Blog success factors: Opportunities for destination marketing

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Abstract

This exploratory study discusses the opportunities for tourism destination marketing organizations to communicate successfully their attractions and offerings through user generated blog content. Key features of effective blogs are identified through netnography of three major blog platforms.

Keywords: virtual communities; user-generated content; tourism destination marketing; storytelling; blog, netnography.

1 Introduction

Researchers in the fields of consumer psychology, marketing and sociology have paid increasing attention to the value of narrative and storytelling in communicating people's experiences (Schank & Abelson 1995; Adaval & Wyer, 1998; Escalas 2004). According to Woodside et al. "first-person stories are what people bring back from travels and destination visits" (2007, p. 163) and as Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier state, narration is "a device for interpreting human experience" (2008, p. 301). Narratives and stories about tourism experiences have always been popular. Blogs like traditional journaling are about expressing the inner experiences of travellers and sharing them with others (Conhaim, 2003; Pudliner, 2007; Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2008; Volo & Osti, 2009; van Limburg, 2009). Sharda and Ponnada (2008, p.157) defined blogs as 'virtual diaries created by individuals and stored on the Web for anyone to access'. Blogs allow travellers to disseminate and investigate 'vast amounts of information quickly, seeking out the factual, the real and the truth' (Pudliner, 2007, p. 47). Blogs combine texts, images, videos, audios, links and a collection of tools to share commentaries or news while travelling (Leu et al., 2005). This digital form of journaling gathers people's experiences, creating an "electronic Word of Mouth" (eWOM), also called "word of mouse", characterised by ease of access, a written format and anonymity (Dellarocas, 2003; Gelb & Sundaram, 2002). The present study discusses factors that make tourism blogs successful. Specifically, the aim of this study was to investigate blogs' elements of success and the potential and suitability of blogs as a marketing tool for destination marketing organizations. To accomplish these aims, consumer-to-consumer blog platforms and blogs hosted in three different websites were analysed using a content and thematic analysis. The paper is organised as follows: section 2 presents the key points of the current debate

on the role of virtual communities as a marketing tool and their potential exploitation by destination marketing organizations; section 3 describes the methodology and findings of an exploratory analysis; section 4 presents a discussion of the findings.

2   The potential of blogs as a destination marketing tool

According to Crotts (1999) blogs are likely to become a preferred information source for travellers. Price and Starkov (2006) point out that blogs can dramatically alter tourism communication in and about the marketplace. Volo (2009) notices that the spontaneity of the commentaries and observations allow for reporting of positive and negative experiences whereas marketer driven communications are biased towards the positive attributes and features of products and services. Despite the great interest in the topic, tourism researchers have only recently started to study the influence that Web 2.0 applications may have on tourism marketing (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008), and as Laboy and Torchio (2007) have stated "there is no compelling data yet to clearly demonstrate the return on investment in developing a Web. 2.0 application or embracing its viral marketing opportunities". Several tourism investigators were pioneers in researching the topic of Web 2.0 applications and have published research mostly that analysed user generated content, in particular travel blogs (e.g.: Woodside et al., 2007; Pudliner, 2007; Pan, MacLaurin & Crotts, 2007; Carson, 2008; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2008; Volo 2009; Volo & Osti, 2009). Pan et al. (2007) analyzed 40 travel blogs on Charleston, South Carolina using a combination of semantic network analysis and content analysis. These authors encourage destination marketers to implement 'automated monitoring systems' that use blogs to periodically collect customer feedback. Schmallegger and Carson (2008) identified strategies used by destination marketing organizations to enhance the benefit of user generated content in several different management and marketing areas: communication, promotion, distribution, management and research. Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2008) analysed selected blogs from the Pennsylvania tourist office website and concluded that well-written travel stories have the power to help potential and novice travellers to obtain information about the destination.

Website success factors in the context of electronic commerce have been addressed in the literature (Liu & Arnett, 2000; Molla & Licker, 2001; Torkzadeh & Dhillon, 2002), and recent contributions addressed the issue of determining and measuring success of online communities (Preece, 2001; Du & Wagner, 2006; Volo & Osti, 2009). Dippelreiter et al. (2008) evaluated eleven tourism online communities using a tailor made "criteria catalogue" encompassing two main aspects of the communities – viz., technological and sociability/usability. According to these authors Web 2.0 success is due to its technical and visual presentation and the ease with which users can contribute to virtual communities. Preece (2001), in evaluating the success of online communities, focused his attention on the concepts of sociability and usability. Du and Wagner (2006) measured weblog success using two dimensions: popularity rank and popularity growth. They concluded that the interest for content that had characterized the early era of blogging had diminished and the "ability of weblogs to create popularity and to nurture social interaction through its technology features" may be increasingly contributing to their success. Finally, they attribute to the

technology the power to "create a distinct advantage" in the competitive blogosphere. Volo and Osti (2009) studied user generated content success factors focusing on mountain tourism and identified the following as key factors for forums and blogs success: (a) the simplicity of browsing; (b) reliability; (c) contribution of new threads by all users; (d) territoriality and homogeneity; (e) sense of community.

3 Keys to tourism blogs success: an exploratory analysis

A qualitative research approach based on netnography was used. Three blog platforms and 45 of their blogs were analysed. In particular a thematic analysis as described by Ezzy (2002) was applied to the online narratives and content analysis was applied to the blog platforms. In addition a combination of observant participation and online monitoring were performed during the summer 2009. A purposive sampling methodology was used, and the blog platforms analysed were: www.travelblog.org, www.travelpod.com and www.travbuddy.com. These blogs platforms were chosen because they are among the most well known on the blogosphere, and they offered a good starting point to identify key features that a destination marketing organization (DMO) blog should have in order to be successful. The clues and themes emerging from this analysis were labelled. Using the categorization by Dippelreiter et al. (2008), technology and sociability/usability items were isolated. Technology related items were discarded while those related to sociability or usability aspects were retained. The blogs investigated are well known and highly regarded, and were therefore operationally defined to be, in some sense, successful. The analysis sought to assess these blogs' performance on the Sociability and Usability aspects. The objective was to distinguish among sociability and usability aspects, those that can be easily replicated, the assumption being that easily replicated sociability and usability aspects of successful blog platforms qualify as success factors. From the analysis of the blog platform and the content of 45 blogs, the items that appear to be critical when building a successful blog platform are described in table 1.

Table 1. Key features for successful blog platforms

Category	User/Description		
Usability	Readers/Ability to search/browse by destination by continent, nation, region, cities	Readers/Preview of blog content, number of: words, pictures, videos, comments, viewers	Readers/Map and Trip summary shows bloggers itinerary and current position
	Readers/Link to newest blogs and popular blogs	Readers/Table of content by author shows blog entries of each blogger	Bloggers/Ease of use writing text, up loading pictures and videos
Sociability	Readers/Bloggers Rating of the blog	Readers/Blogger Smiles ☺ as way to express appreciation	Readers/Blogger Guestbook as a way to convey comments
	Readers/Blogger One-to-one communication Private email or messaging	Readers Bloggers profile including picture	Blogger Ease of connecting with family and friends

4 Discussion

From simple Internet users, many web surfers have become co-creators of content (Volo, 2009), and through blogs and other virtual communities and Web 2.0 tools they share experiences, moods and feelings. As reported by Litvin, et al. (2008) some virtual communities have arisen spontaneously, while others have been sponsored or managed by companies. Nevertheless, users/readers perceive the reviews and recommendations from these virtual communities as credible and coming from trustworthy sources with whom they would be willing to bond electronically despite the geographical distance (Chung and Buhalis, 2008).

In this exploratory study, key features for successful blogs were identified and it does appear that they can enhance users' ability to create and share content, as well as to create a sense of community. If DMOs were to host a blog, they would not only satisfy the different needs of bloggers and readers seeking to create and share tourism experiences but, they could also gather more tailored information, leading to useful insights on the behaviour and experiences of potential and past tourists with all of its marketing implications. Moreover, as some even small DMOs websites have already done, a link to other virtual communities could be created, thereby offering a much wider range of tools to virtual community participants. The value of introducing maps, trip summaries, and a table of contents of blog entries is great for communication purposes, and these pages could be successfully used to initiate tourists to less visited areas within the destination. Finally, the value of the information made accessible by blogs to destination marketing organizations is constrained by the fact that demographic data known to be important predictors of consumer behaviour are not available. However, by introducing the bloggers profile page, destinations could routinely capture more demographic data on their participants that could be linked to their entries, and the value of the blog information to destination marketing organizations would increase significantly. Features aiming to create a sense of community appear to be the guestbook -as an organised form of collecting comments-, the option to leave a smiley face, and the possibility to connect bloggers and readers in a private way. However, substantial research is needed to predict the success of blogs belonging to national, regional or local destination.

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