Digital Tourism on the Way to Digital Marketing Success

Dr. Monica Paula RAȚIU

Ioan Matei PURCĂREA

Abstract

There is a real need of digital support of the tourist experience before, during and after the tourist activity, because digitization is steadily becoming the main pathway for consumer journeys. The digital revolution changed the way consumers shop for travel products and interact with brands. Tourism businesses need to utilize digital marketing techniques in their practices and to right track consumer activity across channels and devices. Getting vital information from customers via social media is already something essential for all brands and destinations. Travel-related companies should consider the vital aspect of making websites compatible with smartphone-based sales, but despite the fact that desktop remains an important part of travel-related businesses’ overall strategy, off-line methods of offering goods and services should not be neglected. Not only the contemporary digital marketplace is evolving rapidly, but also the development of both, the virtual reality as an alternative to holiday brochures, and the space tourism projects.

Keywords: tourism marketing; digital tourism; connected consumer; virtual reality tourism; space tourism

JEL Classification: L83; L86; M31; O33
Introduction

It was argued that: tourism marketing reality implies a growing engagement in accepting the creative thinking challenge, progressing through knowledge and understanding, focusing on the targeted traveler-tourist, ensuring total traveler experiences; (Purcarea and Ratiu, 2010) at the heart of Digital Economy research there are four challenge areas: sustainable society; communities and culture; new economic models; information technology as a utility; (epsrc.ac.uk) the digitization of the economy has revolutionized the tourism market, radically changing its existing business models. (Radaelli) On the other hand, it is well-known that:

▪ Digital Tourism is defined as the digital support of the tourist experience before, during and after the tourist activity; (sachi.cs.st-andrews.ac.uk)

▪ New horizons of knowledge were opened by the development of the Big Data phenomenon (Tourist System: new digital ecosystems - see Figure below; Competitive intelligence systems in tourism; Cognitive systems for tourism; Advanced/intelligent Tourist System management (DMO, Industry); Modelling of the resort's competitiveness as a network); (tourgune.org)

![Figure no. 1: The digital ecosystem and the tourist system as a community of interactive agents in conjunction with their physical environment](http://www.tourgune.org/en/26/82/0/0/knowledge-areas-tourism-systems-in-the-digital-age)

▪ As digitization is steadily becoming the main pathway for consumer journeys, companies need the right DNA for the current evolving environment, marketers being challenged to choose the
right channels/strategies and digital marketing tactics, the right metrics to gauge marketing success and to allocate the right budget on the right digital areas. (Negricea and Purcărea)

**Travel and Tourism Competitiveness and the Perspective of the Connected Consumer**

It is well-known that competitiveness is defined as the set of institutions, policies and factors that determine the level of productivity (whose level sets the level of prosperity that can be earned by an economy) of a country. (weforum.org) The World Economic Forum has based its competitiveness analysis (since 2005) on the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI), the components being grouped into 12 interrelated pillars of competitiveness: (Basic requirements subindex) *Institutions, Infrastructure, Macroeconomic environment, Health and primary education* - (4 key for factor-driven economies); (Efficiency enhancers subindex) *Higher education and training, Goods market efficiency, Labor market efficiency, Financial market development, Technological readiness, Market size* - (6 key for efficiency-driven economies); (Innovation and sophistication factors subindex) *Business sophistication, Innovation* - (2 key for innovation-driven economies). Within this framework it is worth to mention that (thanks to the same World Economic Forum) the *Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2015* (competitiveness analysis based on the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index – TTCI, comprising four subindexes, 14 pillars, and 90 individual indicators – measuring “the set of factors and policies that enable the sustainable development of the Travel & Tourism sector, which in turn, contributes to the development and competitiveness of a country”) discussed “why the Travel & Tourism sector has proved resilient to several different unsettling forces and manage to grow globally and generally more quickly than the economy as a whole.” (weforum.org) On the other hand, according to Deloitte LLP report on the travel consumer in 2015, digital has disrupted the consumer path to purchase, the digital revolution changing the way consumers shop for travel products and interact with brands, consumers being empowered by the influence and reach provided by review websites and social media.” On the other hand, according to Deloitte LLP report on the travel consumer in 2015, (deloitte.com/uk) digital has disrupted the consumer path to purchase, the digital revolution changing the way consumers shop for travel products and interact with brands, consumers being empowered by the influence and reach provided by review websites and social media.

A press release from April 30, 2015 of Deloitte U.K. (Member of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited) showed that travel consumers are now using the internet to compare prices (59% of holidaymakers comparing prices online as consumers keep recessionary behavior), 42% using review sites (compared to 31% using travel company websites and 21% internet only travel agents; holidaymakers sharing experiences and influencing each, moving from being content consumers to content creators), two or more devices (smartphones, tablets etc. using multiple apps and websites) being used by a third of these consumers when researching their holiday. The research conducted by Deloitte (Deloitte’s Travel Consumer 2015 report analyzed data from a
survey of 40,000 holidaymakers by the British Travel Awards, Deloitte LLP being the scrutineer for the results of the annual vote) revealed (Jun-Tai, 2015) that: travel has changed from being a seller’s to a buyer’s market; price is the main factor driving holiday booking decisions (showing the holidaymaker’s desire to get the best deal); posted travel-related reviews are increasing (third of holidaymakers have already posted, and older people becoming more active online); travel companies must adapt to the fragmented digital channel (by creating a recommendation culture, for instance, the word-of-mouth marketing being relatively low-cost and self-perpetuating); in order to use the potential wealth of data to understand and meet consumer expectations by right tracking consumer activity across channels and devices (while avoiding fragmentation generated by the appearance as two separate consumers of those abandoning an online basket in a tablet app to book on a laptop), companies should introduce an integrated experience (by offering differentiating features like personalization, and encouraging users to sign in on every platform, for example).

A SEO and Inbound Marketing Consultant at Powered by Search (Bovykina, 2014) attracted our attention in March last year that one of the industries that is most affected by digital development is the tourism and hospitality industry, among the first ones to utilize digital marketing techniques in their practices (in order to engage communities and make sure their customers have the best possible away-from-home experience) being transportation and accommodation companies. Within this context there were given some examples of digital marketing application: Booking (companies recognizing the importance of second screen marketing, within the framework of the emerging trend of mobile-only travel agencies – MTAs – having the ability to book tickets through downloadable mobile/tablet-exclusive apps); On-board (experience marketing as relevant as ever, making the journey experience more pleasant for airlines travelers, by installing advanced in-flight entertainment system); At the Destination (as additional services result in repeat sales, large hotel chains facing local competition need to expand the range of their offering to deliver even more value to their customers. It was underlined the importance of carefully analyzing how people interact with surrounding environments while travelling, and of using these insights to:

- recognize existing customer needs;
- give travelers what they want to create the “wow”;
- ensure repeat sales.

From Virtual Reality Tourism to Space Tourism, a Niche Project for the Immediate Future

Destinations begin to take their first steps in utilizing Virtual Reality Tourism (a concept which has been discussed for some time, a form of digital marketing). The Digital Tourism Think Tank (an initiative aiming at providing thought leadership to the tourism industry in digital
marketing best practice - thinkdigital.travel) argued that becomes increasingly clear that virtual reality will play a major role in the industry going forward. As the first practical examples are already emerging, the Digital Tourism Think Tank quoted the example recently announced by Destination BC (utilizing Oculus Rift virtual reality technology), the tourist board for the Canadian province of British Columbia which is offering tourists a preview of what the region has to offer with a unique 360-degree video. (thinkdigital.travel)

In the opinion of the Digital Tourism Think Tank the advantages for travel-related companies and destinations offered by the tourists virtual reality trips (which are expected to become considerably more common in the foreseeable future) are obvious, because this kind of tourism effectively enables companies to offer a better portrayal of the destination (compared to what is conveyed through brochures or even Internet content), by avoiding skeptical reactions of the customers. For example, Destination BC is utilizing virtual tours (an innovative and exciting way to showcase the destination as an attractive place to visit) as part of an overall marketing palette at national and international tourism trade shows, while embracing contemporary technology in providing this kind of tours expected to become a mainstream method of promoting tourism, being likely that in the next few years the virtual reality will play a major role as an alternative to holiday brochures.

The founder and CEO of the retail giant which is Amazon, Jeff Bezos, continues to develop his space tourism project “The New Shepard”, being involved recently in the launching of a capsule (Blue Origin's New Shepard vehicle was launched from western Texas) to the edge of the earth's atmosphere. (thinkdigital.travel) Bezos's space tourism project (the precursor to a much larger orbital rocket and spacecraft intended to be developed and launched in the foreseeable future from well-known Cape Canaveral) is part of a series of other project currently working on a providing commercial space travel, such as:

- Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic project (delayed because of technical difficulties and the fallout from the VSS Enterprise crash; to be launched before the end of the decade); it was suggested by estimates that the pricing of tickets for Bezos's space tourism project flights will be extremely similar to Branson's space tourism project flights (beyond the differences coming from way that the two crafts rise into the outer atmosphere);

- World View’s space tourism project (reliant on huge helium balloons; considered to be significantly more affordable than the two already mentioned tourism project flights, one-third to one-quarter of the price of Virgin Galactic), as reported by the Digital Tourism Think Tank.

Something essential for all brands and destinations:

Getting vital information from customers via social media

It is considered (thinkdigital.travel) to be very important getting feedback from social media platforms (not only just targeting large numbers of potential customers with messages and
content, including co-created content), with the help of social listening technology (from Google Alerts and Social Mention till more robust platforms such as Sprinklr). According to the Digital Tourism Think Tank, in order to create a better customer experience around the travel-related company’s brand, social listening should be specifically directed to achieve pre-defined travel-related company’s business goals. In this respect, the Digital Tourism Think Tank recommends the following tips: considering the importance of competitive intelligence (social listening strategy providing a broad view of social media content, which reveal key competitors’ aspects); improving on marketing (by providing a captive audience who will share their preferences and communicate them to you directly, enabling you to best use social media campaigns to reach your customers); eliminating problems (by paying very close attention to any particular issues and tidying them up as quickly as possible); improving customer service (by listening to and learning from customers’ frustrations and what they actually want); finding new customers (by adequately utilizing keywords and queries so as to track conversations efficiently and promote your products via social media in a more active fashion); identifying influencers (by adequately keeping track of everyone who is talking about your brand on social media, and connecting with these effectively listened people who will helping achieve your short and long-term goals); recruitment (by monitoring conversations, blogs and other communities online, and acquiring vital talents and skills); innovation and design (taking into account that thanks to its affordability social listening has a massive role in research and development); content marketing (by using social listening as a centerpiece of any content curation strategy, and providing the best content to your audiences, interacting with them in a much more appropriate fashion); anticipate opportunities (by using social listening programs which will enable you to benefit from the mistakes of your competitors, and gain new customers).

Conclusions

There is no doubt that as the contemporary digital marketplace is becoming more centered on a complex consumer journey which includes multiple mobile devices, tourism businesses need to utilize digital marketing techniques in their practices and to right track consumer activity across channels and devices. At the beginning of June this year took place “Tourism Symposium 2015”, regarded as “the year’s most thought-provoking event” (hosted by Visit Kent, arranged by The Tourism Society, in partnership with Ashford Borough Council, and supported by VisitBritain, UKinbound, Arts Council England, Southeastern and the Coach Tourism Council; over 240 delegates representing businesses throughout Britain together with leading industry professionals attended the event) which enjoyed a comprehensive exploration of the topic “Connecting to the Future”, by focusing on ideas and solutions for sustainable inbound and outbound growth through the lens of the infrastructure (in its widest definition, including, for example, the soft and digital infrastructures of technology) debate. (tourismsociety.org) On this special occasion made the first official appearance in her new role the new Minister, Sandra Matthews. (tourismsociety.org) Two weeks later, an Expedia (a major and extremely well-known
name in the travel industry) report provided a snapshot of “UK Digital Usage”, (thinkdigital.travel) by analyzing online travel content consumption and bookings across devices and demographics in the UK (and comparing those to similar trends in the United States). The valuable report revealed that: “the contemporary digital marketplace is evolving rapidly, and becoming more centered on a complex consumer journey which includes multiple mobile devices.”

A week after the above mentioned “Tourism Symposium 2015”, The Digital Tourism Think Tank informed us (thinkdigital.travel) of Adobe’s recently released annual Digital Index Travel Report (regarded as one of the most comprehensive set of travel insights which exist anywhere in the industry; based on both, aggregated and anonymous data acquired from the Adobe Marketing Cloud, and additional data from a complementary survey of 1,000 U.S. consumers who plan to travel this summer) which assessed consumer behavior across multiple mobile devices. According to the Adobe survey: customers are now booking more trips via smartphone than tablets; Travel-related companies should consider the vital aspect of making websites compatible with smartphone-based sales; despite the fact that desktop remains an important part of travel-related businesses’ overall strategy, off-line methods of offering goods and services should not be neglected.

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