audio and video sequences) running fast across the online environment, this information is also easy to access. More than ever before, the social media, characterizing nowadays online communication systems, empowers people to acquire and give information, to promote or to negatively influence other people' opinions regarding brands, products, services, places, environment, political, economical and social events.

Manipulating people' opinion through specific messages is very likely to occur in this form of media due to the high exposure to a complex and combined form for transmitting the information (Maiorescu M., 2013). There are also situations where the needed information might not reach its designed purpose due to the fact that the way it is presented does not fit the users proper profile for receiving it (Pamfilie et al., 2011).

Generally, in social media the communication is non-formal, therefore the messages transmitted need to be perceived as such, so that the user may feel that he/she is truly discussing with someone friendly, with someone on the same wavelength who experiences the same perspective, who truly listens to his/her points of view and wishes. However, though apparently simple and easy to do, the communication through social media, in order to be effective, has to be based on deep research and careful planning, it must follow a strategy.

---

[1] The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania, E-mail: rdina@ase.ro

Communication strategies in social media

A careful research of users profile is therefore essential in order to be able to convey the desired message efficiently and to be able to strongly mark users' emotions.

Sweeney and Craig consider that the four most important pillars in a successful communication strategy social media based are:

- communicating with the consumer,
- collaborating with the consumer,
- educating the consumer,
- entertaining the consumer.

Based on these frames, companies can build a successful strategy in order to better know their target clients, to determine more precisely their needs and expectations. The purpose is, in the end, to be able to promote, efficiently and effectively, their products and services, but also, to be able to properly react when their products and services are affected by the bad publicity likely to arise from unhappy customers and expressed through social media. (Sweeney and Craig, 2011)

In order to be effective, a communication strategy has to be trustworthy and consistent with other information the users possess about those particular products and services, and not only mere advertising words (Vasiliu, 2007).

A first step in creating this successful communication strategy would be setting the exact message the company wishes to convey to the public, corroborated with the specificity of the targeted public. The whole communication process needs to take into account the economical, social and cultural background of the users, as messages may greatly vary in their structure and composition according to these variables (Plesea et al, 2011). The communication may start only after the message has been set on the solid basis of the past experiences, of the present information about clients and power brokers and of the most efficient channels of transmitting it online and offline.

The company needs also to take into consideration the fact that the targeted public may behave differently to the message and react in different ways. The following types of behavior may be encountered (Safco and Brake, 2009):

- Active
- Reviewer
- Viral
- Passive
- Indifferent

As above described, the company needs to be prepared for facing negative opinions and reactions against the products and services presented through social media. In this case a special focus needs to be on the Active, the Reviewer and the Viral categories of behavior.

An open dialogue with users showing an active behavior is recommended. Here, the company must try to answer as honestly as possible to the critics and to manifest a fully client oriented attitude, prone to fulfilling user's wishes, so that the conflict disappear as fast as possible.

In their dialogue with the reviewers, company's representatives must present, in a non aggressive manner, those arguments that will minimize the negative campaign, favorable to the company. The whole communication has to be kept under the fine balance between official tone and the friendly one

Passive or indifferent behavior users may turn to be a company's allies. A well made strategy pointed towards these may attract them as clients and may contribute to an improvement of the image.

For minimizing these potential negative users reactions, a successful communication strategy must have a clear representation of what is important to be transmitted, keeping in mind both users and competitors (Zarrella, 2010).

Before transmitting its messages, the company must have a strong core formed by actual and potential clients. This core will generate a powerful, positive community that will generate the needed information for the target market, will be the subject of future advertising campaigns and will give feedback. All this information is extremely valuable for adjusting the strategic development models.

There are different types of communities acting in online environment, the communication strategy being influenced by these (Safco and Brake, 2009):

- Affinity based communities
- Inside social networks communities
- Inside company communities
- Vertical communities (people working in the same industries)
- Horizontal communities (people having the same expertise)

The next step in implementing a communication strategy, after setting what will be transmitted and to whom, is deciding the proper environment and social media tools. These have to take into consideration the company's particularities, the number of employees going to apply the strategy and their level of training, the way the information is planned to be structured and transmitted to the public. Although, the use of all communication tools and channels offered by social media would seem to be the most effective, sometimes it is better to focus and use efficiently one single instrument.

Inside these communities the key persons for the further communication process development are essential to be correctly identified.

These key people may be:

- A discussion moderator and manager, usually identified as a power broker or a person the community trusts as being impartial, objective and decent. Once the community becomes more and more developed, it might be possible that more moderators be involved.
- Those persons that easily share important messages both to members inside community and outside it, increasing thus the chance to attract new members in the already formed online group. There are two types of such people who can be deliverers and promoters of campaigns messages: the volunteers and those identified by the company as good "carriers" and transformed by the company in promoters.

It is vital that the company send the messages the community expects to receive. Prospecting community's expectations and needs is a continuous process and the company has to be a fast and accurate deliverer of the proper information. If communication does not take place in the proper moment and in the proper form, there is a danger of perceiving the company as false. Also, there is always the threat of the communication coming from other competitors, as the same community may be easily targeted by them in online social media.

Encouraging community members to generate content will generate precious amounts of dynamic information, useful in improving the products and services and in further development. The community is alive as long as it communicates and expresses its ideas, critics and praises about the products and services the company presents. Its members must feel like being part of a big family, they must feel important, their voice must be taken into account and they must see this.

Social media may be used in all developing stages of a product or a brand. (Alex et al, 2009). The applications and instruments offered allow a company to use social media platforms when launching the product or the service - the moment of raising user's awareness, when selling the product or the service and when gathering the feedback from its clients about the used product or service. The purpose of the social media is to gather as many people as possible in the community of current and potential customers.

Social media for tourism

Due to the fact that people generally want to be well informed before choosing a touristic destination, social media is a powerful communication and information platform they appeal to. In today's society people are more and more crowded with activities and information coming from all over. Internet and social media especially makes possible a fast connection to the source of information, therefore due to the little time they have, people choose this form of information. The

tourism area makes no exception from the rule, as less and less people enter the buildings of specialized tourism agencies in search for the desired destination (Cheung, 2012).

Until recently, on site travel agents have been the most accessed link between consumers and touristic services providers, when planning for a touristic destination. However, changes in the communication and information processes caused by Internet expansion determined touristic services providers and consumers to interact online, directly, diminishing the role of the traditional onsite travel agencies.

The choice of online users in seearch for a touristic destination are influenced by the reliability, assurance, good deals and security offered by service providers. On the other hand, travel agencies may also influence consumer's choice by making visible through social media the added value of their expertise and experience.(Cheyne et al, 2006).

An analysis of Romanian young people choice of touristic services through social media channels

Hospitality and tourism companies acknowledge the strong influence of social media upon consumers' decision making processes and its high potential for promoting their services (Ayeh et al, 2012). Social media seems to offer the information and the solutions users need to design their own travel packages, replacing thus the jobs of the tourism agencies specialists. (Engvall et al., 2012)

To this purpose, a research on 123 young people, ages between 20-35 years old, living in urban environment and having medium or high education level has been performed. The research aimed to determine the trust users have in information they find on Internet and they receive through social media, with a special focus on touristic destinations planning.

Our analysis has shown that respondents have a great confidence in the sources of information they study on Internet (see figure 1). More than 80% of the questioned people have affirmed that they trust online information sources, but this percentage might be explained by the particularities of the analyzed sample, as young people tend to spend more time and grab information from Internet (Lenhart et al., 2010)
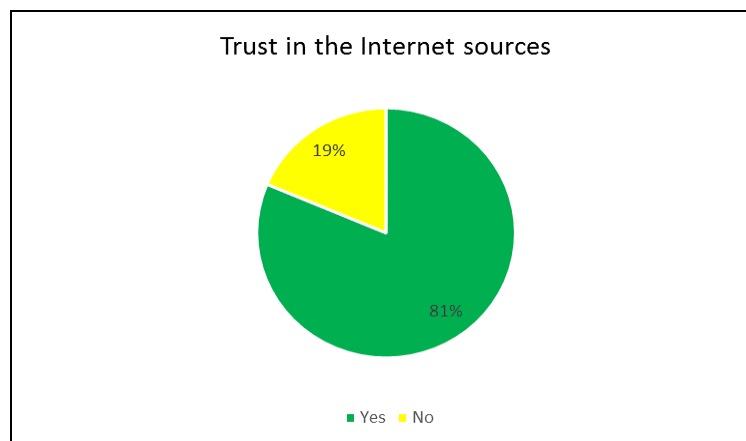

Figure 1 The distribution of answers regarding users trust in internet sources of information

As it can be seen, the sources for information on Internet about a touristic destination are various. In figure 2 it is presented the distribution of answers regarding this issue. Tourism related forums and websites with reviews about restaurants and accommodation in the desired area are the main sources of information.
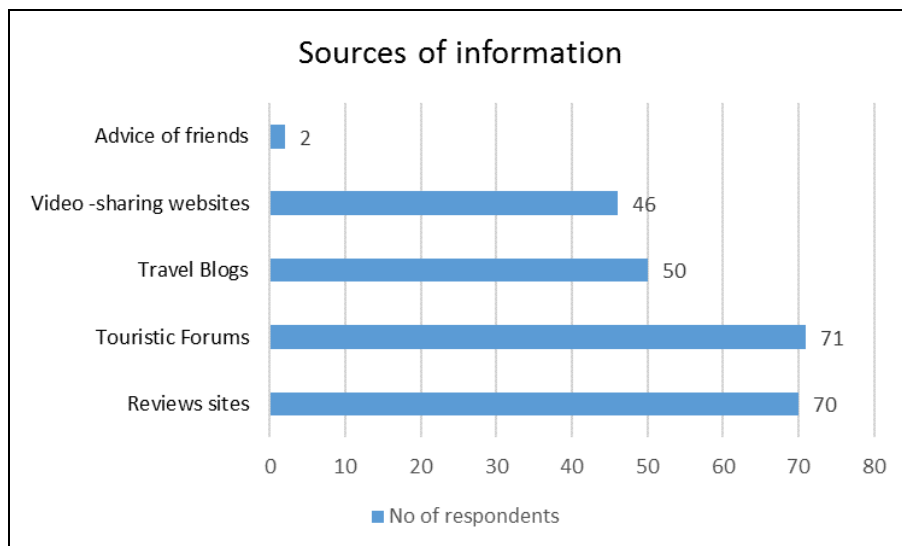
Figure 2 Trusted sources of information regarding touristic destinations

However, blogs of specialists or those of travelers describing personal experiences of the writers and video sharing (YouTube like) influence significantly the planning of a trip. The information presented as text, audio or video, the tips and advices given in a non formal manner through these facets of social media is decisive in pondering the variables of a trip. An interesting observation can be made regarding friends' recommendations, as a very small percentage of respondents say they are influenced by these.

Also, another aspect we considered important to find out was that about the influence the websites showing reviews for restaurants and accommodation places (Yelp like) have upon respondents decisions to choose a certain place.
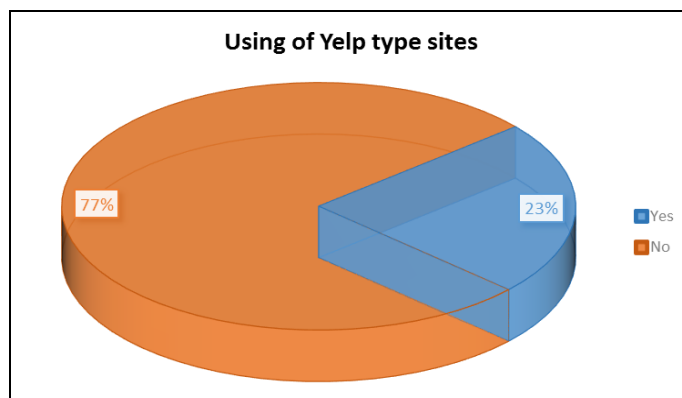

Figure 3 The percentage of respondents using Yelp type websites for touristic information

Research has shown that in Romania, maybe because of the fact that they are not enough known yet, Local Directory Search type websites are less used. Figure 3 indicates that most of respondents do not use such websites when planning to choose a destination or when just wishing to find out information about a certain place. Even though these websites include reviews about the places presented there, Romanian users are not attracted by and do not prefer them. A possible explanation would be that these websites offer detailed information about touristic services and activities possible to be found in a certain area, while respondents prefer searching through multiple

sources of information(forums, blogs, reviews etc) in order to be able to be informed about all the aspects and to be as objectively informed as possible.

Conclusion

The image of a company, the brand is build through and with the help of its employees, but mostly by the consumers. Thus, the influence of company's messages must be oriented towards employees and consumers. In online environment, through social media, messages to and from company to those targeted are very easy to transmit. However, these messages might be interpretable by various groups of users. Chances are that the messages reach their targeted audience, but chances are that messages are wrongly perceived and the discussions and opinions generated by them create a negative image to the company.

In tourism sector social media is also present and companies involved in this sector present and promote their services online.

In the last years, it was registered a change in tourists behavior, as before choosing a touristic destination they search online for more information. Social media is a powerful communication and information platform they may appeal to and the current research focuses on their trust in it. Results show that Romanian young people generally trust online information and before planning a trip they visit forums and online reviews, as well as specialized blogs. Also, the research showed that among all social media channels, Yelp type websites are not much used. A surprise was the finding that respondents take for granted in a higher degree the various online sources offered by social media than the direct sources of information offered by friends. The results of the research may be interpreted in the context of respondents age and Romanian specific cultural background only.

References

Alex, N. et al., 2009, *Blogging and other social media: exploiting the technology and protecting the enterprise,* MPG Books Ltd., Cornwall

Ayeh, J. K et al., 2012, *Perceptions and strategies of hospitality and tourism practitioners on social media: an exploratory study,* Information and communication technologies in tourism 2012, Editors Fuchs et al, Helsingborg, Sweden

Cheyne, J., Downes, M., Legg, S., 2006, *Travel agent vs. internet: what influences travel consumer choices?* Journal of Vacation Marketing, 12, 41-57

Cheung, W., 2012, Trends in Travel Technology, School of Hospitality & Tourism Management, University of Guelph, retrieved from http://atrium.lib.uoguelph.ca

Engvall, M. et al., 2012, Offline vs. Online: Who buys where? A customer segmentation study of travel agencies, Bachelor thesis within Business Administration, Jönköping International Business School

Lenhart, A. et al., 2010, *Social Media and Young Adults*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center; Available at: http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Social-Media-and-Young-Adults.aspx.

Maiorescu, M., 2013, Manipularea maselor în mediul online, Dissertation Paper, Romanian National Academy of Information "Mihai Viteazul" Bucharest

Pamfilie, R et al., 2011, Colour perception of business websites, Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Management of Technological Changes, Alexandroupolis, Greece. Book 1, pp. 321-324

Pleşea, D. et al., 2011, The Relationship Communication Structure - Uncertainty Avoidance Reflected in Romanian Websites Design, Amfiteatru Economic, Volume: 13, Special Issue: 5, pp: 746-753

Safco, L., Brake, D., 2009. *The Social media bible: tactics, tools, and strategies for business success*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Sweeney, S., Craig, R., 2011. *Social Media for Business – 101 Ways to Grow Your Business Without Wasting Your Time,* Maximum Press

Vasiliu, C., 2007. *Bune practici în domeniul transparenţei informaţiilor cazul Metro Group A. G.*, Amfiteatru Economic, 22, pp. 206-208

Zarrella, D., 2010. *The Social Media Marketing Book*. New York: O'Reilly Media Inc